

# Contemporary Zongo Communities in Accra Interfaith Marriages: The Case of Muslims and Christians in Accra

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**Abstract:** The forces of cosmopolitanism, globalization and neoliberal policies have advanced interfaith marriages globally. This study looks at the phenomenon of interfaith marriages between Muslims and Christians in Zongo communities in Accra. Zongo is a Hausa word used to refer to communities that have historically been associated with itinerant Muslim traders and which also served as Muslim enclaves in the Gold Coast. Today Zongo communities, which were once predominantly Muslim, are now religiously and ethnically pluralistic. There is a discernible mix of adherents of other religions in Zongo communities. In the study, we show that although doctrinal differences between Muslims and Christians serve as fundamental reference point in prohibiting interfaith marriages, there are other factors that make a future of more frequent and tolerated marriages between Muslims and Christians in Zongo communities in Accra seem doubtful.

**Key Words:** Islam, Christianity, interfaith marriages, Zongo communities, Accra, Ghana

## Introduction

Many scholars have examined interfaith marriages in other jurisdictions, but in the case of Ghana, there is paucity of literature on this social fact.<sup>1</sup> The thrust of this paper therefore is to look, from a sociological perspective, at interfaith marriages between Muslims and Christians, focusing on Zongo communities in Accra. Zongo is a Hausa word that is used to designate a camping place for caravan traders or lodging place for travelers.<sup>2</sup> Usually, in Ghana, Zongos are located at the outskirts of main townships. Historically, these areas were occupied largely by Muslim traders, who travelled from neighboring areas/regions.<sup>3</sup> They also served as the base for different Muslim groups from northern part of Ghana who went to settle in the southern part of the country. But since Accra became the capital city of the Gold Coast colony in 1877, Zongo communities in Accra have become religiously and ethnically plural. Thus, interfaith marriages between Muslims and Christians have become one of the obvious spillover effects of the religious and ethnic plurality of Zongo communities.

The recent intensification of cosmopolitanism, which expresses a more robust urbane life-style, open-mindedness and impartiality, global justice, network of international contacts, exposure to other cultures (multiculturalism), and feeling at home everywhere has been facilitated and sustained through the improvement in the medium of communication

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<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v19/v19i1a2.pdf>

and other forces of modernization, such as secular education and neoliberal policies.<sup>4</sup> In Ghana, the implementation of neoliberal policies in the 1980s was accompanied by privatization of state-owned enterprises and the broadening of the informal sector. These developments have contributed to the empowering of women economically in many societies that were once considered patriarchal, giving them the social bargaining power over their life choices, including marriage. Likewise, communities that were historically hostile and closed to other religions and cultures are now opening up.

The universalizing of liberal democracy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century which was sustained through structuring aid and donor support around neoliberal policies, found expression in Ghana's re-democratization in the 1990s.<sup>5</sup> Ghana's re-democratization process came along with the right to freedom of religious affiliation and also from religious persecution. Also, the 1992 Constitution of Ghana, which provided the legal framework to the re-democratization process, reified the position of Ghana as a secular state: this has meant that the state does not uphold any dictates of a particular religion over and above the secular constitution of the country. This development has had deep-seated implications for interfaith marriages in Ghana. Also, the fact that Accra remains the administrative and economic center where the forces of economic liberalism and democracy have fully found expression has contributed to make interfaith marriages a social fact. Unlike villages, where parents exercise full control over materials of bride wealth and the choice of marriage partners of their children, migration to Accra, which comes with some degree of economic independence, gives more liberty to determine the choice of spouses. As they move to Accra, some change their religious identity as they establish marriage and other forms of conjugal relations with people of other faiths. Zongo communities that were once predominantly Muslim are now essentially cosmopolitan and religiously pluralistic. These developments have had social and religious implications, one of which is interfaith marriages.

Generally, the increase in the phenomenon of interfaith marriage has implications for both Muslims and Christians, particularly the reinterpretation of some aspects of the Qur'an and the Bible. In the midst of this reality, two categories of discussants have emerged: conservatives, who believe that their religion's family laws—which include the proscription of interfaith marriages—should be upheld even in the face of changes in social structures in society; and reformers, who suggest the need to provide a new hermeneutical analysis and rereading of some scriptural texts that have been used to proscribe interfaith marriages.<sup>6</sup> Both groups invoke texts in their religious scriptures to support their position.

Scholars have for a long time portrayed the relationship between Muslims and Christians in conflictual terms. The doctrinal differences between the two religions, according to Soares, have been exaggeratedly harped to mask every attempt of possible interaction.<sup>7</sup> Doctrinal differences also obscure individual subjectivity which is very important in religious beliefs and practices, particularly in countries that are religiously pluralistic. In view of the supposed tense relationship. Soares suggests we rethink of how Muslims and Christians in Africa have related to each other beyond the simplistic understanding of the two religions existing on one-dimensional continuum that runs from co-existence to conflict.<sup>8</sup> He maintains that Muslims and Christians in Africa have often lived side by side, have sometimes converted to each other's religion, have shared much in the way of culture in its anthropological sense, and have learned, appropriated and borrowed from each other. He, however, admits that sometimes the interaction between Muslims and Christians have been fraught with conflict.<sup>9</sup> Janson and Meyer, on the other hand, aver that bifurcating the study of Islam and Christianity in Africa is highly

problematic.<sup>10</sup> They argue that this bifurcation obscures the fact that despite the differences in the historical development of Christianity and Islam in many settings in Africa, Christians and Muslims have habitually lived side by side, in harmony. Similarly, Larkin and Meyer, focusing on the commonalities between reformist Islam and Christian Pentecostalism in Nigeria and Ghana respectively have argued that while the two religious traditions may have different fundamental doctrinal differences, they have practices that overlap.<sup>11</sup> Being part of a global movement and also fundamentalist provides space for interactions between Muslims and Christians.

