

**Title**

Interview **Dr. Elom Dovlo** Professor of Religious Studies University of Ghana

**Creator**

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**Description**

The purpose of this interview was to seek independent and scholarly reaction to issues arising from conversations with Ghanaian Muslim leaders. For example, had the national government supported secular education for Muslims sufficiently? What has been the historical relationship between Islamic NGO leaders and the traditional Muslim leadership? The conversation in this interview can serve as commentary on the others in this collection.

11 July 2006

Interview with Rev Dr. Elom Dovlo, Associate Professor of Religion and Ag. Dean of the Faculty of Arts

Venue: Professor's Office at the Department of Religious Studies, University of Ghana, Legon.

Interview is conducted in English.

Purpose of interview is to investigate the researched informed perspective on Islam and Torrence in Ghana.

Opening statement and Question: Today is 11th of July 2006, and I am again with the Rev Dr. Elom Dovlo. I return to talk about the issue of Islam, Islamic education, and Islam and peaceful co-existence between Muslims and Christians in Ghana. My students who heard your lecture were very impressed and very happy that you came, and so I you... but let me pose a question [to you]: What are your general views of Muslims in Ghana?

Answer: I would say that [Muslims} are a very conscious religions group in Ghana, but consciousness is not simply built on their religious belief but also built on the fact that they see themselves as a group which has not benefitted fully from public life and affairs of state and would want to remedy that. So I see them coming together as a pressure group and carrying out a lot of advocacy in championing the cause and more or less asking for remedies to their situation in the country.

Question: Now let's go back on that point. What do mean when you say that they are a community thinking that they have received a share in national resources? What do they lack?

Answer: I think the main problem has been that Islam/Muslims, having introduced Quranic schools to spread literacy in Ghana and most of West Africa did not adapt very quickly to secure forms of education which came with colonial governance since they associated it with Christianity and it meant that at Independence, Muslims found themselves at a disadvantage because they did not have the educational skills that put them in Ghanaian public life and so for a long time they remained in private life and were not actually holding very influential positions in

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various aspect in Ghanaian public life until recently and I think what has made them feel disadvantaged in a way.

Question: If there is a follow up [question I would say this] but I know I know the answer to it but let me put it this way]. Why do Muslims feel this way, or weren't there a national policy that could have drawn Muslims into secular education away from the thoughts they held during the colonial period?

Answer: Yes, indeed. There were and when I hear Muslims say today that it was Christianity and colonial powers that put them at a disadvantage, I query a little. You know that most Muslim officers and speakers will say that the colonial authority refused them education because they wanted them to be the hewers of wood and drawers of water [the laboring class] I don't believe that I have seen that policy anywhere. I think Islam was protected from Christianity originally even by the colonial authorities and I think eventually what determined the refusal to undertake secular education was much more religious persuasion [of the Muslims] to which were more geared toward or derived from fear that they might be converted to Christianity. Otherwise, colonial government did set up schools-such as the Government School in Tamale in 1910 and [the Catholics set a schools too]. In the post-Independent era the government of the CPP (Convention Peoples' Party) and Kwame Nkrumah at the time made education free and compulsory for Ghanaians. But in the Northern sector of Ghana, the free education was completely total-because the Local Councils catered for pupils who decided to go to school all the way to the University which was not the case with the Southern Zone of Ghana. It meant that post colonial policy placed the Northern part of the country [where a good number of the people were Muslims] at an advantage as far as education was concerned.

Question: As you indicated in the opening statement, what are the advocates (advocators) identifying as issues in the Muslims community that need to be redressed or that Government needs to react to and who are these individuals who articulate these concerns?

Answer: I wouldn't put it down with individuals, I will say that often a group thing or a movement and the most vocal [Muslim] movement in Ghana today is COMOG (Coalition of Muslim Organizations of Ghana). They take up issues on a number of fronts. For instance on the educational front, they challenged government to respond to the educational needs of Muslims especially through the Islamic education Unit (IEU) of the Ghana Education Service, but I will say that they don't simply sit on their back and push government. You can see a general attitude where every available opportunity offered them they talk about the value of [secular] education and mostly these are people who have had secular education themselves and now occupying prominent positions in society and therefore living proof that you can be educated in a secular way and still remain a Muslim. So they are more or less examples for the cause they are advocating. Another front that came out prominently related to our [national] population figures.

Question: Can you please expand on the population issue?

