

# **SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES OF THE CONTEMPORARY MUSLIM YOUTH: THE GHANAIAN EXPERIENCE**

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## **Abstrak**

*Artikel ini membincangkan natijah sistem pembelajaran semasa bagi masyarakat Muslim di Ghana serta perlunya ia dirombak, masalah buta huruf yang meluas dan masalah-masalah yang dihadapi belia Islam di universiti-universiti. Pandangan dari pelbagai pihak diambil kira sebagai dasar penyelesaian yang berkesan bagi menangani masalah berkenaan, di samping untuk melahirkan generasi masa depan yang bersedia menghadapi cabaran-cabaran sosial di Ghana.*

The world we live in today pulls hard for things as every advert on the radio or television sends us running after new possessions. But as usual it is only when the edge begins to wear out the pleasure of possessions and the possessions themselves take more of our precious time that we begin to think of alternatives. There can be no doubt that we live in a complex world and the Muslim youth of today faces a multiplicity of problems. This paper seeks to address the social and educational challenges of the contemporary Muslim youth in Ghana with special reference to the youth in:

- a) Tertiary institutions - The Universities, Polytechnics and other institutions of higher learning.
- b) Traditional Islamic schools popularly called Makaranta, and
- c) The diaspora - i.e. the youth who are not in any school whether secular or Islamic and are not in any identifiable employment and are thus a prime target for the recruitment of personnel for anti-social activities. This is the most vulnerable group and constitutes the greatest challenge of the Muslim youth and needs to be taken very seriously if Muslims are to regain some of their past glory.

Materialism, says professor Balogun, has driven the Muslims of today to the woe-ful ambition of getting rich at all cost and has thrown overboard the idea of brother-

hood as taught by our beloved Prophet, and re-echoed by Shaykh Usman Dan Fodio. It has robbed our Muslim youth and deprived them of the first principle of goodness and righteousness.<sup>1</sup> This is by far the greatest challenge of the Muslim youth at present in the Quran school whose past seems to be all a deception and the future futureless.

Educationists agree that it is the aim of education to widen the cognitive perspective or domain of the educand. This is true to a large extent. C.E.M. Joad in his book about education enumerates three aims of education i.e to enable a boy or girl to earn his or her living, to equip him to play his part as citizen of a democracy, and to enable him to develop all the latent powers and faculties of his nature and so to enjoy good life.<sup>2</sup>

A critic, T.S Eliot has pointed out that none of these aims would take us far without getting us into trouble as each needs to be corrected by the others and it is possible that all of them need to be adjusted to other purposes as well.<sup>3</sup> This is true and it is equally true that the aims as they stand hold good to a large extent in the Ghanaian context. In Ghana today what the youth school thinks of is his qualification after school in order to get a good job and thereby earn an honest living and to enjoy a good life. The educational institutions in Ghana today cater for students working for the G.C.E. (O/L), G.C.E. (A/L), B.A Hons, B.Sc., M.Ed., M.Phil, Ph.D etc. Education in Ghana as in other western democracies is measured by the acquisition of such credentials as mentioned above. Any one who possesses any of such credentials is recognized as educated. With any of such credentials a person may apply to the Public Services Commission for a position relevant to his credentials and be shortlisted. The argument here is that the Islamic schools in Ghana offer no such credentials as are recognized by the Government with the result that all graduands of the Makaranta system are officially illiterates. This is very unfortunate and is the greatest educational challenge of the Muslim youth as far as the Quranic schools are concerned. The Government has created the Islamic Education Unit about ten years ago and this allows the Islamic schools to expand their curriculum to include secular subjects so that at the end of the course pupils will acquire certificates recognized by the State. This system if practised to the full will without doubt be to the advantage of the Muslim youth because the youth will gain both knowledge of Islam and obtain a certificate which will make him employable in the public sector. What I think is needed very urgently is the expansion of some of the infrastructural facilities in the Islamic schools.

The progress of a nation depends not only on the number of pious men available but also specialists like engineers, medical personnel, lawyers, scientists etc., which the

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<sup>1</sup> K.A. Balogun Uthman Dan Fodio on the "Characteristics of a Good Muslim." *The Islamic Quarterly*, Vol. XXXII. London, 1988, p. 40.

<sup>2</sup> J. S. Bantack, *Eliot and Education*, London: Faber and Faber, 1960.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

Makaranta system cannot produce because of its concentration on religious knowledge alone. Yet it can be argued that the same Makaranta boy school who could master complex Quranic texts with parrot-like rapidity could, if given the opportunity and the necessary environment, master any complex scientific learning with computer-like accuracy.<sup>4</sup> This is borne out in the fact of experience because pupils who come to secular education from the Quranic schools turn out to be among the best because of their retentive memory.