Peel, on the other hand, has a contrasting view. Referring to the exposition by Larkin and Meyer, he points out that “[t]here are certainly empirical grounds for drawing parallels between Christian Pentecostalism and Muslim Salafism...”; however caution must be exercised against the overemphasis placed on similarities between the two religious groups.<sup>12</sup> He argues that profound cultural differences exist between Salafi Muslims and Pentecostal Christians:

While southern Ghana is overwhelmingly Christian (with many Pentecostals); its Muslim minority is little influenced by Salafism—in fact there are many Ahmadis—and there is no serious interfaith conflict. On the other hand, Northern Nigeria is a crucible of both Salafism and interfaith conflict, but although the Christian body is substantial and internally diverse, Pentecostalism is less influential than in Southern Nigeria and is less prominent in interfaith conflict than some other churches are.<sup>13</sup>

In other words, “[i]n attempting to balance these differences against similarities in the comparison of Salafism and Pentecostalism, it should not escape notice that they are of a significantly different kind: the similarities are chiefly a matter of form, whereas the differences are chiefly ones of content or substance.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, the fact of the existence of similarities between Islam and Christianity generally does not obfuscate the fact of their (outward and internal) differences, which often engender conflicts between the adherents.

This study situates itself in the context of ongoing discursive discourses on Muslim-Christian relations and looks at interfaith marriage relations between Muslims and Christians in three Zongo communities in Accra. While it acknowledges that in Ghana the boundaries between Muslims and Christians are not fixed and non-negotiable, and that through inter-faith marriages and other forms of conjugal relations, adherents of both religions crisscross each other’s religious boundaries, it argues that conceptualization of marriage, which forms the substance or content of the doctrines on marriage of both Muslims and Christians, provides a prism through which interfaith marriages and new forms of interactions between them are discussed.<sup>15</sup> In other words, the present phenomenon of conjugal relations between the adherents of the two religions does not obscure the differences and intolerance that characterize them. This study concludes that the possibility of more frequent and tolerated and stable marriages between Christians and Muslims in Zongo communities in Accra seems improbable.

## Methodology

Aside from key respondents, who were largely theologians from both religions, we also interviewed twenty-five young men and women aged eighteen years and above. Focus group discussions were also used to gather information. Multiple sampling techniques were used to select respondents for the study. First, we purposely identified three Zongo

communities in Accra—Mamobi, Nima, and Madina. These communities are among the oldest Zongo communities in Accra. Also, they serve as hives for different strands of Christianity and Islam. In view of the relative cheap cost of accommodation and living generally and a strong sense of community, these communities continue to attract migrants from the northern parts of Ghana and some other areas in the south. The communities are diverse and have also become densely populated areas booming with economic activities. Madina, for instance, boasts of a vibrant and one of the busiest markets/commercial centers in Accra. The population of Nima is 80,843; Mamobi 61,724; and Madina 79,832.<sup>16</sup> With respect to number of houses, Mamobi has 3,349; Nima 4,272; and Madina 8,486.<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, the 2010 Population Census of Ghana is silent on the percentages of Muslims and Christians living in Zongo communities.

Since the study population included only Christians and Muslims, we did not include persons who did not share in those faiths in selecting our respondents. We randomly selected our respondents by using house numbers. We wrote down the house numbers of sixty houses, twenty each from the research areas. We counted and picked second number of our count. After identifying the house, we spoke with the Muslim or Christian in that house. The random sampling ensured that we gave equal chance of representation to our sampled population. We recorded the interviews and later transcribed and analyzed the data. Thick description, together with emic and etic perspectives, serves as the frame of analysis of the study. Interviews were conducted in Twi, Hausa, and English languages.

### **A Brief Survey of the Social Evolution of Zongo Communities in Accra**

West Africa has had contact with Islam since the eighth century. However, in what is today Ghana, Islam first entered the northern part of the country by the fourteenth century through the economic activities of Dyula, Hausa and Wangara traders.<sup>18</sup> These Muslim traders had routinized the practice of moving with clerics who performed religious services. The religious services the Muslim clerics provided appealed to various Northern chiefs, including the Dagomba, Gonja, Wala, and Mamprugu, some of whom converted to Islam.<sup>19</sup> By the eighteenth century, Islam was already in Asante. The Asante engaged the Muslim clerics for amulets and other forms of protection. In the same way, the Asante engaged literate Muslims as administrators in the Asantehene's place. The relationship between the Asante and the Muslims was so strong that Asantehene Osei Kwame had a permanent Muslim cleric, Muhammad al Gamba, in his palace.<sup>20</sup>

While Muslims have been in Asante since the eighteenth century, it was only in the nineteenth century that Zongo communities as political communities emerged. By the 1830s, there was a small nucleus of Muslims in the Accra region. These were freed enslaved Africans brought from Brazil. Many of them originally belonged to Hausa, Nupe, Kanuri, and the Sahelian ethnic descent.<sup>21</sup> Before the British invasion, the Asante had kept the Muslim traders from neighboring countries at the borders to control the flow of the trade.<sup>22</sup> In Kumasi, the community of northern Ghanaian and non-Ghanaian immigrants, which is known today as Zongo did not originate as a political community until after the colonial occupation of Kumasi in 1896. It was during this time that the ethnic political leaders of Zongo communities were legitimized by the British.<sup>23</sup>