Answer: In 2000, a national population and housing census was held and the results came out in *Diversity and Tolerance in the Islam of West Africa* (<http://westafricanislam.matrix.msu.edu>)

2002. The new population figures regarding the religious distribution in the country was concerned, Christians were recorded at 69 percent, and Muslim were reported at 15.6 percent of the population [the rest being Traditionalists]. What happened immediately was that COMOG came out in a Press Conference and a Press Release accompanying it which challenged the figures. It claimed that other sources put Muslims in the country at a population minimum of about 49 percent, with Traditionalist following and the Christians were the minorities in Ghana.

They cited a lot of sources without any scientific basis but what was important was that first the language in which it was couched was very polemical and secondly the language more or less was posited to indicate that those who did the census were Christians and therefore they distorted the population figures with a Christian agenda. Even they used some Christian sources such as that of the Ghana Evangelical Committee research that produced certain figures to argue that these were precursors or forerunners to the Christian agenda to distort the census numbers. But again, there is an element of balance in this thing. Because of the Older leadership in the Muslim community, their relationship with the Christian Council [of Ghana] and the Catholic Secretariat is such that whenever an issue comes up that more or less has the potential of degenerating into conflict [they find ways to defuse them]. In fact, if people had wanted to respond to the arguments of COMOG we could have easily degenerated into verbal conflict. If the tone was to be responded, but then after a while some more matured voiced presented the same argument in less hostile way and not confrontational way and eventually the Statistical Department came out to explain their figures and the case more or less left the public debate scene.

For [those of us informed enough to look at the argument] it was not only about population figures. It had to do with politics, it had to do with power and authority, it had to do with distribution of wealth, it had to do with a lot of things more than just the view that this religious group or people are more important than the other. But I wasn't surprised because for a long time, the Muslims themselves have pushed population figures and made arguments that because of their [minority situation] or that because they have not been exposed to more development s they are having more children so I saw [the population figures conflict] as one of the areas of advocacy relating to population figures and therefore for resource [redistribution].

Question: Let me take on the very important issues you have indicated here and direct a question. The census argument of 2002 came at about the same time as Muslim movement in the North made the argument that their predicament as an under educated people was due to the colonial government and therefore wanted the British Government to pay reparations to them,. That point was made but that was a political argument anyway. If one were to play a devils advocate and say thus: "Well, Muslims made an argument of increased children for lack of spacing childbirth, so if the 1960 census put them at 12 percent of the population, estimates since then as we were not putting religious denominations in the census figures of 1970 and 1984, UN figures estimated Muslim figures to be about 15 percent therefore by the year 2000, some of them are thinking that their numbers should be more than 15 percent. Wouldn't that be a reasonable assumption on their part?

Answer: Yes, it would be a reasonable assumption. I personally query the population figures as  
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well, and I query it on the basis that if looked at the Ghana Evangelist Committee Report, which I think the last one was in 1995-1998, it came out with figures of Christians who were Churched [those who frequently go Church or belong to a Church community] as opposed to those who claim to be Christians but do not go to Church. It means that for reasons of social conformance, people could actually say that they are Christians and therefore there should be allowances made for such cases. So on the basis of that for instance, I will say yes there 69 percent of Christians reported in the 2000 census was a very high figure. I raise those issues because traveling around the country, maybe the figures for Traditionalist (Ethnos-religious peoples) should a bit higher and there is the possibility that those of the Muslims could also be slightly higher as well. But in our part of the world, religious is not an exclusive domain. Today someone can carry our traditional practices, tomorrow he can meet with a Mallam {Muslim Imam}, and by Sunday the person is [attending] Church also. Such multiple allegiance to faith is an inclusivist attitude and more or less always make is guarded about hard figures in religious matters [even one regarding population distribution]. And so, I will say that it is a very suggestive figure and I recently found some figures (I have forgotten the precise source: it was a group that gave statistics on religious groups around the world). I came across it on the Internet and I think that they were close [to what the percentage of Ghanaian Muslims in the general population].

Question: And what were their figures? I personally think that the Muslim population could be close to 20 percent but that can also be an exaggeration because it is an assumption.

Answer: I was also thinking about that before the 2000 population census. But when I listen to the explanation of the Statistical Department, I thought they should be able to give errors (plus and minus ranges) to determine such figures. The arguments COMOG made about the figures that Households were not counted those are things to be investigated. In my own home during the census, we had a person living in our house who was a Muslim (she was a student here) and she was counted as a Muslim. The census officials were even surprised to see a Christian Minister (priest) having a Muslim in the same compound.

Question: Let me take up that issue. Is it possible that some Muslims did not make themselves available to be counted because some people thought that they will be tax implications associated with the census so we can say that their numbers were smaller than they could have been but not in any exaggerated manner. But two issues you raise-let me take the second issue first: The fluidity of faith whereby one can be a Traditionalist today and next time may show interest in Muslim charms and on Sunday probably go to Church. What does this say about our society in terms of religious tensions and religious peace?

