

Interview by: Dr Mark Sey and Professor Emmanuel Akyeampong

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Place of Interview: Sawaba, Kumase

Emmanuel: Our knowledge of Muslims and Zongos is that in the olden days in Ashanti whenever someone contracted some disease, be it boils, craw, the person is advised to take it to the Zongo for a cure. Also, whenever there is the desire to eat T.Z., a popular Zongo dish, the person goes to the Zongo. Yet still whenever someone desires to sew or buy Baba Riga/Agbada he is advised to go to the Zongo. However we do not hear anything about Islamic scholarship. Please tell us something about Islamic education in Ashanti.

Name of Interviewee: Mustapha Kamil Amin bin Safid. He is the leading Islamic scholar in the Ashanti Region today and carries the title, Hujjat-ul-Islam. He is the successor of Shayk Baba al-Waiz who was one of the iBig Elevenî in Islamic scholarship in Ashanti and founder of the Wataniya Islamic School situated at Aboabo.

Khalifa: iAlhamdu lillahi. Wassalatu wassalamu Ala Ashrafil.î After praising God and sending salutations to the Prophet of Islam, Khalifa explained as follows: In the olden days, there were Muslim settlements at Kintampo and Atebubu but the most important settlement was at Salaga which became the center of international trade and Islamic culture. Hausas from Nigeria came there to do business. Ashantis also took kola and slaves to Salaga for sale. Wangaras also had their share of the trade. In short, there was a brisk business at Salaga. Principal commodities were gold, kola, spices, and slaves. This continued for a long time. After the Yaa Asantewaa War (in 1900), a cleric by the name of Mallam Banufe arrived in Kumase from Nigeria and suggested that the center of trade be transferred to Kumase (no date specified). Kumase was therefore where Hausa traders and demobilized Muslim soldiers gathered and a Zongo emerged.

Emmanuel: Where was the first Zongo established?

Khalifa: It was established at a place on the way to Suame-Odeon[?] Nnurom [?] Then it was moved to Roman Hill. Then began era of Zongo chiefs, the most popular being Mallam Sallow (1919-1929). The first Mallam was Ibrahim Gardi, followed by Mallam Maigida, then Mallam Usman. It was Mallam Usman who facilitated the introduction of Islamic education in Kumase. He brought in a scholar (name withheld) who was successful in teaching many earnest students such that by 1945 there were about eleven first class Islamic scholars in Kumase. They became known as the iBig Elevenî. They formed the Gold Coast Islamic Missionary Society. The society did its best to spread Islamic learning in Kumase. Islamic schools were established. Baba al-Waiz, for example, established the Wataniya Islamic school at Aboabo. This school was established as a purely Quranic school. In 1960, it added English to its school program. Since 1983 the school became an English-Arabic School run along the lines of any public school in Ghana. Many of the iBig Elevenî also established schools which are still active.

The Wataniya has turned out many important Islamic scholars. For example, the present Ashanti Regional Chief Imam is a product of the Wataniya. The Imam of the Western Region at Takoradi is also a Wataniya product. The school which is now at the JSS level will reform next academic year to an SSS system.

On the question of Zongo Chieftaincy, the Khalifa said that the word Zongo itself is a Hausa word. It was first established by the Hausa and therefore the chief is a Hausa. The present Zongo Chief Alhaji Dan Sofo (Garba Style) was selected from among 15 housesñall Hausa.

We selected him from 8 contestants chosen from the 15 houses.

Each of the 8 contestants was made to sign an understanding that any one of them who was elected to the office will have the support and cooperation of all of them. The election itself was supervised and officiated by the Chief Imam, Alhaji Ciroma who is now deceased.

All the other ethnic groups have their own chiefs but they all come under the Sarkin Zongo. The Imam who was a Hausa man died and his deputy who was a Gonja succeeded him. It is the first time that a non-Hausa has been elected as Imam. He too has been given a deputy who is Asante-Nkramo. The Imam is under the Sarkin Zongo.

Emmanuel: Now, please tell us about yourself.

Khalifa: I was born in 1936 in Kumase and grew up under the care of my uncle Baba Al-Waiz. He was among the ìBig Elevenî and was full of wisdom and piety. I admired him a great deal. Since my childhood, I had always wished to be like him. I studied under him and he taught me with all his heart. I owe my learning to him and he served as interpreter to all the Arab visitors to Kumase. I enjoyed being in his company during such occasions when Shehu Ibrahim Nyass visited the Gold Coast. My uncle served as interpreter on that occasion.

When old age caught up with him and his health began to fail, he put me in charge of the school and made a WILL that in the event of his demise I should succeed him and so I am now his successor in charge of the Wataniya Islamic school. The school has turned out many Quranic reciters and is still doing so. The school now has a female wing for both children and adults. Many of the Zongo sub-chiefs were products of this school.

Emmanuel: Thank you very much!