In postcolonial Ghana, however, Zongo communities have reified its pluralism religiously, ethnically and linguistically. Although they still maintain their Muslim features, and social bonding is largely framed around Hausa language, the lingua franca of these

communities, today Zongo communities are home to many people from traditionally non-Muslim areas. While Islam and Hausa remain the dominant religion and language respectively of many Zongo communities in Accra, Christianity and other religions have made significant inroads. Twi and Hausa now serve as the dual lingua franca of most of the communities. This is to the extent that both Christian and Muslim preachers use both languages in their proselytizing. During crusades of Christians and open and public preaching of Muslims, the clergy of both religions use Hausa, Twi and sometimes English.

Several factors have contributed to the changing demography of Zongo communities. The first was the transfer of the administrative capitol of colonial Gold Coast from Cape Coast to Accra in 1877. This development meant that Accra became the center of both political and economic activities of the colonial administrators. Project works were largely concentrated in Accra. This transfer contributed greatly to the formation of the three main Zongo communities—Mamobi, Nima, and Madina—in Accra. The resettlement of ex-servicemen after the First and Second World Wars also contributed to the expansion of these communities. As Accra became the center of economic activities, Muslims from Ghana and neighboring territories came as traders and laborers to live in the city. With these developments, Accra, which had been largely Ga, became deeply cosmopolitan. The city has since become the hive of socio-political, economic and religious activities.

Similarly, following Accra's emergence as the hub of economic and political activities, many people from the southern parts of Ghana, largely Christians, migrated there. Irrespective of their Christian background, many who find themselves within the low-income bracket group choose to settle in Zongo communities, where accommodation and cost of living are relatively cheap. The three communities of our study however have significant representations of different Christian denominations. For instance, the Jehovah's Witnesses have Kingdom Halls in these communities, and the Seventh-day Adventists also have a considerable number of followers there. Since the 1970s, the presence of pentecostal and charismatic Christians is also greatly felt. Thus, the Christian presence in Zongo communities is visible and continues to grow as Accra continues to experience continual inflow of immigrants from other areas of Ghana and West Africa.

Although the Ahlu-Sunna wal-Jama dominates in Zongo communities, different versions of Islam also have a high presence. For example, the Ahmadiyyas have a mosque near Old Ashongman (about twenty-minute drive from Madina). Ahmadiyya Muslims, as part of their mission strategy send their youth to Pakistan to study.<sup>24</sup> Shia Muslims have a mosque in Mamobi. The presence of the Shia Muslims since the 1980s and their engagement in social services, including the building of hospitals and a university has boosted the Shia profile. Since the 1980s, they have offered scholarships to many Muslim youth in Zongo communities in Accra and other places in Ghana for study in Iran. Since the 1990s, the Ahlu-Sunna wal-Jama presence in the study areas has only increased. Many Muslim youth are offered scholarship to study in Saudi Arabia. The Tijaniyya also send students abroad, largely to Senegal, for study.<sup>25</sup> The different strands of Islam as well as the Zongo communities generally have in this way been impacted on by the internationalization of Islam. The social and religious shifts in the landscape of Zongo communities have had implications for the communities among which is the contraction of marriages, particularly conjugal relationships between Muslims and Christians.

It is worth mentioning here how the propagation of Islam in sub-Saharan Africa has shaped the relationship between Muslims and Christians. The spread of Islam in sub-Saharan Africa, apart from a few areas like Northern Nigeria, where the reformation of

Osman dan Fodio resulted in the establishment of a caliphate, was generally peacefully borne by African converts, whose engagement with non-Muslim Africans was inspired more by economic motives than political.<sup>26</sup> In the case of Ghana, Islam was spread peacefully through trade. In most cases, Muslims preferred to live in separate quarters where they could safeguard their religion from adulteration. Not many attempts were made to convert non-Muslim Africans.<sup>27</sup> This approach in Ghana has contributed to a peaceful interaction between Muslims and Christians in Zongo communities. In the research areas for this study, it is easy to find Muslims and Christians trading freely with each other. The extent of the interaction is such that some Christians have a kettle (known locally as *buta*) in their shops for Muslims to use. During various religious festivals of both Christians and Muslims both share gifts with their neighbors. The act of sharing gifts has further cemented the cordial relations between Muslims and Christians. In the same way, both Muslims and Christians crisscross each other's religion for the purposes of finding religious responses to some of the vicissitudes of life.<sup>28</sup> Christians and Muslims also attend each others' social gatherings and activities such as marriages, naming, and graduation ceremonies. During Christian funerals, Muslims commiserate with Christians and vice versa.<sup>29</sup> These interactions have contributed to interfaith marriages in Zongo communities in Accra.