Answer: It shows, I dare say that in our society tensions that lead to conflict can easily be minimized because of shared experiences. If you think of hard core faith oriented people who are so exclusive so as to generate clashes in our community, they will form a very small percent of the faith community. The larger percentage will be people who believe in their faith but are ready to accommodate people of other faith. And their relations [interactions] may not be that of faith relations. It may be in the other areas of human existence and encounters-trade, politics, occupational and others. They are able to relate freely without tensions.

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Question: If people here count more the relations other the religions to be more important than to stress religious divide, but in the earlier beginnings when Christianity was being introduced, local chiefs were more adamant and opposed to people who became Christians and mover to Christian sections of town; that was divisive and the Christian missionaries were very emphatic on these things and yet today and so many decades after the fact, we see Muslims, and Christians, and Traditionalist who mingle so easily. What happened in our history to produce that particular respect for individual religions?

Answer: Personally I do not think that it was a historical development. I think the basis were there in the traditional family structures as argued by previous scholars. For instance, I think that the attitudes of chief [to early Christianity] was due much more to the loss of authority which Christianity [inflicted on traditional authority] such as the creation of two towns or communities out of what was [always seen as] one community. You will notice that those people who became Christians in those days (some of them very faithful to their new faith) but a lot of them also suffered from Church discipline for not getting rid of traditional customs. Indeed, you look at our history of encounter between Christianity and Traditional beliefs and practices, you see that there were a lot of unconscious dialogue taking place in the hearts and minds of people which even eventually emerged more formally as our societies began to produce their own "Christianities" so I think it was there and simmering and eventually it came out. In our society if you live in the same community it is difficulty to say that someone's business is not your business. We attend the same funerals, the same ceremonies, and I was at a wedding this Sunday afternoon and the girl getting married grew up in Nima [a Muslim community in Accra] and they all came to Church with their heads covered and these Muslims couldn't say that they were not coming to Church because they were not Christians; and we couldn't say that we are not going to their marriages because they are Christians. So I think [Professor] Lamin Sanneh is right [in his publications] to say that the two faiths [Islam and Christianity] had been domesticated in Africa. They have lost their exclusiveness to a point in Africa. It is rather the new movements emerging out of them-the Charismatic Churches, the Ahl Sunnah al-Jama`a, the Africana Mission-they are rather the exclusive groups.

Question: Now let me take you up on that because that is related to the first question I was going to ask you relating to leadership issues. The Elder leaders (Older generation of Muslims) appear to be more accommodative of the political climate than the newer generation of Muslims who are education in secular programs who have remained Muslims and never converted [into Christianity]. So if you look at [can we say] that secular education in Ghana create radicalism as opposed to the Middle east where the thinking has been that fundamental Islamic education had created radical fundamentalist? Just this question and I will follow that with the issue of leadership as well as institutions that moderate tensions.

Answer: Indirectly it [secular education] produces radicalism. [I say indirectly] because it is not part of the secular education curriculum to produce or teach radicalism. But just as education produced people who fought against colonial rule education is able to raise people to a level of consciousness of their own conditions. I said indirectly because education has created room for

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Ghanaian Muslims who have gone to school to connect with the Islamic world and easily [such as by the Internet] and so on.. And I think that it is this connection that has created the ability to know what is happening in the Islamic world generally, to associate with other intellectuals in the Islamic world too easily and I think that is what is contributing to [the issues at stake] or what I might call the rise "in options in viewpoints" among the Muslim communities.

Question: If that were the case, wouldn't these new generation of Muslims educated in secular schools and connected to the Muslim world even though most of them may not speak Arabic, they can communicate in English, how do these young people perceive their traditional leaders in situations of dialogue and of conflict, and secular education?

Answer: At times in the expressions in private conversations, the [young advocates of issues] do not see the generation of older ulama [leaders] as providing even adequate leadership to the Muslim community as appropriate to the 21st century. They even challenge the way and manner the leadership is selected in Ghana. They feel that the leadership is more or less political symbols who are incapable of addressing the political and social issues of the Muslim community. They believe there is the need for change of the old leadership. But [the new intellectuals of the secular educated Muslims] are also conscious of the fact that there is very little they can do about it at the moment. So we have kind of two-tier leadership in the country. The Older Ulama and the Younger media produced educated leaders. What I see happening is mostly on the issue of making allies. Some among the youthful leadership find the need of alliance with the Older Ulama, and after a while you may see another group of the younger relating to the Older Ulama in a different way. But for me, it means that the Older Ulama hold the leadership because if the younger leadership has to more or less form alliance then there is no doubt that the Older Ulama are leading. I think they are performing a balancing act.

