

Title

Interview Shaykh Muhammed Kamil, Proprietor of the Azariyya Islamic School in Kumase

Creator

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Description

The major theme for this interview was on the issue of secular education for Muslim children. Azariyya School is a Muslim-proprietor program that has accepted a government secular curriculum but combines it with the school's own Islamic religious education. How do such schools, where almost all the students are Muslims, contribute to national integration?

Interview with Shaykh Kamil of the Azariya Islamic School, Kumase

Persons Present: Dr. Gabrielle Lanier (James Madison University), Mamuna Shaban (Graduate Teacher of the Azariya School)

Interview by David Owusu-Ansah (James Madison University)

Purpose of Interview: To have conversation with Shaykh Kamil about the history of the Azariya Islamic School as part of an on-going research on the transformation of Islamic schools.

Language used for Interview: Asante Twi:

Opening Statement: About five years now, and even long before (1984) I started research on Islamic traditions in Asante and the palace in Kumase. When I completed the earlier work, I continued with work on the Asante Nkramo traditions and the conflicts within the systems. I have been interested in the learning traditions that made it possible for Muslims to serve the Asante State, and also the learning traditions that sustained the Muslim community. Such research project however must be developed into the modern period where one looks at the transformations and one of the obvious areas where this transformation needs to be looked at is in the field of Islamic learning traditions and how they have been influenced my modernity. Hence, the last 20 to 25 years, we see how Islamic education has changed. We see that the Makaranta (Quranic) tradition of learning is also changing. We are interested in how the proprietors of the traditional Quranic schools are reacting to the change. Research shows that those who are now involved in the modernization of Islamic schools were the children and grandchildren of the original proprietors who created their makaranta schools.

The second issue of this interview is the subject of Islam and conflict in the Muslim world. In the history of Islam in West Africa however Islam has not always about conflict. This is the second interest of the research-that to look at what has made Islam in West Africa, and therefore Ghana, peaceful and that our people are religiously tolerant. Michigan State University group are working in Senegal and I am part of the Harvard Group that works on Ghana. My work is to look at Islamic education and institutions that contribute to peaceful co-existence in Ghana.

In the past 5 years, I have talked to a number of leading Muslim personalities in Ghana-among them Taj al-Din at Amakom (Kumase), Shaykh Mustafa Kamil (also of Amakom/Aboabo, Kumase), Shaykh Yahya at Sukura, Accra, Shaykh Zakaria of the Adab Islamic Mission School,

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Alhaji Umar Imam of the Ahl-Sunnah al-Jamat in Accra). Dr. Mark Sey at Cape Coast University told me that I have to talk to you (Shaykh Kamil) and I have been missing all the appointments till Dr. Clarke put me in contact with Mamuna to arrange this meeting. It is therefore not for any reason that we are here but to come to learn from you about the activities of your program here.

I will like that we start this interview with your statement about your name, and your background so we can establish a base for this conversation.

Response: Thanks be to God. Praise be to God, Master of the Universe. My name is Muhammad Shaykh Muhammad Kamil. I was born here at Kumase Old Tafo. My father started this school as a Makaranta (Quranic) school. He ran the program to educate us in Islam and this was before 1954 when I was born. When I grew up a little, I also attended my father's Makaranta school. My father used this same name (Azariya) for his school. My big brother also attended this school and he worked with my father in conducting the affairs of the school. After a while, my big brother gained scholarship to study in Saudi Arabia in Islamic studies. Even before he returned from his studies, he was already influencing the school here. He came to the conclusion that the way instruction at my father's Azariya school was done needed to be restructured. For example, we used to have a month set aside when we memorized and dramatized the life and teachings of the Prophet Mohammad. We used to assign students verses from the Quran to memorize so that they can read or perform those verses on the day of the said activities for their parents to see and also to gather money for us. When my brother came back he began to challenge such things as he argued that he did not see anything of such acts when he studied in Saudi Arabia. Instead, he advocated serious learning and he started introducing changes in this program every time he came to visit Ghana. He also was instrumental in getting me to become involved in learning. I have already started the Arabic school under my father, but my brother argued that he met difficulties when he went to Saudi Arabia because his learning was limited to only Quranic studies. He wanted me therefore to get involved in the NORMAL education system to broaden my background. My brother's name was Shaykh Mallam Baba, and my father's name was Shaykh Mohammed Sawudin. My father was afraid that I might become influenced if I was sent to a Christian school.