### Theology and Conceptualization of Marriage by Muslims and Christians

Generally, both Muslims and Christians have theologies that largely determine the rules of marriage. Both groups invoke injunctions in their scriptures to enforce prescribed and preferred marriages. According to the Christian respondents, marriage is a covenant, whereas for the Muslims, marriage is a contract. Also, post-earthly marriage possibilities differ in both groups. Our Muslim respondents indicated that there is some form of conjugal relations in paradise, but the Christians thought otherwise; for them marriage has no post-earthly existence. These differences shape the predispositions of the faithful toward interfaith marriages. Indeed, despite the differences of theological understandings of marriages, interfaith marriages—due to cultural contacts, education, technology, and improvement in communication—have become a social reality globally.<sup>30</sup> Some Muslim theologians are beginning to accommodate changing trends in social life, including interfaith marriages.<sup>31</sup>

The different interpretations on marriage have given rise to sometimes contradictory theologies that affect interfaith marriages. According to an Ahlu-Sunna wal-Jama Muslim scholar, Sheikh Osman Bari, traditionally among Muslims, marriage is conceptualized as an act of religious devotion.<sup>32</sup> In other words, Muslims regard marriage to be normal, natural course for women just as it is for men.<sup>33</sup> The text that many of the Muslim respondents invoked to support the importance of marriage is: "And among the signs of Allah is this, that He created for you mates, that you might live in tranquility with them; and He has put love and mercy between your (hearts). Truly in that are signs (about the nature of Allah) for those who reflect" (Qur'an 30:21). To underscore the religious value of marriage, Sheikh Osman Bari pointed out that there is a *hadith* that says that, "[w]hoever has married has completed half of his faith (*baihaqi*)."

For many Muslims, only marriages between Muslim men and Christian women are permitted: "Lawful for you in marriage are not only chaste women who are believers, but chaste women from among the people of the book revealed before your time when you give them their due dowers" (Qur'an 5:5). So Muslim women may marry only Muslim men.

According to Sheikh Osman Bari, this instruction is supported by the injunction: “They are not lawful wives for the unbelievers, nor are the unbelievers lawful husbands for them” (Qur’an 60:11). Among Ahmadiyya Muslims, however, there is no scriptural logic to permit interfaith marriage. Maulvi Bilal Ahmed explains that in the theology of Ahmadiyya Muslims, the Qur’anic injunction that permitted Muslim men to marry Christian women is now obsolete, because Christians have largely distorted the ‘original’ message given to Jesus Christ.<sup>34</sup>

Christian denominations generally consider marriage as a divine cultural mandate (Genesis 2:24). Christian respondents indicated that their religion expects every man and woman, who is capable, to marry. The definition of marriage was framed around heterosexual relationship. Marriage is a covenant, which is to be enjoyed until death do the couple apart. The only provision for dissolution of marriage, according to our respondents, is infidelity of the couple (Matthew 5:32; 19:9). The major biblical text that they provided to explain the imperative of marriage is the text that says: “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24). Based on this text, Bishop Ben Sallah defined a Christian marriage as an agreement and union between a man and a woman who have agreed to live together, under the ordinance.<sup>35</sup> A church elder of the Legon Seventh-day Adventist Church, Michael Kofi Andoh defined marriage as, “a consensual matrimony between one woman and one man, who share the same faith, and are blessed.”<sup>36</sup>

In relation to the question of whom a Christian can marry, the text cited was: “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols?” (II Corinthians 6:14-16a). However, different interpretations were given to reflect denominational teachings and perspectives on interfaith marriages. Jehovah’s Witnesses and Seventh-day Adventists leaders argued that the text is applicable not only to marriages between Muslims and Christians, but also intra-Christian marriages. Members are encouraged to marry from within the church. For other Christian respondents, the text is usually invoked to discourage interfaith marriage, not intra-Christian marriage. Others do not see anything amiss regarding who a Christian could marry. Pentecostal Rev. Dr. Rockeybell Adatura, for instance, points out that Moses and Joseph are two examples of biblical personalities who married non-Israelites although they were leaders who were firm in their belief in Yahweh God: “The Bible is not against marrying from a different group or race per se, it seeks to preserve the worship of God in its purity.”<sup>37</sup>

Much as religious leaders attempt to enforce the prohibition of interfaith marriages, they cannot compel followers to adhere to their specific theologies. Individuals bring their subjectivity to bear on their engagement with religion. The secular status of Ghana and the freedom of religion accorded to Ghanaians by the 1992 Constitution enforces religious freedom and thus frustrates attempts by religious leaders to impose religious code on interfaith marriages.

### **Difficulty in Discouraging Interfaith Marriages**

Although religious leaders in Ghana try to discourage interfaith and sometimes intrafaith marriages, they are in some cases unsuccessful. Some religious leaders periodically organize

singles and family retreats and study programs particularly for young people where they seek to indirectly connect fellow members (aka matchmaking). They also try to institute measures that may help discourage interfaith/intrafaith marriages. A branch of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Accra is seeking to reform a practice which prohibits a pastor from counseling a member who chooses to marry a non-Adventist. A member entering into interfaith/intrafaith marriage would therefore be fully advised about the challenges involved in such marriages. Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses also do not allow a church pastor to preside over interfaith marriages. This practice is a significant disincentive for young members considering such marriages. Some pastors however refrain from directly linking men and women in marriage, since as Bishop Sallah indicates, "If you forcibly join two people together in marriage, you become responsible if the marriage fails to work. We, therefore, cannot compel our members to marry from within."<sup>38</sup> Among Jehovah's Witnesses, an elder of the church who marries a non-Christian loses his position as an elder of the church. In the Church of Pentecost it is preferred that one should marry from within the church or the broader Christian community before one is ordained a pastor. However, members of both the Seventh-day Adventist and the Church of Pentecost had no knowledge about any historical precedence where an office holder of either church married a Muslim, and were therefore unable to tell how the policy of both churches on such marriages could be implemented. Nevertheless, members of both churches contended that the teachings of the churches would discourage their leaders from marrying Muslims. Among the Christian groups (except Jehovah's Witnesses explicitly proscribe office holders from marrying a Muslim), the internal social logic in preferring Christian endogamy for their leaders is to serve as an example for the laity of the Christian orthopraxis of marriage.