Question: In that sense they [both] have certain roles that they are playing!

Answer: Yes, definitely, each has specific roles that they are playing within the Islamic community.

Question: Let me follow this up with another question. Why is the younger Ulama challenging the Older Ulama who see them as not Ulama at all?

Answer: The Older Ulama are those who are grounded in Quranic education and the younger Ulama in secular education..

Question: Are there any Ulama that transcend [this dichotomy-both highly educated in the Religious sciences of Islam and also in secular thoughts]?

Answer: Ammmmm!

Questions: One that can be educated in secular learning but also education in the Quran, hadith, and tafsir and other things who can combine those roles and emerge along the way?

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Answer: No names come particularly to me.

Question: Not even Shaykh Armiyawo [Imam and Acting Director of the Islamic Education Unit in Greater Accra]?

Answer: Armiyawo had all his Islamic education in Ghana and even though he represents more matured face of the younger leadership and works with the Older Ulama, he has not gone through the Arabian country education. More so of Egyptian education and not Saudi.

Questions: This brings us back to where we were when the western education ulama because they can hook up with other Muslims by the Internet and gain views, we can say that the older generation of Ulama also [have their external associations] but in a different way.

Answer: Yes, but come to think of it that kind of option for the newer ulama-being able to reach parts of the world quickly [by internet] works in the other direct as well. In the sense that Muslims in Ghana face various options in Islam. After September 11 [bombing in the United States the Muslims in Ghana were faced] with the option of Islam in the West which has been there and led my the United States Embassy, there was some kind of rapproachmore toward the Muslim community. And it was the younger leaders of the Muslim community who picked on the challenge. Eventually, some of them formed organizations to express their opposition to terrorism in Ghana and I know that was a key challenge to some of the Muslims. Some of these Muslims leaders visited the United States to see the options of Islam there. So I believe that had it not been for the secular education of the younger ulama, these options would have been missed.

Question: Let me raise the last issue. I have discussed some of these issues with some of the Christian leaders and the Ahmadiyya Movement and individual. Last year I talked to Archbishop Akrofi of the Anglican Church on these but I want your opinion it. I also talked to Rev. Dr. Nathan Sanwini at the Christian Council. You talked about the Older generation of the Ulama and their moderating effect on issues. But you also mentioned the Religious Bodies Forum that brought religious bodies together-Muslims and Christians from the other Muslim point of view and the Ahmadiyya as well are brought in. Can you comment on this a little-about the National Institutions that mediate religious conflict?

Answer: I think Councils like the Christian Council of Ghana and the Islam in African Project which has developed in PROGMURA, has tried to get Christians to understand Muslims and Islam not necessarily with the intention os mission [converting them]. The same experience can be found in the Catholic Church of West Africa where they have had bi-annual inter-faith services and some of that had even been held in Ghana. So for quite some time these key Christian bodies have tried to facilitate contacts with Muslims and the Ahmadiyya Muslim Mission are always active even before the older ulama of the Ghana Sunni Muslims came in. It ended up what became known as the Forum of Religious Bodies, and the Forum met to solve crisis such as when president Jerry John Rawlings had a conflict with his vice president the Late

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Mr. Arkaah, such as in 1995 when there was several violent conflict between some Muslims and Christians in Ghana, and even on ethnic conflicts. The Forum came out with statements opposing these conflict. But the religious conflicts were the work of younger people and I think that has [religious relations'] had been smooth and amicable. I was looking at the newspaper recently when a new Archbishop was created for Accra, one of the people who he called on was the Chief Imam and the Graphic [national newspaper] show a picture of them embracing and these have positive images. But I dare say that recently and international organization is trying to enter the inter-religious scene in Ghana ad has asked that it becomes the only group to seek international religious relations. I think this causing [some concern] but I have not investigated it as yet.

Question: Would that be a Muslim International Organization or a Christian Organization?

Answer: A Christian International Organization.

Question: But it cannot supercede the Christian Council of Ghana or the religious Forum, can it?

Answer: I hear that they have convinced some that all interfaith issues should come under it panel or that organization. Even when the Christian Council sent a letter they were challenged. When Rev. Sanwini organized international conference for PROGMURA, they protested it. I haven't fully investigated this and I will [let you know more later.]

Question: Finally, in so far as religious relations in Ghana is concerned, Muslims in Ghana have had amicable relations with Christians?

Answer: Yes, I believe so. There had been a good level of understanding, respect and fellowship with others in Ghana and the society and hope that it will continued so without and changes.

Thanks you very much sir. I appreciate the conversation/.