Question: Did you big brother attend Makaranta?

Response: Yes, he did and he got scholarship. During his time, some people from Egypt used to come here as teacher and he studied under them too. But he did not attend any secular schooling and all his learning was in Islamic and Arabic studies. My brother also sent applications to Islamic programs in Arabia. Also my father went on a Hajj (pilgrimage) and he went to visit the school in Saudi Arabia and asked that his son (my big brother) be considered for admission to the school. It did not take long after my father's return that my brother received scholarship to study in Saudi Arabia because once they accepted you they also provided the funding for the education. My brother then went to study in Arabia but whenever he came home he brought changes and even suggested that I receive secular education. My father opposed my attendance of Christian school so I was sent to Suame to English/Arabic school that Appiadu conducted. I

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already knew Arabic very much so there was no need for me to start from the beginning. Also because I was a little older, I was enrolled in Primary class 3 (K-3). When it was time for Arabic classes, I did not participate in the learning because I was already advanced. Instead, I was given an Arabic class to teach the younger children. There was one of the teachers who observed my work and suggested that my progress in the English learning was not going to progress faster since I was too far advanced for the programs at the school. He gave me special books and instructed that I came to his house in the evenings for additional instructions, which I did. After one year under his instruction, he sent me to take an internally conducted exams at a Local Authority School where I passed and I was moved up to 7th grade at the new secular but non-Christian school. I therefore moved from the Appiadu School at K-3 to K-7 at the new school because I was already grown up and have done well in my private lessons too. I completed the 7th grade at the new school but later moved to Aboabo where I completed my elementary education. My father prevented me from going to secondary school because he was still afraid that I would become influenced by Christianity but in the meantime, I came back to my father's Azariya school where I helped with the teaching and running of the school. By the time my big brother completed his program and returned, I was in charge of the Azariya school. My father died in 1972. My brother returned briefly but returned to complete his program. It was he who came to manage the school with my assistance and it was he who introduced English into my father's makaranta program by making changes. He asked for National Service personnel to the school at the old site of the school before we acquired the land here for the school at this location at Adompo. It was all forest here and we have to fall the big trees and later constructed this building. Also, as he introduced the changes, the number of students increased. He removed the excessive games from the program, introduced much learning and testing to the school. One of the innovations was the testing of Arabic which hitherto people did not think could be examined. The Muslim community took notice of the programs and they sent more children here which forced us to build sheds. This was in the post 1972, and just about 1979, I also got scholarship from the school in Saudi Arabic to study and now my brother took full control of the school and I was in Saudi Arabic till I completed my program 1985.

Question: When you went to Saudi Arabia, which school did you study at?

Response: I studied at the Islamic University at Medina (Saudi Arabia). That is the same school my brother attended. When I completed the program, I returned home in 1986.

Question: You said that he (your brother) asked for National Service teachers. Had he already converted the school to an English/Arabic program or was it now part of a secular/Arabic school?

Response: The National Service teachers taught English and secular subjects. The first National Service administrator of the school was one Mr. Danso (in 1986). He was not a Muslim but he later on joined the faith. At that time also, we had a number of our former Arabic students recruited to teach the subject here at the school. The presence of National Service staff allowed effective combination of the two aspects of learning. As for Mr. Danso, we became friends, he learned more about Islam and we were able to explain the religion to him and accepted it later on

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and he was named Yusuf Danso. It was the joint hard work with Mr. Danso and my brother and others that this school expanded. Also, when I was in Saudi Arabia, we were able to attract many of our former students from here to gain admission with support from the Medina school (about 9 to 10 students to gain admission in Saudi Arabia).