The important function that Arabic literacy has performed from the earliest times to the beginning of this century cannot be easily dismissed. In an article captioned "Arabic Language and Muslim Society in West Africa" J.O. Hanwick writes, "Historically Arabic has been down to the beginning of this century the language of learning in West Africa. Only in a few towns on or near the coast where Europeans came to trade and later to proselytize for Christianity had it any competitor. Throughout the interior of West Africa the educated man was the man who could read and write Arabic and this knowledge slight as it may have been in some cases, gave him high status, even among non-Muslims. "His services were every where in demand - at the ruler's court, as secretary, clerk and accountant; in the great Muslim cities as professors, judge, librarian and copyist ....."<sup>5</sup>

Traditional Islamic system of education as it has come down to us in Ghana is described by Mervyn Hiskett as "It was broadly the same over most of the Islamic the Islamic world although of course it varied in detail from place to place. It was a feature of Marinid Morocco of Mamluk and Ottoman Egypt and of the two Holy places of pilgrimage - Makka and Madina."<sup>6</sup>

It is clear from this extract that Islamic education came to this part of the world from Makka and Madina through Egypt and Morocco in North Africa. Indeed it has been observed that after the first conquest of the Muslims in North Africa their religion advanced southward into the continent not by armies but by schools and books and mosques, by trade and intermarriages.<sup>7</sup>

Reliable oral tradition has it that when the early Muslims settled in isolated communities in northern and upper parts of Ghana during the later parts of the 16th century they set up Quran schools where they taught fellow traders and their children the read-

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<sup>4</sup> M. Sey, "Islam and Education in Ghana," A Keynote Address at a symposium on Islam and Education, University of Cape Coast, April 1989. p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> J.O. Hunwich, "Arabic Language and Muslim Society in West Africa," *Ghana Social Science Journal*, Vol.4 No. 2, November 1977, p. 13.

<sup>6</sup> Mervyn Hiskett, *Development of Islam in West Africa*, London: Longmans, 1983. p. 55.

<sup>7</sup> Anson Atterbury, *Islam in Africa*, New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969. p. 86.

ing and copying of the Quran.<sup>8</sup> This system has continued to this day even though it is fast fading in the face of the Government educational reform programme which seeks to transform the Quran school into a modern establishment in line with current realities.

There is a case for transforming the traditional Islamic system of education. It has surely played a useful role during the early history of Ghana particularly during the golden age of the Ashanti Kingdom in 18th and 19th centuries.<sup>9</sup> The time has come for a reasonable change. In conversation with some students of the typically traditional Islamic schools in Accra and Tamale, the majority of the students are all hoping to go to Arabia for further studies but with little likelihood of their getting such an opportunity. The only way out is to improve the conditions and terms of the school so as to make the graduands employable within the country as their non-Muslim counterparts from the government schools. This is by far the greatest challenge of the Muslim youth at the present in the Quran school whose past seems to be all a deception and the future futureless. What needs to be done as an interim solution is a kind of merger of a few cluster of Quran schools into an organised single establishment that allows the implementation of the national Basic Education Programme.

There is too much individualism in the traditional Islamic system of education so that a man having gone through the Quran school also establishes his own and becomes the master. Several Quran schools therefore spring up even in the same locality. So much has been said against the traditional system of education as found in West Africa and the need for reform is equally stressed. Sight however should not be lost of the fact that it is this same system that produced notable scholars of old like Shaykh Uthman Dan Fodio, Shaykh Umar of Kete Krachie and Ahmad Baba of Timbuctu whose works remain monuments of Islamic literacy and cherished by modern scholars.<sup>10</sup> There can be no doubt that Islamic literacy has a bright future in Ghana as B.A.R. Braimah rightly points out.<sup>11</sup> However it seems that the most positive statement made in favour of Islamic literacy in West Africa is by G.M. Brown and Hiskett who wrote "The Islamic system of education is the only practical literate alternative to the western system for most generalized application in Africa."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> M. Sey, *Islamic Literacy Almanac*. Department of Religious Studies, University of Cape Coast, 1992.

<sup>9</sup> M. Sey, *A Critique of the Islamic Religious Studies Syllabus for SSS*, (Post Graduate Project Work, Faculty of Education) U.C.C., Cape Coast, 1993. p. 8.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> B.A.R. Braimah, "Islamic Education in West Africa" in J.S. Pobeeed. *Religion in a Pluralist Society*, Leiden 1976. p. 213.

<sup>12</sup> G.M. Brown and Mervyn Hiskett ed. *Conflict and Harmony in Education in Tropical Africa*, London 1975. p. 93.

