

**Title**

Interview **Ahmed Tijan-Hassan**

Principal of the Falahiyya Islamic School at Cape Coast

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**Description**

The interview focuses on the challenges faced by the least endowed Muslim communities as they embrace secular education for their children at Muslim-run schools.

Interview with Principal of the Falahiyya Islamic School at Cape Coast

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Present at Interview: Dr. Gabrielle Lanier (History Department at James Madison University),

Dr. Mark Sey (Department of Religious Studies, University of Cape Coast in Ghana)

Interview by David Owusu-Ansah

Language used is in English

Purpose of Interview: To learn more about the Falahiyya School and its programs as part of the on-going research on the modernization of Islamic education in Ghana.

Opening Statement: Good morning, Sir. My name is David Owusu-Ansah and here is my colleague Dr. Gabrielle Lanier, and Dr. Mark Sey of the University of Cape Coast. This morning we are going to talk to the Principal of the School and we would like him to introduce himself.

Response: My name is Ahmed Tijan-Hassan. Head master of Falahiyya Secondary School (JSS).

Question: Why do you call it “Falahiyya” [as others call their schools “azariyya, nuriyya, wataniyya” etc]?

Response: “Falahiyya” is the Arabic word for “success” so we call this “The School of Success.”

Question: Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?

Response: I am Tijan Hassan. I graduated at the University of Cape Coast and read Psychology and after that I enrolled with the Faculty [College] of Education at the University of Cape Coast where I completed my field studies toward the Masters in Education Administration (MEd).

Question: Before you went to the University of Cape Coast, where were you educated?

Response: I started at the elementary at the AME Zion School and after that I completed the University Practice Secondary School at Cape Coast. After that, I taught at the traditional Quranic [Makaranta] school for so many years before I decided to enroll myself at the Adult Education program and prepared toward my Advanced [A] Level examination. In 1995, I started teaching as Arabic Teacher because I had studied Arabic with my father and I had done that

subject at the Ordinary and Advanced Levels too. So in 1999, I had the required number of O-LEVEL and A-Level courses needed and started my BA course at the University of Cape Coast

Question: Now, you did your primary education at an AME Zion School which is a Church-affiliated School, and the University Practice School at the Senior Secondary School. You also said that you learnt Arabic from your father and then taught at the Makaranta system. Can you tell me how the Makaranta was organized and why you thought that you were qualified to teach at the Makaranta?

Response: At the Makaranta we do not have any formal system that we follow, but we read the Quran and you must finish the Quran first before you learn some of the Arabic book [literature] and then (fiqh) or jurisprudence and I learned this with my father (who is the Imam of Cape Coast) and I learned so many books in private lessons.

Question: Did your father run a Makaranta and how did he organize it?

Response: Yes, he did run a Makaranta. My father had two classrooms for his students and we started at the compound where [student began] studying the Arabic alphabets by writing them on wooden slates starting from the first few Arabic words till you get them and then continue with the rest till you master them all. After that you learn to add the diacritical signs or vowels to the alphabets and after that you are given the Quran where you start reciting/reading from the first chapter (al-Fatiha), followed by the next chapter and read and memorize them but at the later part you can read it. So we do this for sometime and we don't have the number of years but it depends on the individual. After completing reading the Quran then you begin to learn the literature.

Question: So [...] tell me a little more about him [your father] because I did not get his name.

Response: My father is Alhaji Abu Bakr al-Hassan. He was a tailor and the Imam of the Central Region. He went to study his own Quranic education in Kumase and after that he went to study at al-Azar in Egypt.

Question: Your father was Imam, he run a Makaranta Quranic school, he was a tailor and in all he was not worried about sending you to an AME Zion Christian School?

Response: No, all my brothers went to AME Zion school.

Question: How about your sister (do you have any sisters)?

Response: I have ...[many sisters] but as for the sisters he did not send them to school.

Question: What about this school and how did it start. Now you have your MEd, and you have Psychology background, a Makaranta System that your father is involved, and now you have this Falahiya Islamic School. How did this program begin and how did you become attached to it?