Since any marriage in Ghana is subject to the endorsement of the state, as the couple are constitutionally mandated to register with the Registrar General, it becomes difficult for Christian leaders to have control over their members' choice of marriage partners. Elder Andoh expresses this thus: "To be a member of a church is by choice. By extension, choosing a marriage partner is also a matter of choice. A church may express preference, but it cannot superimpose on her members relative to the person the member marries."<sup>39</sup> He further intimates that: "In choosing a partner, a person may choose rightly or wrongly, so what our church does is to provide guidance, which is mainly biblical guidance." The biblical guidance, according to him, may include advising females to marry only unmarried men, and also to marry Seventh-day Adventists because marrying a non-Seventh-day Adventist could create lots of challenges that besiege marriages.

In spite of the teachings of Islam discouraging interfaith marriages, we encountered a number of mainline Muslim men married to Christian women. Although such action does not generally receive approval from the leaders and other Muslims, and they may be rebuked or not assigned special religious functions, the men are not socially ostracized. It is interesting to note that many of them allow their children to attend church services and other religious and social activities in the churches of their wives. In an interview with Labaran, an Ahlu-Sunna wal-Jama, he argued that:

There is nothing wrong marrying a Christian woman and allowing my children to go to church. I know that there are some Muslims who make a fuss about allowing Muslim children to go to church. I am not worried by such arguments and protests, because I think that both religions teach sound moral values. It does not matter whether my children go to church or mosque. At the



end of the day, it is the same prayer to the same God. I have had some family members and imams raising concerns about my liberal attitude towards religion, but I don't care how they think of me. Once my children believe in God that is enough for me. I must say that people have the right to understand Islam the way they consider it fit. I will not allow any imam to define my Islam for me. Instead, I will follow Islam as I know it. After all, I am still a Muslim.<sup>40</sup>

Yet Sheikh Osman Bari, asserted it is improper and religiously unacceptable for a Muslim man to allow his children to attend Christian services.<sup>41</sup> According to him, this is a clear violation of the demand on Muslims to train their children in Islam. He argued that marriage is God's regulation and so is the training of children in the way of Islam; a Muslim man must therefore ensure that the children of the marriage follow the path of God. The only point where a Muslim is absolved from the responsibility he wields over his child's choice of a religion is when the child has attained the age of maturity and is able to clearly discern between wrong and right. Thus, according to Sheikh Osman Bari, until the child reaches the age of maturity the Muslim man incurs the wrath of God if he allows his child to follow any religion other than Islam. Sheikh Osman Bari however firmly indicated that a Muslim man is absolved of the responsibility of his mature children if they later decide to follow the religion of their Christian mother. In such a case, the punitive act would be to deny them any share of his property. Ahmaddiyya Muslims, on the other hand, hold a different position. Maulvi Bilal Ahmed maintained that in Islam, a parent is responsible for taking care of his children, even if the children decide to abandon Islam to join another religion.<sup>42</sup> According to him, a Muslim man cannot in any way shirk responsibility towards his child—it is a violation of Islamic family law.

### **Implications of Interfaith Marriage for Children**

The lack of consistency that characterizes the understanding of Christian and Islamic teachings on interfaith marriage is manifested again in the responsibilities that couples have to their children. In an interview with Abiba, a Pentecostal but born to a Tijaniyyah man and a Christian woman, she mentioned that since she decided to follow her mother's religion, her father stopped caring for her.<sup>43</sup> This is despite the fact that when she was a child, she went to the mosque with her father. She is not sure whether she will have a share of her father's estate when he passes. Rosaline, a Pentecostal and a university student, whose Muslim name was Musiriatsu, indicated that she stopped being a Muslim after she completed senior high school.<sup>44</sup> But she maintains that her father, a Tijaniyyah, continues to take care of her needs— university tuition fees and her daily upkeep are entirely borne by her father. Zekia was born to an Ahlu-Sunna father and a Pentecostal mother.<sup>45</sup> When she was four years old, her father went to Nigeria, and she lived with her mother so as a result went to church with her. But when her father finally returned to Ghana, she decided to join the Islamic religion. She is now married to an Ahlu-Sunna man. She indicates that her mother feels disappointed since she is the only child of her parents. She however maintains her relationship with her mother who is now married (but without a child) to a Christian man.

The various Islamic and Christian teachings present serious challenges to children from mixed marriage homes. Usually, very young children in such homes tend to follow their Christian mothers to church. But they start Qur'anic education when they have learnt to speak. At that stage, it becomes quite difficult for Christian mothers to take their children to

church, since the child will be expected at the weekend Qur'anic school. Only a few Muslim men, such as Labaran, allow their children to attend Christian services when old enough to attend the Qur'anic school. Abiba, for example, pointed out that there were times she got confused over the teachings of Islam and Christianity. At Makaranta (*madrassa*), she learnt that Christians had distorted the true teachings of Jesus Christ and that Jesus is not God, but at church, she had to always pray to Jesus. By the time she was mature enough to make a decision over religion she chose Christianity, because she found her mother quite influential on her life. Shamsudeen is a Pentecostal born to a Pentecostal mother and an Ahlu Sunna father.<sup>46</sup> His parents divorced when he was still very young. His father got married to a Muslim woman, and that made it quite difficult for him to stay with his father. He moved to live with his mother and started going to church with her. Later, his mother also remarried to a Christian man. He returned to live with his father when he was ten years old and became a Muslim. At age fifteen when he was in second year in junior high school, he reconverted to Christianity. That annoyed his father, who vowed not to take care of him. He stopped schooling, and with the help of his stepfather learnt a trade as auto-mechanic. At the time of our interview, Shamsudeen was not on speaking terms with his father. According to him, since his father has disowned him he has no hope of inheriting anything from him. He is also seen as a betrayer in the Zongo community where his Muslim neighbors ridicule him as *kafir* (infidel).

