

**Title**

Interview Al-Hajj **Ibrahim Umar**  
Imam of the Ahl-Sunna al-Jamait of Ghana

**Creator**

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**Description**

Al-Hajj Imam Ibrahim Umar centered his conversation on Islamic orthodoxy and expressed concern about the old leadership that he described as more akin to mysticism. The Ahl-Sunna al-Jamait Group, over which he provided leadership, see themselves initially as protecting the integrity of the religion. The Imam also talked about the support he has for secular education—and in the end presents his group as more progressive.

Interview with Al-Hajj Imam Umar (Ahl-Sunna)  
14 July 2005  
Interview Location: Nima (Accra)

Q. [Please would you] introduce yourself for us?

A. I am Ibrahim Umar Imam of the Ahl-Sunna Ghana Mission.

Q. Good Morning Sir, Can you please also provide a biography background for me so I can appropriately identify you?

A. I am Umar Ibrahim Imam from Ghana. I was born in 1932 at Kwahu Ankoma area. I was [a student] of Al-Hajj Bunyani from Nigeria who took me from my father and came to Koforidua 9In the Eastern region to study under him]. I was there until the end of the Second World War before coming to Accra. We came here and stayed in Accra till 1957 when my teacher died. I made my mind to go to Saudi Arabia to learn. From 1958, I traveled from here to Nigeria and from Nigeria to the Sudan, and I boarded a ship from Sudan to Saudi Arabia in 1959. That time, there was no university in [Saudi Arabic] but there was the Dar al-Hadith (something like an Institute) where I studied. I was there [at the Institute] when they opened the Islamic University at Medina [in Saudi Arabic] in 1961 so I joined it from the secondary level until I graduated in 1968 and came back to Ghana. It was from then that I started this work I retired in 1997 so I am a retired person but I am still doing my work.

Q. The Dar al-Hadith in Medina, what kind of subjects did you study and in what languages were they instructed?

A. The subjects there were all Islamic--hadith [prophetic traditions], the Quran, tafsir [Quranic interpretations], tawhid [the unity of God]. These were all Islamic subject and we did not have anything other than that. They were taught in Arabic. When they

opened the University [of Medina in 1961], we continued the courses in the same manner.

Q. You said that when you came to Ghana, you started your work. Can you describe the nature of the work for me?

A. The work is to teach the children about what is Islam and call the people to the correct Islam. I taught the reality of Islam and then we built the institute that you see [across the street here], and we sent some of our students to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar to learn. They went and came back. These you see [in the picture are some of my students who went to study in Arabian countries and] came back.

Q. The schools you established: were they Makaranta [Quranic school] types or did you established the structure system. I have seen the new school [Institute you have built here] but when you started in 1968, how did you structure your school and how is this new one is different as transforming from the past?

A. We started with Islamic classes. But after we built this building, we now have secular subject added. All the children who come here learn secular subjects as well as Arabic and religion (Islamic). So now do both.

Q. When did you decide that you wanted to learn both [secular and Islamic knowledge] as opposed to strictly Islamic courses?

A. I can say that the need to introduce both secular and Islamic curriculum to students was something I thought about when I was studying in Saudi Arabic in the late 1950s. Because we saw that the people [the Arab Muslims] had betrayed us. They tell us not to learn English and French and other Western languages but focus on Arabic. They were afraid that if we learnt these languages we might be attracted to Christianity. After we went there [to the Arab world to study] we recognized that it was a big mistake just to focus on Arabic. So my idea was to learn both so when I came back home, I told people to learn both secular and Arabic since Arabic was for religious studies and secular education was important as it taught the national language and the languages for learning in secular education. If you do not speak these secular languages then you are nobody. This is why the Muslims in West Africa are mostly low income earning people because they have no skills to be employed in meaningful positions. That is why you see the main work for Muslims in Ghana as being driving trucks and the second on is terrorism, and then being laborers, and then they are "book men" [parking attendants], or night watchmen [security guards]. This needed to be change through secular education.

Q. Now, you started the secular education for your student and the Quranic and Islamic education also for your students. How much time in a day will a student in your school spend studying?

