

**Title**

Interview **Ms. Abdul Kadiri Ayishetu**, Graduate Student in Religious Studies at University of Ghana and Member of the Federation of Muslim Women's Association of Ghana (FOMWAG)

**Creator**

Owusu-Ansah, David  
Abdul Kadiri, Ayishetu

**Description**

The conversation centered on the activities of the Federation of Muslim Women of Ghana (FOMWAG) and its ability to interest young Muslim girls in schooling. The conversation aimed at exploring the issue of secular education for Muslim girls through the examination of the personal story of the interviewee.

12 July 2006

Interview with Ms. Abdul-Kadiri-Ayishetu, Teacher, Graduate Student in Religious Studies at the University of Ghana (Legon), and Member of the Federation of Muslim Women's Association of Ghana.

Place of Interview: At University of Ghana, Legon, Office of International Programs.

Opening statement: We have a broad base interview and also a broad base agenda. In 1984 I did interviews with the Asante Nkramo [Muslims] and my original work was on what was titled as the "talismanic traditions of Muslims in 19th century Asante". And that got published and subsequently that was published and I followed the research with another work on the [division] of the Asante Nkramo at Nkenkaasu to study the dynamics as compared to [their counterparts] at the [Kumase] palace. I have also done two editions of the Ghana Historical Dictionary and as we work on Muslims and more on Muslims regarding their learning traditions, it becomes automatic that you take it the modern times to see what the modern influences are and how Muslims are reacting to modern education and so and so forth... So that is currently my primary research interest. But we [Drs. Garcia Clark and Emmanuel Akyeampong] are part of this broader research. Dr. Emmanuel Akyeampong is looking at the [Professor] Adu Boahen manuscripts and he is also looking at the [Professor] Kwame Arhin manuscripts. He is also looking at the Kumase Manhyia [Palace] archives. But our interest is on Islam and tolerance as opposed to Islam and terrorism and certainly I am doing the work on the education part which is an [important part of the program. During the research activities], I have talked to Sulamana Mumuni [Lecturer of Islamic Studies at the University of Ghana], I have talked to Dr. Dovlo [Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Ghana and Acting Dean of the Faculty of Humanities], I have talked to Rashid Gbandamosi [Registrar at the Islamic University College at East Legon], and I will be talking to the Chief Imam on Saturday, but I have talked to Mustafa Kamil [a leading Muslim Imam and proprietor of Islamic schools in Kumase], BUT what I have not done is to talk to Rabiatu Armah [Professor of Islamic Studies and a leading female voice on Islam]. I could not talk to her last year because by the time I managed to arranged interviews with her, it was time for me to leave the country. I am planning to talk to her this time when she returns from Cape Coast. We do not have any woman that we have talked to, at least on my side,

and that is bad. What [Dr.] Garcia has done [on Muslim market women] begins to balance the material for us. I just want to focus on issues of education. So first I would like to take your particulars-beginning with your name, educational background and let's talk a little about you.

Response: My name is Ms. Abdul Kadiri-Ayishetu. I am a teacher by profession. I am currently studying, and I did my diploma here [at the University of Ghana] and my first degree [too]. Right now, I am doing my MPhil [masters degree] at the Religious Studies Department.

Statement: You see what you did. You give your education background [information] but you didn't tell me anything about your Islamic learning.

Response: Okay. I did my traditional Islamic learning at the Makaranta [Quranic recitation school] level.

Question: How early were you in terms of age when you stated [Quranic learning]?

Answer: Actually my grandfather used to be an Imam, so I studied under him when I was around 8 years old.

Question: What was his name or is he still alive?

Answer: He is deceased now, and was Mallam Abu Bakr Garba who lived at a village near Suhum [in the Eastern Region of Ghana] called Amanase.

Question: At eight when you began, how long did you study with him?

Answer: Since he was my grandfather, I did not go through the formal Makaranta even though I sat in some of their classes. But when we were at home he gave me instructions on continues basis. He will call me and read the Quran and help me through it. And explain certain parts of it the Quran to me. But when I was about 13 years, he got sick and transferred me to my aunt so [that part of my Quranic instructions came to an end]. I studied more when I was with my aunt for about one and half more years.

Question: Were you studying only the recitation of the Quran?

Answer: Yes, the recitation and the hadith and some tradition and the historical background of the Arabs and how Islam came into being.

Question: But you did not study the pure Arab [such as alphabets]?

Answer: I did it to some extent but that one was not in details.

Question: Did he teach you in Arabic or in Hausa?