Question: How were you able to gain scholarship and admission for these students in the Saudi School?

Response: Well, we have their certificates from our program; we can also show that they have completed the Middle School program in Ghana which at that time was the highest level of elementary education. When this information is sent to me, I will take the information to the administration/admissions office at the school in Medina (Saudi Arabia) and I will follow through to ensure that their materials are given due attention because once they were admitted, it meant that they also received funding, which included airline tickets.

Question: You said that you return in 1985/86 and that your school here had received government teachers, but the Islamic Education Unit just officially began in 1987. How was it possible that your program was ahead of the IEU programming?

Response: Well, modification in Islamic education had occurred before but it was not yet made effective. But we have already introduced the changes in our school to the extent that we already taught math, English, geography and all the subjects that students must test for the elementary school program. Our students were writing the nationally conducted Form Four Certification Exams by 1986/87. Note that Islamic Education Unit had already been introduced in the Northern part of the country but it had not been expanded to this region, yet we had our own modernized programming and thus when the IEU was formally introduced as an Educational Unit, we joined it. The Arabic was our major attraction for the students and their parents and with the combination of the secular subjects, we became a great attraction. We know that the other Islamic schools teach Arabic, but many of their instructors have not gone overseas to improve themselves. Our teachers and former students had that opportunity so our instruction was of quality in Islamic subjects. Even the students we taught Arabic here were of quality and because of this tradition we became the school that trained many of the Arabic teachers teaching the language in other schools, so why don't you send your child here to the source?

Question: Let me ask you one more question. One of the major concerns of the Islamic Education Unit system is the state of Arabic instructions. Many proprietors do complain that the testing of Arabic language has suffered as the West African Examination Council has now neglected the language. How has the Azariya school dealt with this problem? I know you have a long history of Arabic instruction and testing but does it concern you that there is no national Arabic testing agency?

Response: It is not a problem for me. The reason why Arabic is subordinated in the other Islamic schools is that they do not have the quality Arabic teachers or enough Arabic teachers. That is the main problem. If you have six classrooms for your school and you have only two Arabic teachers, then they are overstretched and there is no consistency in instruction because of

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the insufficient number of Arabic teachers. In this case, you are going to have for such programs, maybe six teachers for secular subjects but only two for Arabic and religious related subjects. Over here, things are different. If we have six classrooms, then we must have six Arabic teachers. Also, we have early morning Arabic programming from about 7:30 to 10 AM before the secular programming for the school commences and goes on till 12:30 PM as Ghana Education service has mandated. This helps us to maintain the level of Arabic instruction and we provide our own certificate in recognition of the level of attainment by the student. These certificates are recognized by the schools outside the country to which these students intend to attend. We have already proven our worth to them. Even our certification allows some of our former students to be hired as Arabic teachers for the Islamic schools in Ghana. Thus, though we are concerned about the state of Arabic in the country at the national level, we should not let that hold us back. We have been told that they are going to do something about it. As of now, they teach Arabic at the University, and they test Arabic at the Senior Secondary School level, but why not the JSS? That is where the concern is. So our students have an advantage because we give them quality instructions and when they enter the university later on and encounter Arabic as a course, they are able to perform well.

Question: Let's put the Arabic aside and turn to the Islamic religious studies content. Islamic history, tafsir, tawhid, grammar (adab). Do you teach these too?

Response: Yes, we teach all that here at this school. It is a must that the child learns tawhid (the principles of the religion). It allows the child to know about the Oneness of God, that he is the creator, and that all the powers of God. This is the message God sent to man through the prophets. The child needs to know that there is no need for other gods and God has said, he will forgive all sins except that of worshipping other gods. Tafsir also is about the interpretation of the Quran. In the olden days, children were not taught this. Christian children understood the stories of the Bible but we went to Muslim schools and recited much without understanding the interpretations or even writing the passages. That is what we want to change because the understanding of the religion is facilitated by such [good] education.