Response: It started in 1969 as a Makaranta Quranic school. And then gradually we taught many people here. [The owner of the this Makaranta school] is Mallam Zakari Abdullah. Some of his students or graduates are the current Imam of this community, and his deputy. There are also so many former students from the makaranta that he ran here who now teach Arabic at several programs. Then in 1994, the former Regional Manager of Islamic Education Unit suggested to Mallam Zakaria that he wanted the school to be observed by the GES (Ghana Education Service) and Mallam Zakaria accepted the request. So in 1994 he joined the IEU program by them a lot of the children in this community were not attending schools so they brought them to these three classrooms. They looked at the age of the child, and if you are 6 years old, then they will put you in Class One (K-1), and the older students were placed in higher grades determined by age and not previous level of education achievement. This is how the school transformed into the IEU and the community was happy that now their children were in school. This then made the school an English/Arabic school because the makaranta was attached to the school now in 1995.

Question: When did the Makaranta change from purely makaranta Quranic to English/Arabic program?

Response: In 1995.

Question: So in 1995 it becomes an English/Arabic School. So can you describe the programming when a school becomes English/Arabic program? What is the English part and what is the Arabic part?

Response: Okay, when they started, the people had the makaranta but when it comes under the Ghana Education Service programing (IEU) we have to follow the time table and the syllabus of the Ghana Education Service so the time allotted to the Arabic language becomes limited to three credit hours so they discovered that Arabic instruction was not effective as before so they were a bit disappointed. But by then they knew that the children were at school and they were happy for that, but they always complained that the Arabic has suffered.

Question: What has Mallam Abdullah done about that [concern about the lose of Arabic in his school]?

Response: Mallam Zakaria Abdullah also thought that they cheated him. Because when he converted the Makaranta into English/Arabic program, little did he know that he will loose control. It continues to be his school and he is thinking about taking it away from the GES and return to the Makaranta but he says that it is because of me [because I am the son of their Regional Chief Imam] he has not done so. Up till now they have not compensated him for his structure.

Question: But couldn't he collect fees from the students as compensation for the use of his former structures?

Response: No, that will not be permitted.

Question: So now he lost his school, and none of the students will pay him for attending what

was his former Makaranta school?

Response: Yes.

Question: These building, were they his?

Response: Yes, he started [his school with] these three classrooms and the community also added three more classrooms and later the government also added more rooms.

Question: Now, as principal of the school what are your duties and your frustrations of running a school like this that has just transformed (10 years now) into a secular IEU program?

Response: Well you see there were a lot of problems when I took over the administration of the school. In fact, the school was at the verge of collapsing. From class one to six (K-through-6) I had a total enrollment of about 40 students. So I discovered that the attitude of the teachers toward work was very poor; and we are also located in the midst of an Islamic community that did not know and appreciate the importance of secular education so these were my problems. So when I came I struggled. Even with the remaining 40 students, some of the parents came to take their wards out. It was also due to the attitude of teachers toward work so before I took full responsibility of this position, I did some investigation about the reason why the school had little student population. In addition to the poor attitude of the teachers there was also poor leadership and that is why the former Headmaster was transferred to another school. So what I did was to come to school early and to make sure that the teachers come to school early. Up to now I am doing it. In fact, there was a lady teacher who was on maternity leave when I took this position and when she returned at the end of her leave, she was shocked by the changes in attitude that had taken place in the school because of the new Headmaster. This affected the community as well so they were beginning to return their wards to school.

There was also the reason that the school was only K-through-6 so the community/parents had to look for a JSS for the children after completing here. So the logic for parents was to find their children schools that had JSS attached so they would not have to be looking for new programs for their children after completing the K-6 at Falahiya. So I decided to start a JSS but I was advised to first apply to the Regional Manager of Islamic Schools and ask for money and approval. On second thought, I decided to start anyway and put up the structure and thinking that the students will come and they came and I started with them. The Manager was saying that I did not inform him and he was concern because he had a problem in the past with a school with similar situation. So I just went ahead and started and later on he supported my decision and I wrote officially to inform them of my desire to open a JSS and when this school reached the JSS-2 that was when they approved it and therefore supported us. So all the materials needed for the school for the first year of the JSS initiative, I provided them.

Question: How did you manage to provide those resources?

Response: I collect some of the school fees and added some of my own money. When I came here there were so many children in the community but there were no kindergarten program here so I thought of it. So I went and bought a "Merry Go Around" piece and place it here on the

compound. It cost 450,000 cedis as used piece of equipment. So I went around from house to house visiting the parents and they will say this is my child, and I will say come to school and I will take the child to our school. The community also knew my father so I took advantage of that and I brought these children here free of charge. This is how I started and now I have about 40 children in the kindergarten program.

Question: What level of JSS do you have here?

Response: This is the first batch of JSS students to complete their program from here and we are waiting for the results of our first national examinations.