The real challenge of the Muslim youth of today as regards the Makaranta system is that a boy who attends the Makaranta for ten years is officially an illiterate, whereas a boy who attends a public school run by the Government for ten years is deemed educated and his credential is recognized by the state. The two are therefore not the same, why should this be the case? The answer is simple and straight that it should not be so but then this is really the situation. The blame lies heavily on all of us i.e. the Ghanaian Muslims, as Alfa Ishaque, the Regional Chief Imam of Upper West region of Ghana said, "We should take the blame for the situation in which we find ourselves today because we refused to send our wards to the public schools for fear of losing their faith in Islam."<sup>13</sup>

What Muslims should realize is that the Makaranta school is not the birthplace of engineers; it is not a place where doctors are trained; it is not the birthplace of pilots and other professionals even though it contains elements who are capable of becoming doctors, pilots, accountants etc. if given the necessary and sustainable environment.

The need for secular education for the Muslim youth is therefore imperative. This idea is fully recognized when at the meeting of the Council of Muslim Chiefs and Imams held in March 1989 a decision was taken on the need for secular education. The resolution which was unanimously passed reads:

"We the Imams and Muslim Chiefs of Ghana do hereby endorse the establishment of the Islamic Education Unit by the Ministry of Education and commend the government for the efforts it is making towards reforms in general on the subject of education in Ghana today."

We call on all Muslim Chiefs and Islamic educationists to accept and help the formation of the Islamic Education Unit in their areas and participate fully in these units in order to bring the traditional Makaranta system up to the standard required to be able to face and accept fully the challenges and advantages of the present educational system obtainable in the country. There should therefore be the need for constant interaction between people and members of the Education Units in order to get a situation where both secular and Islamic education are equally emphasized.<sup>14</sup>

This resolution speaks for itself and it is up to the Muslim youth to be up and doing. Healthy beginnings have been made by some of the traditional schools and some are springing up but it is not enough. More should be done. Failure to do so would lead to a situation where Muslims will remain amulet writers to earn a living as was com-

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<sup>13</sup> M. Sey, "Approach to the 21st Century: The Ghanaian Ulama Speak Out." *Journal of Usuluddin*, Bil. 6. Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya. 1997. p. 154.

<sup>14</sup> M. Sey, "Muslim Community in Ghana," *Shariah Journal*, Vol. 5, Bil. 2. Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya. 1997. p. 249.

mon during the golden age of the Ashanti Kingdom.<sup>15</sup> The use of Muslim amulets by non-Muslims was observed by Mungo Park, the Scottish traveller while moving through what is now Gambia and Mali during the late eighteenth century. He wrote: "... I did not meet with a man whether Muslim or non-Muslim who was not fully persuaded of the efficacy of these amulets ...."<sup>16</sup>

The high degree of confidence placed by the Ashantis in the ability of Muslim amulets to protect them in war is also noted by Hunwick.<sup>17</sup> It is my considered view that unless we reform our traditional system we shall be doing great injustice to the Muslim youth by giving only religious education. The call for secular education is being made by all sections of the community and there are healthy signs here and there and our prayer is that Allah The Most High shall sustain us in our efforts to bring meaningful changes into our lives.

The call for the Muslim youth to acquire secular education in addition to the religious is now being made in many quarters. Hajia Katumi a beneficiary of secular educational and leader of the Muslim Ladies Association of Ghana has made the call on several occasions. She advises the Muslim mother to send their daughter to school so that they can be useful citizens and assets to Islam.<sup>18</sup> Dr. Rabiatu Amma Conney of the Department for Study of Religion, University of Ghana has also been vocal on the issue of secular education for the Muslim youth. Shaykh Mustapha Ibrahim, Chairman of the Islamic Council for Development and Humanitarian Services has expressed the view that the future of the Muslim youth lies in the acquisition of secular education.<sup>19</sup> Alhaji Mukhtari Abbass the immediate past National Chief Imam of Ghana indicated that the Muslim youth must be encouraged to acquire professional training as is essential to the development of Ghana. He has shown the way because he has a son who is a jet pilot in the Ghana Airforce. What is needed now in Ghana is a Muslim youth who is educated both in secular and religious subjects; is conversant in the principles of Islam and puts them into practice; contributes meaningfully to the welfare of his community; respects the principle of peaceful co-existence with members of other faiths; and is able to explain Islam to his non-Muslim friends.

All the above can be achieved with better education which should be broad based. Much of the misunderstanding between Muslims and non-Muslims is due to inadequate education. A practising Muslim who has a profession say an accountant, an engineer, a

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<sup>15</sup> J.O. Hunwick, *Islam in Africa: Friend or Foe*, Ghana Universities Press 1975. p. 14.