Question: What [period] time in the school day do you get the time to teach these religious contents?

Response: As you know all the schools have time set aside in the timetable for religious instruction-say 45 minutes in the day; others have 30 minutes. The teacher has ways to teach this. Also the morning time that we preserve for Arabic is also used to teach religious lessons and so when we start at 7:30 till 10 AM we divide the use of the time between Arabic and other religious subjects and after all we have five days in the week so we do not have to teach Arabic all the time.

Question: Since your school was started long ago but you have joined the Islamic Education Unit, can you tell me how many teacher are here-how many are Arabic/Islamic Religious instructors and how many teach secular subjects?

Response: As of now, we have 52 teachers in the secular division of the school and we have about 60 teachers who work on Religious/Arabic division.

Question: How many students do you have in this school?

Response: We have a little over 2000 students. They are grouped in A, B, C, in the programming. When you get to the 7th grade, we have 4 classrooms for boys and four for girls; then JSS we have 2 classrooms each for boys and girls, and we have also adult literacy programs for people who come here for matured lessons purely to study Arabic (there are about 5 classrooms), we also have a vocational program and teach the girls Arabic as well; then now we have Senior secondary school (our first year).

Question: How many of these students are Muslims?

Response: The whole of the program are Muslims except about a handful of the SSS students. So we can say that 99.999 percent are Muslims.

Question: Where do these students (over 2000 of them) come from?

Response: They come from many areas. Some come from as far away as Accra. They have relatives with whom they stay. If a student does not have a place to stay, here is the Mosque here and building around here that they can keep their belongings, bathe and change and sleep. We however do not have a boarding system as such so we do not charge them anything.

Question: If you do not charge them for where they sleep, but do you charge them for tuition fees?

Response: Yes, we charge 40,000 cedis (about \$5.00) per term. For those who are not able to pay the fees, we do not force them because they cannot pay because to send them home will create problems for the child. So we leave them and hopefully they will pray for us in return.

Question: You are the Director of the School. Let's say Mamuna who teaches here is teaching a course like geography and she talked about the weather and rainfall and the scientific explanation of condensation and clouds and hence rains, do you as Muslim proprietor have problem with the scientific explanation of these things because I have heard that some of the proprietors of Islamic schools do not agree to this secular interpretation of things they strictly attribute to God's doing?

Response: No we do not do that here. After all this is learning and also we believe that

knowledge must be had but nobody's knowledge surpasses that of God. Weather is weather and the person is looking at the conditions that creates events. You know I have a son who has completed the university and studied science. Once I was complaining about a report that a meteorite was falling toward the earth and I discussed it with him, He reminded me that the existence of meteorites or falling rocks has been mentioned in the Quran and therefore is not new. He opened the Quran and read me a verse that supported it. This means that we do not know everything and must be ready to learn. He has therefore informed me and I accept it. The last subject was about the eclipses and the scientists informed us not to look at it with our bare eyes. We accept all these as scientific knowledge and I do not challenge my teachers on this.

Question: When you interview Muslim proprietors, some call their schools, wataniyya schools, others call theirs nuriyya schools, and you the azariya school. Are these all related and how do people select names for the programs?

Response: They are not connected. In the Christian system, they also have SDA schools, Methodist schools, Ramseyer Schools, so this is like different type of management of the schools. This is the same here and it does not affect the content of the school system. The names are reflections of the owners of the programs: wataniyya is Arabic word for national so this proprietor calls his school a National School; Usman may call his school an Usmaniyya school and Rashid may call his Rashidiyya (just adding the nisba to it). Ours is Azariya named after Al-Azar University in Cairo. What we all do despite the names we put on our schools is to keep to the same syllabus because we do not want to complicate the life of our students.

Question: Another subject I have not talked about is the subject of religious co-existence. We know that we occasionally have conflicts but it has never risen to the level as we see in Nigeria. Why do you think that we in the country (of Ghana) have this peaceful way of living together?