### **Marriage: A Point of Conversion?**

In most cases, severing a relationship with the religion of one's parents is likely to create tension and conflict. Parents feel betrayed when their children convert to a religion other than theirs. However, the responses to a child's conversion and the impact of the conversion on the child and may not be the same. Stella, a university graduate, was raised in the Presbyterian Church.<sup>47</sup> She is now a Tijaniyyah and married to Abdul Salam Haruna. They have three children. Her parents were very disappointed when she married a Muslim who she had courted for about a decade. Because her parents were reticent in accepting her husband, Stella and her husband went to the Registrar General's office in Accra to register their marriage. She admits that she feels alone and neglected by her family although she is very much accepted by her husband's family. Because Stella converted to Islam a few months before getting married, the couple did not have a wedding but an engagement. As part of the contingent prestation, her husband gave her a Bible. While she would love to read her Bible, her husband does not allow her to read it. She sometimes reads the English 'translated' Qur'an. According to her, she sees no contradiction between Christianity and Islam: "both religions worship the same God; what matters is one's total commitment to God. I can't imagine a God who will not allow either Muslim or Christian to go to heaven, because of the different perspectives both religions have on Jesus." It is of interest to note that although some Muslim men who marry Christian women had to present them with copies of the Bible, they do not allow their wives to read them. Haruna mentioned that he gave a copy of the Bible to her because he knew that once she moved to stay with him, she would never get the chance to read it again.<sup>48</sup> So once they got married, the Bible was kept away in their drawer. According to Haruna, he had wanted to give it out as a gift, but he did not do that, because, as he said, "I want to also keep it as a remembrance of our marriage."

Doris, a Pentecostal, is married to Zakari, an Ahlu Sunna.<sup>49</sup> She accepted to marry a Muslim because she does not see any difference between Christianity and Islam. She

continues to attend the Assemblies of God Church. Although a member of the Assemblies of God, the blessing of her marriage was presided over by a pastor of a charismatic church in her neighborhood because her church did not approve of her marrying a Muslim. According to her, among the contingent prestation given to her by her husband were a Bible and a ring. She is not sure about what the religious affiliation of her children would be since she is yet to have a child.

Seyram is a Christian and a university student.<sup>50</sup> She is married to Issaka, a Tijaniyya and a military man. They have been married for seven years and they have three children. Seyram still goes to the Assemblies of God Church in her community. Her children attend with her. They also sometimes go to the Mosque with their father on Fridays and always attend special prayers on Id Fitr and Id Adhar. In the month of Ramadan, Seyram sometimes fasts with her husband. She is planning to convert to Islam but she is concerned about her father, who before her marriage made her promise to him that she would remain a Christian after the marriage. "I am, therefore, afraid that since he is still alive, though a retired military officer, he will disown me if I choose to become a Muslim. If he passes away before I do, I will become a Muslim." Interestingly in a follow up conversation with her, Seyram indicated that she has rescinded her plan of becoming a Muslim: "After you left, I picked interest in the subject and had a series of discussions on it with my pastor. He was categorical that Muslims and Christians don't worship the same God. I felt uncomfortable, but I have become convinced that Jesus is unique about matters of salvation. I will, therefore, not become a Muslim." Seyram had both 'engagement' and wedding, and was given, *inter alia*, the Bible by her Muslim husband as contingent prestation. She could not have the wedding at the Assemblies of God but had it at a charismatic church, where the pastor accepted to officiate.

Fauzia is a Tijaniyyah, and a university student.<sup>51</sup> She has dated three different Christian men since she finished senior high school. She has, however, no plans of converting to Christianity. As she narrated:

I have dated three Christian guys. I agreed to date them because, initially, they appeared to be liberal about their Christian faith. I was, therefore, hopeful that I could convert them to Islam. In fact, one of them stopped going to church for a while, but later started going to church seriously. I later felt that there was no way I could convert him. Eventually, I had to break up with him. Now, I still meet nice Christian guys, but my mind is made up already. I can't marry a non-Muslim.

Concerning Muslim and Christian marriages, she said:

Christians and Muslims worship the same God. The difference is the teaching about Jesus Christ. We Muslims believe that Jesus is only a prophet. But Christians think of him as God. I must confess that my resolve to marry only a Muslim man was as a result of a singles program I attended, which was organized by one of our Islamic sheikhs. He made it clear that a Muslim woman risks losing her faith if she marries a Christian man. That was the end of my relationship with Christian guys.