Answer: For the reading of the Quran, he did it in Arabic, and the translations will be in Hausa since he could not explain in English.

Question: How big was the Muslim community at Amanase?

Answer: Amanase Zongo [Muslim community] was about 900 people (if I am not lying) in those days.

Question: How big is the [Muslim community at Amanase] now?

Answer: It has rather declined because many of the people have migrated to the big cities.

Question: Your grandfather, was he a trader or [a full time] Imam?

Answer: He was just the Imam of the community?

Question: What was the general occupation of the community?

Answer: General Muslim community composed of traders, farmers, and some were civil servants working with the Ministry of Agriculture as project officers around Suhum.

Question: When did you get into formal secular education?

Answer: I started my formal secular education in 1971 when I was 8 years old.. My grandfather was still alive, but let me add something here. I would have missed formal [secular] education had it not been the timely intervention of my [maternal] uncle. Because I was brought to my grandfather when I was just three years only. He [was so pleased with me] that he did not like to lose sight of me so he did not like me go anywhere, So I was 8 years old and but looking at my behavior at the house, my uncle determined that I was a brilliant kind so he said, why don't we send this child to school because her mind is matured. But infant, my grandfather did not agree with him, so my uncle arranged everything with me and even with [having the appropriate school uniform, but in my house clothing] he took me to the school and wrote my name [registered me].

Question: What was your uncle's educational background. Had he completed secular schooling?

Answer: Yes, he had completed the Middle Form 4 by then [equal to high school in America].

Question: What was he doing at that time [in terms of profession]?

Answer: At that time, he had applied to work with SNIT (State National Insurance Trust) and was awaiting the response to his application letter, so he just took me to the school, wrote my name and warned me not to disappoint him. I did not know what disappointment meant at that time, so I said okay. That day my grandfather was annoyed but he did not stop me [from going to secular school] because he was old by then but gradually he agreed to the whole situation [of me

going to secular school. So [in] class One [K-1] I came in first [in the end of year exams], and my uncle did not know what to do [with joy, and my good performance continued] till P-4 [Fourth Grade] the school granted me scholarship and covered my school fees. This was a Local Authority [citizens funded school that waived my tuition]. So my grandfather was so happy and it was like he gave me the support [to continue with the secular education]. In fact, I did very well till I completed Form 4 [High School].

Question: And then what happened [after you completed High School]?

Answer: After that, and in fact by Form Two [equal to 7th Grade in America] my uncle encouraged me to sit [write] for the Common Entrance exams [that allows students to enter the Secondary School system].

Question: Where was your uncle [what was he doing] at that time?

Answer: He later came to Accra and came home every weekend to see how we were all faring [doing] so he let me sit for the Common Entrance [Examination]. I passed [with admission to go to Abuakwa State College (Abusco) but I was not allowed to go because my grandfather did not want me to go to a boarding house [away from home], so that ended it. Obviously I completed the Middle School (Form 4) [which was equal to the American High School system at that time] in 1981.

Question: And then how did you continue your education?

Answer: In 1981, another uncle of mine who used to be a Sales Manager at Cadbury Limited [company that is in the production of chocolate in Ghana] asked me to come stay with him. So I did come to stay with him. At that time his wife was pregnant and she had a difficult childbirth. [My uncle had] promised to send me to a vocation school, but due to the complications of his wife's child birth, I have to stay home to take care of my siblings for three years so around 1983/84 academic year, my mother decided that since I am still at home and I was so plum [fear that I was matured, I needed to become more engaged academically that I was.]

Question: Was your mother a Muslim woman?

Answer: No. She was a teacher and Ga (by ethnicity) and actually she Islamized [converted to Islam] when she married my father but when she broke off [divorced] she left the Muslim faith. So my mother came to my uncle to demand that I be engaged in something. She preferred me to go to a Teacher Training College. In fact my uncle was not ready to release me to my non-Muslim mother [and he also like the help I was giving at his house]. But gradually she [my mother] convinced me and I agreed so one day she just sent another woman (Hajia Katumi Mahama, who is now doing her PhD at Birmingham University in the United Kingdom) to our house and Hajia was the Headmistress [Head of a School] of her school and [my mother thought that Hajia being] a Muslim woman might convince my uncle but he did not agree. So quietly, my mother brought in some forms [application form], she took me to the photographer, took my

pictures for the completion of the application forms and asked if I was ready to [continue my education to which I responded in the affirmative]. She said then that she would not come for me but I should come to her place so I packed my things and left my uncle. He came looking for me later on but I had started school already.