Response: The solution to the Ghana situation is the result of greater understanding among the people. Nigeria is a big country but the level of learning is relatively less than that of Ghana. Most of the persons who engage in the conflict follow instructions and therefore are more excitable because they are not making the understanding decisions themselves. Most Ghanaians are educated and therefore we think through our actions. Also, the Nigeria Muslims think that Nigeria is an Islamic country. Ghana on the other hand is more mixed and pluralistic religiously. In fact, I do not know what a Christian can do against a Muslim that will require violent action and also we are not opposed to inter-faith marriages. My first wife is an Asante who was not a Muslim initially. My brother-in-law who was a nominal Muslim has also become a practicing Muslim since my marriage to his sister. The rest of their family are not Muslims and yet we are married. In the family of my last wife, she is the only person who is a Muslim. These inter-

relationships contribute to understanding among the religious groupings. We see ourselves as one people and there is no reason to challenge what you worship and I do not have any right to question what you practice. You can look at my teachers. We have over 40 non-Muslim teachers in this school and we all get along and the Ministry of Education does not hear any complaints from my teachers. This co-existence is due to the level of education and it is for this reason that makes me say that Ghanaians are unique than other countries.

Question: If you interview in Accra, you hear the story of the past when there was conflict between the Ahl-Sunnah Muslims and the Tijanni Muslims. Is there still conflict between the two groups and where do you stand in this?

Response: I am an Ahl-Sunnah. I am the Ahl-Sunnah Imam for Ashanti Region. I respond to the Ahl-Sunnah Imam in Accra. The source of most of the conflict is the Tijanni. I do not think that they have studied enough and the leadership want people to serve them as opposed to knowing things religiously. The leadership behave like Shaykh and want people to serve them, carrying their sandals and holding their clothing. So they can have a following for a long time and by the time these people leave the Shaykh, they still have not learnt anything. We want the people to be educated and worship their God. So when we challenge them on religious knowledge and because they do not know much, they resulted to conflict and violence. But that was in the past. Do not Christians challenge themselves? But the approach is different. There is give and take based on knowledge. Both our group need to be better and equally informed.

Question: If you are an Ahl-Sunnah, does it mean that your school will be subjected to the decisions of the Ahl-Sunnah Shaykh in Accra?

Response: The school is an Ahl-Sunnah school and it is independent but the Shaykh in Accra can made suggestions that he does not like this or that and his school in Accra is not his but belongs to the Ahl-Sunnah so if he or I am not here we can then ask or find another person to look after the programs. This is like the Ahmadiyya movement schools.

Statement: We thank you very much and we would like to take some pictures.

Response: There is one thing I want to say. We do not have conflict in Ghana, but there is conflict even abroad. When there is religious conflict among Muslims, they call it terrorism, but when Europeans react to political actions, they are defined as defending themselves. Why are Europeans and Americans defending themselves by their actions and others are defined as terrorists? There is a need for better evaluation instead of rapid conclusions. I remember when

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the Soviet Union fell, Queen Elizabeth II made a statement that the Soviets are gone and now what is left to confront and defeat is Islam. Last year, Mr. Bush referred to the Iraqi invasion as a Crusade. That this mean that they want to pick a fight or something else. Now look at Israel. Who is a terrorist-the one who throw stones or the one who bombs? Apart from this, when there is conflict, the United Nations step in to separate the forces. Why have they not separated the current Israeli and Lebanese conflict? They are forcing to bring peacekeeping troops to Darfur and Somali so why not in Palestine and Israel. Mr. Bush say that Israel is defending herself. This perception of unequal treatment contributes to conflict even such as Iran nuclear capability. Doesn't this balance the power? And we want you as researchers and writers to bring this concern to your public's attention. Let them pay attention to these things as we don't want these neglected issues to cause move conflict. I also think that the White/European world cheats the Black world. This is want I wanted to say.

Question: So do you tell your students these things you have mentioned to me?

Response: Just that we think that we are being cheated but I say these things just to let you know that we think of them and we think much will go well if there is not too much interference. I thank you for listening.

Thanks you too. [End of Interview]