The ring also features prominently in both Christian and Muslim marriages. In Christian marriage ritual the ring symbolizes fidelity, earthly perpetuity, and the bond of marital union. But this notion of a marriage covenant does not exist in Islam. As Sheikh Osman Bari explains, "In our religion, marriage is a social contract that admits the

institution as human institution, even as it is divine institution. Our religion, therefore, admits that problems which might undermine the continuity of the marriage could besiege the marriage. It makes it possible for either of the partners to call for the dissolution of the marriage, if the marriage becomes unworkable." According to the Christian respondents, divorce is hardly allowed in their churches and this is symbolically expressed in the round shape of the ring, which connotes earthly perpetuity of marriage. The only instance divorce is allowed is marital infidelity on the part of one of the spouses. It is worthy to note that the ring does not convey the same social implication and marriage dissolubility is not strictly connected to marital infidelity among Muslims. According to Muslim respondents, as a social contract any violation of any of the terms of marriage contract can result in the dissolution of the marriage. A Muslim man who can afford it can have as many as four wives simultaneously. When Seyram's husband, Issaka, who had a wedding at the church, was asked about his understanding of the Christian vow and the ring and the taking of additional wife he indicated that, "the vow or ring did not make me a Muslim."<sup>52</sup> He believed he was not bound by the monogamous logic and social implication of the Christian vow and ring.

Indeed as Janson and Meyer indicate, interfaith marriages have been points of conversion between Muslims and Christians.<sup>53</sup> It is apparent in this study however that it is mostly female Christians who bear the onus of deciding whether or not to convert for the purpose of marriage. Those who take the option of becoming Muslim make such a choice because they believe there is no fundamental difference between Christian and Islamic values. They may however suffer social ostracism because of their decision to marry a Muslim or convert from the religion of their parents to the religion of their spouse. Different Christian and Muslim groups have varied dispositions towards interfaith marriages but devotees also have their own subjective understandings.

### **The Future of Interfaith Marriages in Zongo Communities**

In a religiously pluralistic world, Muslims scholars are bitterly divided over whether Muslim women, like their male counterparts, should have the same freedom to choose their spouse. Muslim traditionalists/conservatives insist that the prohibition of interfaith marriage should be upheld, while modernist/liberalists argue for an interpretation of Qur'anic verse (5:5) that makes it possible for women to freely choose their spouse.<sup>54</sup> Contemporary exegetes are thus saying that the Qur'an does allow all Muslims to contract marriage with Christians and only prohibit them from marrying unbelievers. In other words, Muslim women should be permitted to marry Christian men.<sup>55</sup>

In discussing the possibility of altering current positions on interfaith marriages to harmonize with contemporary society, Sheikh Osman Bari argues that social changes must be judged in light of the Qur'an and the practices of Mohammed and not the other way around: "In Islam, there is no give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God. The Qur'an and the Sunnah provide a comprehensive guidance to the Muslim." When asked whether it is acceptable for a Muslim woman to marry a Christian if he allows her to practice Islam, Sheikh Osman Bari argued that, "it cannot be guaranteed that the Christian man would keep this promise to the end. There is always the temptation that the man would use that as a bait to get to marry the Muslim woman, after which the woman will be compelled to become a Christian." According to Elder Batsher, a Pentecostal leader, "the practice of *twetuba* cannot be allowed either among Muslims or Christians. As

an Elder, it is unacceptable to me for a Muslim to decide to convert to Christianity in order to marry a Christian lady or vice versa. For me, such *twetuba* has no future. After the marriage, the Muslim or Christian man will revert to his religion.”<sup>56</sup> In a conversation with Mariam, a Pentecostal born to an Ahlu Sunna father and a Pentecostal mother, she summed the whole matter up by arguing that the issue is not so much about the woman having the freedom to pray as a Muslim or a Christian. “The issue is largely based on the religion of the children. It is the child who is important in the marriage.”<sup>57</sup>

## Conclusion

Cosmopolitanism, liberal democracy, globalization and other related factors have advanced and sustained religious pluralism and interfaith marriages. However, most Muslim and Christian theologians are very skeptical of the prospect of interfaith marriage relationships. The major challenge to such marriages is the assumption that their theologies are mutually exclusive and irreconcilable. Whereas it is possible for a person to be a Christian or a Muslim and practice an African traditional religion simultaneously—although not encouraged by their respective leaders—it is impossible for a person to be a Christian and a Muslim simultaneously. But much as this is so, it is equally true that the lived experiences in Zongo communities in Accra and in Ghana generally tend to significantly mediate the extent to which religious differences could fracture interfaith relations. In addition to exercising faith in their religions, religious people in Zongo communities tend to be very pragmatic with their expressions of faith, particularly when it comes to interfaith marriages and other relationships. For many of our respondents, ethnicity, neighborliness and sometimes symmetric political affiliation tend to blunt the entrenched divisiveness embedded in the two theologies during their day to day relationships. In other words, Zongo communities have lived religious experiences that in some ways potentially curtail religious extremist tendencies and which in the long run perhaps encourage interfaith marriages.

Again, the cordial and peaceful coexistence between Muslims and Christians in Zongo communities in Accra is historically well documented. However, this does not obscure their differences. Their theological and cultural differences are profound in substance or content. In other words, it is not the theological or cultural similarities but the entrenched differences that matter. Although there have been crossings of boundaries in the expression of religion in Zongo communities, the attitude and concern of family members and others to marriage and possible conversion of a prospective couple to the other’s religion, and where the religion of the offspring is seen as most important, the possibility of more frequent and tolerated interfaith marriages in Accra’s Zongo communities seems improbable. We observe in this study that interfaith marriages between mainline Muslims and Christians in Zongo communities in Accra, although a social fact today, are characterized by differences and would continue to encounter many obstacles.