Question: Which school were you attending?

Answer: Accra [Teacher] Training College. At first I said I wouldn't go but one of my maternal uncles, a retired diplomat was visiting and my mother told him about that, so he said that I wanted to go to school, I should come and stay with him so that my paternal uncle would not have access to me, so I went and stayed with him at Kanda [Estate] and started my Teacher training College [education] until I completed in 1987. So when I completed, my mother informed my [paternal] uncle of it so he can [be in contact with me again]. By then around 1981, when I came to stay with him, he introduced a man to me to see if I liked him to which I [responded in the affirmative] but when I told the man that I wanted to go to school, he did not deny me that right and he said that if I wanted to go to school, concentrate on my education and complete the [program] he wouldn't mind and would wait. And he waited till I completed [the Teacher Training Program] in 1978 June so in September [of 1987] we got married. I started my teaching profession in 1987. But in 1998, I enrolled at the University to come to do my Diploma in Political Science and Religions having completed privately to do my Ordinary and Advanced level certification, and I completed my diploma in 2000. Following the completion of the Diploma I enrolled in 2001 to do a bachelors degree which I completed in 2004 in Religious Studies) and I completed with a First Class. The Department thus encouraged me to come back to do my MPhil (Graduate Masters Degree in Religious Studies).

Question: According to the information I have, you are involved in the Federation of Muslim Women's Association. Can you tell me more about that?

Answer: Yes, FoMWAG (Federation of Muslim Women's Association in Ghana) is a group of secularly educated Muslim women sat down to reflect on the Islamic communities, on the condition of the Muslim community in Ghana, and looked at the plight of the Muslim women many of whom are illiterate and they are being treated by their husbands poorly. These women face so many problems so we thought of how we could help solve some of these problems. You know in the Muslim communities, they have various associations so we decided to bring all of the Muslim women's associations together under the umbrella of FoMWAG. Our objectives is mostly concerned with girl-child education and encouraging and empowering women to take charge of every sphere of their life-economically, socially, psychologically, and physically. When we started mobilizing our women, the [Muslim] men saw this as a threat, they thought we were going to pollute the minds of these women for them to rebel against them so they were apprehensive of [the movement]. But as time went on, they saw that FoMWAG had a vision for the Muslim communities. When we started we began to educate our young girls about this formal [secular] education. We also educated them not to accept early marriage-thus when they are in school and they are told to drop out to get married, they should [refuse]. Another question came up: If [a girl] refused the husband that has been arranged for her and [she is] thrown out of

their family home, where would [she] go? So FoMWAG decided to put a fund in place to finance such brilliant Muslim girls [who face financial needs] so that when they refuse to accept [early marriages and want to go to school, then FoMWAG will take up the responsibility [of funding their education]. [We have a student we funded] and she completed studying Pharmacy at the KNUST (Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology) last year. [Also], if you look at [this] university campus [Muslim girls] are very well represented and all this is the work of FoMWAG.

[Regarding Ghana's general Muslim women population we know that they are mostly engaged in trading], we realized that they did not know their priorities and they don't know how to use their monies well, so we educated them that their children's education is very important; that they should learn also to save [their money] and give good accounting [of their investments]; that they should stop buying expensive clothes, and expensive bowls. [Now they have moderated their wasteful spending] and they see the need to invest in their children's education. Because of the polygamous nature of Muslim men (when a man is married to two or three wives), and his first wife sends his children to go to him for their needs, [he is not going to be able to satisfy those needs], so we tell the women that their children are theirs and it is their responsibility to educate and refine them even if the father does not do it. So because of the work of FoMWAG, many Muslim women are becoming responsible and despite the fact that they are illiterate, they are giving their children education as best as they can.

Question: FoMWAG doesn't have a House/Home where they can accommodate children who are thrown out by their parents because they refused to accept early marriage, does it?

Answer: No, we do follow up [the cases if you know a girl is in conflict]. We visit the homes and talk to the parents and in many cases the parents come to agree with FoMWAG to allow the girl to continue her education and take good care until she completes and the marriage of carried out.

Question: Your [personal] experiences are very good for the organization. What has been the reaction of the Muslims, not the community as such, but the leadership such as the Imams or the Chief Imam to FoMWAG?

Answer: Initially they saw us as a threat but later on they realized that FoMWAG has a good vision for the Muslim community. So now, I am telling you that whenever the Chief Imam is organizing things on the national level, they call on FoMWAG and we initiate and organize things for them. Many of the male Muslim organizations in Ghana now cannot do anything without us; they have accepted us fully and they consult with us and seek suggestions from FoMWAG whenever they are organizing things.