A. We have here the nursery school, and we have the elementary division, and then we have the Junior Secondary School (JSS) [all these are both Islam and secular]. Those

who have gone through this already, we have the senior secondary (SSS) for the Islamic side of the system.

Q. Do you have the SSS (Secondary school) here on this premise?

A. No, not the secular but an Islamic Secondary School and JSS Islamic but they learn English as a subject. From Nursery through the Junior Secondary School, they learn both secular and Islamic subjects.

Q. So this is a very big school then.

A. Sometimes you should go to the [classes to see what they are doing there].

Q. So in a sense, you have a very comprehensive school from kindergarten which is both Islamic and secular, primary school both secular and Islamic, junior secondary School both Islamic and secular, and then Islam only Secondary school. What is the idea for the Islamic only secondary school but not both secular and Islamic?

A. Because secular secondary school is not easy to add to this. We are now trying to find the money to build a separate secondary school that will be both secular and Islamic. That is what we are trying to do. The current structure is not sufficient.

Q. So at the moment, your school system is not part of the Islamic Education Unit. Is it?

A. Yes, we were the first people to have joined the Islamic Education Unit. We were the first to register and we are the people who are supporting it. And we are the people who think that the success of the Islamic Education Unit will contribute to the freedom of Muslims to do many things in the country

Q. How about the problem that the Islamic Education Unit and of course all the Arabic Schools face in terms of the testing for Arabic which the West African Examination Council does not have in place for students in the Islamic Education system?

A. The problem is that we the Muslim educators in Ghana do not have a standard curricular and the Arab countries also do not help us only they want to give us their books. Their books are also different from each other--Saudi books are different from Libyan books, and Egypt's curriculum and books are different. So in a sense we don't know what we are doing. So you see different schools teaching different books. What we want is an Islamic Unit that come together to develop religious studies content materials. There is a need for the help to develop our own syllabus so it can be tested easily.

Q. I remember when the Chief Imam told the President two years ago to find a way where Arabic is given serious consideration in the school system. It is my understanding that this has not been done [by the State]. So what would your school for example been doing in the absence of such support coming from the State?

A. Our problem is monetary. If we had money we will be able to do everything without any help. As for government involvement it takes time because government these days are trying to do many things. The [World Bank Policy for Highly Indebted Poor Countries [HIPC] that calls on the government to reduce spending had made government support very limited].

Q. How about the issue that touches on the purpose of this conversation. There is the view that the nature of relationship of the Ahl-Sunna Group and the Tijaniyya Group in Ghana have distracted the need for united action. One may say that the absence of effective conversation between groups have led to the situation where both groups have not addressed the possibility of Muslim community raising money in support of those schools that are weak in the system. What are your views on that?

A. As for the Tijaniyya Group they are not interested in secular education as much as we are. Because some of their ulama say that secular education is not important. We the [Ahl-Sunna] do not agree with them on this issue. We are in favor of secular education and that is why we support the government's GETFUND [Ghana Education Trust Fund] by which small and poor community schools are aided. But this help is not enough. In the past, there was a lot of conflict between the Tijaniyya and the Ahl-Sunna. But we thank God that this has changed and everything that happens we try to solve them. The difference is that they have no interest in secular education. We too are not trying to call attention to this.

Q. Let me ask you a last question, and after that you also tell me anything you want me to know about which no question has been posed. The original conflict between the Ahl-Sunna and the Tijaniyya Muslims in Ghana was the issue of theological expressions (I understand that was the case). In the past I did hear from the Radio some of the debates on the issues of difference. How were you able to resolve the conflict in such a way that you now have peaceful relationship in Ghana among Muslims?

A. Conflict used to come from the Muslim preachers sometimes. They used to preach and we too used to preach and we came to conflict over some positions. But we have come to understand that the people understand what we say and many have come to accept our position. Now we tell our people "just go and preach, don't touch the Tijaniyya, don't say Tijaniyya is good or not good. This is not your business. You teach your own interpretation and address what God says and what the prophet says and do not compare it to the Tijaniyya interpretation so the people can make their own decision." This is how God has helped us to solve the problem.

Thanks you very much we appreciate the conversation.....End of Interview.