Question: Now, you have boys and girls all mixed in the program.

Response: Yes.

Statement: Some of the schools we have visited separate the genders.

Response: I don't believe in segregation and let them be together. This was supported by the Manager too.

Question: When one comes to your school or when inspectors come to this school, certainly they inspect the structure to see if the buildings are sound etc. Now, how many students do you have on this premise for the land and structure you have (this is the whole school compound, right?).

Response: At the moment we are about 265 students from K-JSS 3. Most of them come from this community but others come from short distances from here.

Question: Is there another Islamic school in this area?

Response: No, there is no Islamic school closer here.

Question: Are all the students attending here Muslim children?

Response: Oh! About 95 percent of the student population are Muslims.

Question: So the parents are sending their children here as opposed to a school closer to their home which is not Islamic.

Response: Yes.

Question: Why do you think these parents do that?

Response: In fact, because of the Arabic that is why they send their children here.

Question: So do you have another Arabic teacher other than you?

Response: Yes.

Question: What do you teach then as Principal of the School?

Response: Sometimes I teach Arabic at the higher level. I also design the Arabic language program with things visible in the school (for them to acquire the vocabulary) from nouns to simple statements. We also teach them how to greet in Arabic and the students at the JSS are able to read the Arabic too.

Question: Will Imam Zakaria Abdullah be happy that the students at the JSS are able to read Arabic.

Response: Oh yes.

Question: Has he come here to teach the Arabic at all the way he used to teach the makaranta?

Response: Oh no but he does not have a makaranta now either. But he has an Arabic Religious program that is for adults who are reading advanced works.

Question: Now let's talk about the compound [compared to other schools, this school compound is messy, needs drainage and needs further improvements]. Does the community come to help the school to improve the compound?

Response: Sometimes but it is very difficult but this is still a community that doesn't see the importance of western education so the school and the community should work together on their schools. But anytime you tell them, they say yes we will come but never shows up. If you visit the Christian communities, they visit their schools and help them so it is very difficult for us.

Question: Your teachers; you said that some of them were coming to school late. What are their qualifications and how are they committed to the school at the moment?

Response: At the moment their commitment is good. Most of them are trained teachers and are supplied by the Islamic Education Unit Regional Manager through the Ghana Education Service. Every year those who graduate from the Teacher Training Colleges are distributed to the Education Units and the Regional Managers share the teachers up and then the Managers also give the teachers to the schools.

Question: Is there anything that we have missed and you want us to learn from this conversation?

Response: Ghana Education Service provides the text book every year and the students buy their exercise books. The teachers [the majority of them] are Christians.

Question: Are these Christian teachers alright with Islamic religious instructions that students in the school receive?

Response: Yes we have the students from the Islamic communities but most teachers and even head of schools of several [formal] Islamic programs are Christian Headmasters.

Question: Are there still things that I should know?

Response: We don't have any Senior Secondary School (SSS). The land on which we have constructed our JSS belongs to [the Anglican] Adisadel College but this school now belongs to the government and they will therefore not want to collect It [the land] back in the future.

Question: Are there any plans to develop special relations with Adisadel College so students from here can attend their SSS and not necessarily go through the general process?

Response: Well no because we now have a computerized distribution of qualified students to SSS across the nation. Also the Old Boys of the [well-established] Colleges are also concerned that they should also have a quota for the admission of their children and that is under review by the GES.

Question: But the Universities are saying that they are going to allow students from a listed least endowed schools to have special admissions just to be fair. Why shouldn't the Senior Secondary School admission process also do so?

Response: We had a workshop last week on this subject and the issue of the Old Students of the established schools was raised as one of the issues under review. I must add that you asked me about my teacher. I have trained teachers here but I also have untrained teacher working here too-people who have completed secondary schools but do not have teacher training. Several of them are enrolled in distance education. I can place them in any class at all. In fact, I like their performance and these teachers are dedicated to the work. If a teacher disagrees with you he can ask for transfer but the untrained teachers depend on the report annually from the Principal for renewal of their contracts so they work very hard.

Final Question: I thought that it was interesting that you have your BA, and MEd. And came to a program like this which is a very difficult place to start. When I was teaching in the school system, such schools as this one were headed by Certificate B Teachers and those from the 4 year system. Yet, you are very highly qualified and you are here. Is this a standard mode of posting teacher these days in Ghana?

Response: The university now trains school administrators and this is a government policy for the administration of schools.

Closing comment: Yes, that is the point I wanted to get established. Thank you very much for this interview.