Question: One thing that came up in my research interviews of the Islamic Education Units is that some of the Quranic schools and their proprietor are all being convinced to join the Islamic Education Unit. Of course it is their right to join or not. At times they accept to join and then at the last minute they change their minds. The argument being that they want to establish the

foundations of Islam in the students firmly before they are exposed to secular education [or to remain in Islamic controlled Junior Secondary Schools till they are exposed to the Senior Secondary Schools that are secular]. Is there any coordination between the Federation of Muslim Women's Association and the Islamic Education Units that can encourage not only that the girls to go to school but also the Muslim proprietors to join the Islamic Education Units and therefore expose more children to secular education?

Answer: Let me add something here. When the Islamic Education Unit start there were a lot of agitation. For instance the Imams wanted the pure Islamic learning to form over the secular and they did not agree to the curriculum of the GES (Ghana Education Service). 1) They wanted Friday not to be a school day, and 2) they wanted more class period [time to be devoted to] Islamic subjects. So as FoMWAG has many of its members in the Ghana Education Service and the Islamic Education Unit, we came together and educated the Ulama [community of Muslim Quranic scholars] that we cannot have everything in our own ways. And above all, GES is paying the Teachers and it is GES that is providing books and other logistics, so we are give a quarter or time slot in the class day so we should use it effectively for religious instructions. In this case the children will be both educated in Islam and in secular learning. For now, we have resolved this. We keep on to tell them that the Makaranta [Quranic recitation] learning is good, but we should not only develop the spiritual side of the child because the human person is made up of spiritual, physical, psychological and all other aspects, so we should develop all. So as we develop the spiritual aspect we should also develop the secular aspects so they [student benefit fully and lead a total life. So now if you enter every home, you will hear a mother or father shouting at a child saying, "hurry up and go to school don't you know you are going to be late to school? Don't you know that education is important?" So there has been some conscious-raising on the part of parents. Beside that, we that the Islamic community does not have any singled model secular school so in fact, FoMWAG has acquired it own 10 acre land toward Nsawam to build one-complex model school for the Muslim community. We started a model nursery school at Amasaman for the Muslim community.

Question: Why is FoMWAG building this complex and NOT the Imams initiating this idea?

Answer: Maybe that has not been their focus, We talk about the need to educate our children but that may not be their focus, so FoMWAG being more concerned about girl-child education decided to put something on the ground to show as example so the rest can follow.

Question: Is the school intending to only focus on girl-child education or will it be opened to all children?

Answer: At the moment we are focusing on education because when you go to our community it is our girl-child who is at risk. So we want to focus on them, groom them so they can pull the others along. Then we can open our tentacles later on.

Question: Who is going to fund the complex?

Answer: For now, we are funding it from our own contribution, but we are also seeking international donors. We have not succeeded but we are trying and we have cast our net wide so we hope to get support.

Question: Have you seen the educational complex of the Ahl-Sunna at Nima (the Islamic Research Institute)? What do you think of it?

Answer: I think it is good in the sense that it has given the Muslim community some kind of focus. At the same time, I think they need to polish the secular aspect (of their education because it seems to me) that the Islamic aspect is dominating the learning experience. [One of their teachers once] told me that sometimes a [secular] will be teaching social studies or science for example, and one of the Arabic teachers [or Islamic studies teachers] will come in and ask the secular teacher to leave so he can get enough time to teach his Islamic courses. So I think that there must be some structures so that it will look very good and say that this is a model school for Muslims.

Question: So, is FoMWAG looking at Accra [for its complex]?

Answer: As long as the land and the school is concerned, FoMWAG [is limited in its operations]. We had decentralized some of our operations. So if you are in the community or in a society, you [look at what your Associate can do]. Sometimes we make general decisions and say this is what we want to do [but we want the decentralized zones to take decision that are most appropriate] for their regions or their communities.

Question: There is a school in Kumase run by Mustafa Kamil that focuses on secular education, then they do Arabic, then he does an after school program [in Islamic studies]. When I interviewed him, I asked him [whether] it was not so much for the children to come to school from 7:30 AM and don't go home till 7 PM? His answer was that the parents want them off the street. What do you think of that?

Answer: "All walk and no play makes Jack a dull boy."

Question: So when FoMWAG finishes its complex (now you have the nursery, so) when do you think of starting the primary school system of the complex?