<sup>16</sup> Mungo Park, *Travels in the Interior District of Africa*, 2nd Edition, London 1916. p. 56-57.

<sup>17</sup> J.O. Hunwick, *Islam in Africa: Friend or Foe*, p. 15.

<sup>18</sup> M. Sey, "Muslim Community in Ghana," *op. cit.* p. 251.

<sup>19</sup> M. Sey, "Approach to the 21st Century: The Ghanaian Ulama Speak Out," *op. cit.*, p. 152.

lawyer, a doctor is a better asset to Islam than the Muslim with a one sided education in religion. This is possible, by learning other subjects in addition to the traditional Islamic knowledge imparted in the Quran schools. The existing public schools should be patronized by the Muslim youth because it will no doubt lead to a brighter future and as Dr. K.A. Busia said several years ago that the better educated a person is the better a man he is and the better person is the better opportunity he has to be a better man.<sup>20</sup> The situation in which a Muslim who has undergone training in the Makaranta school for years but is officially an illiterate should be a thing of the past and the remedy is secular subjects alongside religious education.

There is in Ghana today a section of the Muslim youth that does not belong to any school system - whether Makaranta or secular school. This group is also not in any identifiable profession but live under strange and questionable circumstances. This is the group I choose to call the youth in the diaspora. The ages range between thirteen and thirty nine and are located at places like "Chicago Base", "Alaska", "Yellow House" "Philadelphia Row", "Harlem" etc. This I think is the greatest thorn in the flesh of the Muslim youth. This group is the most vulnerable and bear the full incidence of foreign influences as they watch the wildest western films and taste the deadliest and dangerous drugs and provide a fertile ground for the recruitment of personnel for anti-social activities by the Drug Barons. The activities of this group leads to drugs, disease and death. An attempt was made forty years ago during the first Republic under Dr Kwame Nkrumah who was able to put in place the system known as the "Builders Brigade" which mobilized all such people and turned them into useful citizens by giving them some kind of vocation. It is sad to say that shortly after the overthrow of the first Republic in 1966 the facility was dissolved. But in fairness to that system it may be said that many good artisans and craftsmen of today are products of the Builders Brigade. If such a system could be put in place to give some hope to the youth in the diaspora it would be good for the youth in Ghana. Shoe-making, carpentry, masonry, black smithing, welding, tailoring and painting are some of the vocations fit for this section of the youth. This of course should be coupled with adult literacy classes.

The University is usually an institution of higher learning and research and its products are highly respected by society. A university says Cardinal Newsman:

"... is not the birth place of poets or of immortal authors, of founders of schools, leaders of colonies, or conquerors of nations. It does not promise a generation of Aristotles or Newtons, of Napoleons or Washington or Raphaels or Shakespeares though such miracles of nature it has before now contained within its precincts. Nor is it content on the other hand with forming the critic or the experimentalist, the economist or the engineer, though such too it in-

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<sup>20</sup> M. Sey, "Islam and Education in Ghana," *op. cit.* p. 10.

cludes within its scope. But a university training is the great ordinary means to a great but ordinary end; it aims at raising the intellectual tone of society, at cultivating the public mind, at purifying the national taste ...'<sup>21</sup>

Society's expectation from youthful graduates of our universities therefore is very great. As secretary general of the National Union of Muslim Students in 1967, I presided over a congress of a fewer than one hundred undergraduates. Several years have passed and the number has increased more than fourfold and with the increase came complications. The complications have been compounded of late by the presence of an overwhelmingly Christian environment in which the Muslim youth of today operates on the university campus. Hardly a week passes without any Christian activity of some sort.

These are very common phenomena on the campuses these days. The contemporary Muslim youth therefore is at a disadvantage and the challenges are enormous. What really is a matter of grave concern is that which springs from the suppression syndrome or complex. This is the situation in which a Muslim youth, having come a long way from typical Muslim home wherein the five daily salat is the way of life, finds himself in a different environment and decides to relax. This laxity may stem from the fact that he had performed the religious rites to satisfy family curiosity but not as a matter of principle in which the performance of Islamic duties becomes his way of life under any condition. Having been obliged by the family or teachers to perform those duties under compulsion he feels free not to do so because the family or teacher is no longer present in a free university atmosphere. This type of situation has been diagnosed several years ago by Nadīm al-Jisr when he wrote,

"I have known many educated young people who do not observe religious rites because when they were young (children) their fathers or teachers forced them to perform those rites."<sup>22</sup>

This situation has led to infidelity or downright apostacy on the part of some of our educated youth sometimes to the embarrassment of both families and friends. It is therefore not uncommon for such people to deride religious rites and thereby encouraging others to do the same.