## Notes

1 Connolly 2009; Islam 2014; Larson and Munro 1990; Nakaterogga-Kisekka 1975.

2 Abraham 1962.

3 Ntewusu 2011.

4 Kleingeld and Brown 2014; Delanty and Močnik 2018.

5 Ake 1996; Abrahamsen 2000; Sandbrook 2000.

- 6 Budiman 2008.
- 7 Soares 2006.
- 8 Soares 2006.
- 9 Soares 2006.
- 10 Janson and Meyer 2016, p. 616.
- 11 Larkin and Meyer 2006, pp. 278-79.
- 12 Peel, 2016, p.192.
- 13 Peel 2016, p.193.
- 14 Peel 2016, p.195.
- 15 The reasons for this development of adherents crisscrossing each other's religious boundaries this paper proposes are twofold. First, Ghana's religious plural status reifies one's freedom to choose one's own religion. While conservative Muslim and Christian leaders may frown on religious conversion, in Ghana they lack the political power to enforce their normative teachings against inter-faith marriages. Consequently, unlike some Islamic countries, where the Sharia disallows a Muslim from converting to Christianity or any other religion, freedom of religion, enforced by Ghana's 1992 constitution, protects individuals from the usual violence that religious converts in some jurisdictions are subjected to. Second, the religious plurality of Ghana's religious economy also encourages individuality and subjectivity. While individuals seek collective identity and support from their religious groups, they also bring their subjectivity to bear in their engagement with new religions. This subjectivity includes how individuals choose their marriage partners and their decision to convert or remain in their natal religion. The relationship between Muslims and Christians, in this sense, in Ghana seems to challenge the meta-narrative that Christians and Muslims cannot interact with each other, beyond doctrinal differences. Indeed in some cases, African tapestry of religion has witnessed the fusion of elements from Islam and Christianity into a distinct religious tradition, as were the cases of Chrislam in Nigeria (Janson 2016) and Zetaheal in Ghana (Atiemo 2003).
- 16 Ghana Statistical Service 2014a.
- 17 Ghana Statistical Service 2014b.
- 18 Wilks 1962.
- 19 Levtzion 1968.
- 20 Braimah 1976.
- 21 De-Valera, Botchway & Mustapha 2017.
- 22 Pontzen 2017.
- 23 Schildkrout 1970.
- 24 De-Valera, Botchway & Mustapha 2017.
- 25 De-Valera, Botchway & Mustapha 2017.
- 26 Azumah 2001.
- 27 Lapidus 2012.
- 28 Owusu-Ansah 1983.
- 29 The only difference is that Christians and Muslims hardly attend the burial rites at the cemetery of each other.
- 30 Ata and Morrison 2005.
- 31 Al Jazeera 2017. Examples of Islamic scholars who are retheologizing to rationalize Muslim women marry non-Muslim men include, but not limited to the following: Khaled Abou El Fadl, Khaleel Mohammad, Asma Lamrabet, and Al Ajami.

- 32 Sheikh Osman Bari is a leading Ghanaian Muslim scholar. He has published two important books on Islam, *A Comprehensive History of Muslims and Religion in Ghana*, and *The Holistic History of Islam in the Western and the Central Africa*. Interviewed on 20th May, 2017 at his residence at Lapaz.
- 33 Abdalati 1975.
- 34 Maulvi Bilal Ahmed is the Ahmadiyya missionary in charge of Greater Accra. He was interviewed on 20th August 2017 at the TI Ahmadiyya School at Ashongman.
- 35 Bishop Ben Salleh is a Bishop of Action Chapel Church International, and the head Bishop of the Adenta branch of the church. He is currently a PhD candidate at Birmingham University, UK. He was interviewed 19th May 2017.
- 36 Elder Michael Kofi Andoh is the head of the Family Ministries at the Legon SDA Church. Interviewed 20th May 2017.
- 37 Rev. Dr. Rockeybell Adatura is a Ghanaian Christian apologist. He trained in the USA and travels extensively to defend the Christian faith. He is a scholar of both Arabic and the Biblical languages.
- 38 Bishop Ben Salleh was interviewed on 19th May 2017.
- 39 Elder Andoh was interviewed on 20th May 2017.
- 40 Interview with Labaran, 22nd May 2017. Aside the key respondents, the other persons have their names changed for the sake of anonymity.
- 41 Sheikh Osman Bari was interviewed on 20th May 2017 at his residence at Lapaz.
- 42 Maulvi Bilal Ahmed was interviewed on 20th August 2017 at the TI Ahmadiyya School at Ashongman.
- 43 Abiba was first interviewed on 16th May 2017, and later 21st July, 2017.
- 44 Musiriatu was interviewed on 19th May 2017.
- 45 Zerkia was interviewed on 19th August 2017.
- 46 Shamsudeen was interviewed on 5th May 2017.
- 47 Stella was interviewed on 2nd May 2017.
- 48 Haruna was interviewed on May 6 2017.
- 49 Doris was interviewed on 2nd May 2017.
- 50 Seyram was interviewed on 19th May 2017.
- 51 Fauzia was interviewed on 12th May 2017.
- 52 Issaka was interviewed on 19th May 2017.
- 53 Janson and Meyer 2016.
- 54 Leeman 2009.
- 55 Buisson 2017. See for example writings of Asma Barlas, Kussay Fakhir Al-Mousawi, Riffat Hassan, Asma Lamrabet, Amina Wadud, Amel Grami, Khaleel Mohammed, Abdel Kader Merabet and many others.
- 56 Elder Ebenezer Tawiah Batsher is an Elder of the Apostolic Church, Ghana. *Twetuba* is contraction of two words, "Twe" in Twi language means vagina and "tuba" in Hausa means conversion. Thus, *Twetuba* is used to refer to a conversion that is based on commitment to sex not to religion.
- 57 Mariam was interviewed on 14th June 2017.

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