Answer: Right now we have a primary one to three (K-through-3) and we have developed it on a different site all together. So as soon as the building is finished we will move [our programs to the complex].

Question: Are the Teachers government funded [at your nursery and K-through-3]?

Answer: No, FoMWAG is paying the teachers [as of now].

Question: Why don't you place them within the government system [in the Islamic Education



Unit system where the government pay the teachers]?

Answer: Yes, we want to gain our firm grounds and when we are sure of what we are doing then we place it in the GES system. By then we would have put in place certain things we want from them such as good tuition, learning, and discipline then we can absorb them into the government system. [Implied here is the view that the public education system lacks discipline though secular education is attractive].

Question: Is there anything that I have not asked you that you want to add? [I say this] because several years ago, I came to Ghana [for research and] I was looking for the Islamic University College [at East Legon] and I ended up at a small complex run by a man who directed an Islamic vocational program [at the Islamic Call Society at East Legon]. Does FoMWAG bring these organizations under its umbrella or do these people [the International Call Society operate on their own]?

Answer: I am happy to tell you that many of the International Non-governmental societies such as the International Muslim Call Society, the Iranian Cultural Consulate (as we speak now is organizing the birthday of Fatima-the only daughter of the Prophet Muhammad) and they are coordinating it with FoMWAG. So many of them collaborate with us.

Question: So the students at the Call Society can get Guidance from FoMWAG?

Answer: [Yes], most of the time they consult FoMWAG [on behalf] of some of the students.

Question: [Is there] anything else that I need to know that I have not touched on?

Answer: So far, at the economic front the Muslim women are doing well. We just enlightened them more on how to channel their resources wisely and profitably.

Question: Do any of [these women] contribute [financially] to the activities of FoMWAG?

Answer: FoMWAG is an umbrella organization so if you are in the Eastern Region [of the country], the various organization come under FoMWAG and they contribute something.

Statement: I was thinking that from the point of view of those of us who are not Muslims, Muslim women trade and have money is they bank it. So they should contribute to the program.

Response: Yes, they belong to their organization and when they meet they do contribute their quarter and some come to the national level.

Question: This is the last question: Is there experiences where in addition to the secular education FoMWAG has encouraged the girls to study Arabic?

Answer: That one, it is obvious that we can never discourage them away from that. We talked about holistic education and never be just secular so they should study both, Even we are encouraging the adults to who have never had access to this arabic schools to [enter] adult education programs in Arabic around many of the Mosques. The Muslims converge and now we have Muslim scholars who teach the women Arabic and Dr. Gracia Clarke met a group of them in Kuamse, and [these adult Arabic literacy education participants are] all over in Accra.

Question: Has there been any government reaction to that [that so many adult women are taking adult literacy classes in Arabic]?

Answer: No at all. Because the government itself know that Muslims are handicapped in so far as education is concerned so it is gives the moral support because at every function the government stresses on this need for education.

Question/Statement: In have seen in newspaper reports that there is a lot of [Muslim] emphasis on girls education in the Brong Ahafo Region [of Ghana].

Response: Yes, it is all over [stressed over the country], but let me add a little bit on the social relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims [in this country]. You known that sometime back there were petty squabble between Muslims and Christians [in the country] but I am happy to say that FoMWAG is educating our people to be tolerant and live peacefully and co-exist and I am happy to say that now there is some kind of peaceful co-existence [among the faiths] because in one family you have [people of the same family] who are Christians and others who are Muslims.

At functions we all meet together and at the end of the day we all go to our various places and therefore there is no reason that we cannot co-exist.

Question: Before you go, let me question you on an issue: Your mother is a Ga and your father is a Northern. So how would you be classified that you are an Accra [Ga]-Muslim?

Answer: I cannot be a Ga-Muslim, a Muslim is a Muslim!

Statement: But in the literature the [distinction is made] of Accra Muslims who are considered to be Ga [people] and became Islamized. Is this a distinction or do you see a distinction to this effect?.

Response: I my case, you take into consideration my paternal relations as Muslim and as such I am a Muslim by birth so I cannot [other than being a] Muslim.

Question: Would the description [based on ethnicity] comes secondary if anything at all.

Answer: yes, but in fact, I do not see any need [for such ethnic distinction at all] of Ga Muslims, Asante Muslims, etc. The bottom line is that we are Muslims and that is all but sometimes they try to bring this ethnic differentiation and that creates a lot of tensions

Observation: Yes, because if you are dealing with the resolution of tensions, then this should not be an issue.

- Yes, and I thank you very much [for the interview].

- You are very welcome!