It is therefore suggested that Islamic teaching or guidance be presented to the children in an appealing, interesting and persuasive way and refrain from applying stem

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<sup>21</sup> Paul McCormick, Winifred Post et al. *Adventures in English Literature*, Harcourt Brace and World Inc. Classic Edition N.Y., 1968. p. 577.

<sup>22</sup> Nadīm al-Jisr, *Our Cultured Youth in the Face of Faith and Piety*, Academy of Islamic Research (Al-Azhar) Cairo, 1965. p. 274.



measures except when necessary and always within limits.<sup>23</sup> The youth who had been brought up under such a condition regards the observance of religious duties as his way of life and will surely keep to it in the face of all odds.

One underlying factor in this matter is ignorance. Many of our youth come to the universities with little or no knowledge about the teachings of Islam and are unable to defend their Islam in the presence of non-Muslims. To cut the long story short, Islamic literature should be made available to the youth. "Youth attention should be drawn to the innumerable bounties of God for which they should be grateful and also to the fact that God created on earth everything for the enjoyment of man.<sup>24</sup> We should explain to the youth, the Guiding Motto i.e. the Quran which specifies the qualities that a faithful should have believers who have succeeded are those who pray solemnly. (Q23,1-2). "Successful indeed are the believers who are humble in their prayers, and who shun vain conversation, and who are payers of Zakat ..." (Al-Mu'minūn, 1-4).

Humility in prayers and avoidance of vain talk are conditions of success and as Muḥammad al-Ghazālī remarks, "to avoid irrelevant and nonsensical things is a condition for success and a proof of perfection."<sup>25</sup> It should also be driven home to the youth what Hazrat Abū Hurairah (R.A.) relates what the Prophet s.a.w. said: "A man is likely to follow the religion of his friend so beware whom you befriend." (Abū Dāwūd and Tirmidhī).<sup>26</sup>

The suppression syndrome and its concomitant ills is perhaps the greatest social challenges of the contemporary Muslim youth. However with tact, patience and diplomacy on the part of all concerned. This can be overcome through the following measures:

- a) The youth should be advised to make good friends among practising Muslims.
- b) Considerable amount of Islamic literature should be made available to the youth.
- b) Seminars on the excellences of observing religious duties should be organized from time to time for the youth in tertiary institutions.

Equally depressing is the frustration syndrome that has plagued the Muslim youth in tertiary institutions in recent years. This syndrome stems from a youth coming to the

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Abdel Ḥamid Ḥassan, *Bringing Up the Youth According to the Principles of Islam*, Academy of Islamic Research (Al-Azhar) 1965. p. 250.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Muḥammad Al-Ghazālī, *Muslim's Character*, International Islamic Federation of Student Organization, 1991. p. 135.

university with high hopes of following a particular course but not finding his way is obliged to accept any available programme. This frustration is enough to derail the hope of the youth. The frustration can also result from his inability to do well in that particular course to which his nature is not capable. This situation constitutes an educational challenge for the Muslim youth. This may result in a sense of guilt that may have negative results. Such a student may tend to wonder whether life belongs to the devil or to God. It has been pointed out that the young man who suffers from a feeling of frustration finds pleasure in giving vent to his feeling through advocating atheism and for deriding religious rites or tempting others to follow suit. This however seems to be an extreme position. A Muslim youth who has been brought up to face life against all odds would adopt a different attitude. Yet the danger is still there that may lead to undesirable consequences and must be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Having said about the youth in the Makaranta school, the youth in the diaspora and the youth in the university and highlighted the social and educational challenges involved and also made some suggestions toward meeting those challenges, I wish to conclude by drawing attention of the youth to what Uthman Dan Fodio says that a good Muslim must be a well wisher for all people and be of service to them. He should not distinguish among people. A good Muslim should also remember to avoid impediments to religion be they human satanic or spiritually. In concluding his advice to the youth on the characteristics of a good Muslim, Uthman Dan Fodio states that a good Muslim should also endeavour to protect himself against the four obstacles in life namely:

- a) He should be content to seek wealth by relying on Allāh.
- b) He should also be content when he is in danger by entrusting everything to Allāh.
- c) He should be satisfied with what Allāh has predetermined for him.
- d) He should be patient when calamity befalls him.

What I have for the contemporary Muslim youth is what our beloved Prophet s.a.w. said in his Farewell Sermon, "I leave behind me two things which if you hold on to, you will never go astray i.e. the Book of Allāh (Qurān) and the Sunna of His Messenger."