Muslim Empowerment in Ghana

Islam in Africa

VOLUME 26

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Muslim Empowerment in Ghana

Analysing the Spectrum of Muslim Social Mobilization during the Internet Age

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BRILL

LEIDEN | BOSTON

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Weiss, Holger, author.
Title: Muslim empowerment in Ghana : analysing the spectrum of Muslim social mobilization during the Internet age / by Holger Weiss.
Description: Leiden ; Boston : Brill, [2024] | Series: Islam in Africa, 1570–3754 ; volume 26 | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2024022544 (print) | LCCN 2024022545 (ebook) | ISBN 9789004697119 (hardback ; alk. paper) | ISBN 9789004699267 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Muslims–Ghana. | Non-governmental organizations–Ghana. | Faith-based community organizing–Ghana. | Faith-based human services–Ghana. | Social media–Religious aspects–Islam.
Classification: LCC BP64.G4 W45 2024 (print) | LCC BP64.G4 (ebook) | DDC 361.7088/29709667–dc23/eng/20240604
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024022544
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024022545

Typeface for the Latin, Greek, and Cyrillic scripts: "Brill". See and download: brill.com/brill-typeface.

ISSN 1570-3754
ISBN 978-90-04-69711-9 (hardback)
ISBN 978-90-04-69926-7 (e-book)
DOI 10.1163/9789004699267

This book is printed on acid-free paper and produced in a sustainable manner.

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Preface

This book closes my Research Council of Finland and Finnish Society of Sciences and Letters funded research project *Muslim Empowerment in Ghana*. While the book sets the end of my journey, its beginning is more difficult to establish as it has at least three starting points. One was in 2015 when I was guest professor at Dalarna University in Sweden. I had already published several books on the history of Muslims and *zakat* in Ghana but had left these topics and conducted research on global history. However, a possibility to return to investigate *zakat* opened when my colleague Torsten Hylén suggested launching a joint research project. Although our joint project never materialized, this book is the result of our aspirations.

The other starting point of the book was a workshop on Muslim NGOs and the provision of social welfare in Africa organized by Franz Kogelmann and myself at the Institute of African Studies in Bayreuth, Germany, in November 2017. Our workshop resulted in an anthology, containing two chapters by myself outlining the international discussions on *zakat* as a tool for poverty alleviation as well as the discourses on *zakat* by Muslim scholars in Ghana.[1] The two texts served as the background for the present book.

The third starting point of the book was an invitation by Yunus Dumbe to meet Muslim scholars in Kumasi in February 2017. Having outlined the discourse on poverty and *zakat* in Ghana during the early years of the twenty-first century as well as occasionally updating myself on the situation in Ghana since then, I was aware that some novel openings had occurred since I had published my books. One of the most intriguing ones was the establishment of the Zakat and Sadaqa Trust Fund in 2010. After lengthy discussions with Haji Mumuni Sulemana (Haji Sulley), my close associate, friend and mentor during my earlier fieldworks in Ghana, I realized that my texts had become accounts of the past. I therefore decided to update my investigation on *zakat* discourses and outlined together with Yunus Dumbe and Haji Sulley a new approach to interact with Muslim scholars and activists, resulting in the above-mentioned Research Council of Finland research project.

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1 Holger Weiss, "Muslim NGOs, *Zakat* and the Provision of Social Welfare in Sub-Saharan Africa: An Introduction," in *Muslim Faith-Based Organizations and Social Welfare in Africa*, ed. Holger Weiss (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020), 1–38; Holger Weiss, "Discourses on *Zakat* and Its Implementation in Contemporary Ghana," in *Muslim Faith-Based Organizations and Social Welfare in Africa*, ed. Holger Weiss (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020), 273–303.

My research started by tracing the discourses on poverty and *zakat* among Muslims in Ghana on the internet and in Ghanaian online newspapers. Soon the search revealed a multitude of discourses and engagements, and I thus extended my fieldwork and discussions to include stakeholders of Muslim NGOs. As a result, I amassed a wealth of information on local, regional, national and international Muslim charities and organisations in Ghana, on *sadaqa* and *infaq*, Muslim empowerment, and various attempts and debates on introducing Islamic banking, *waqf* and Islamic microfinance in Ghana. This turned out to be a highly interesting topic as very little had hitherto been written about their activities. I therefore decided to publish two "interim" publications on the topic intended for a local readership in Ghana, namely *Zakat in Ghana: A Tool for the Empowerment of the Muslim Community* (2021) and *Moving Mountains: Muslim NGOs in Ghana* (2022). The two volumes served as draft version for the current publication; I distributed them to Muslim scholars and activists during my fieldwork in October 2022. The comments I have received in addition to extensive updates, not least by adding information on about 250 NGOs to the present volume, resulted in a revised and extensively rewritten version of the two earlier texts merged into a single book.

Interviews, newspaper reports and social media constitute the main categories of sources for tracing the discourse on *zakat* and the activities of Muslim NGOs in Ghana. The main differences between the various categories of sources consulted during my investigations two decades ago and those for my current one were the geographical outreach of my fieldwork in Ghana and the focussed use of social media. The backdrop for my recent round of fieldwork were interviews I conducted with imams and Muslim scholars in Tamale, Yendi, Salaga and Accra from 1999 to 2005. The initial interviews were semi-structured, containing a fixed list of questions on *zakat*, *sadaqa* and poverty, and served as the baseline for my discussions.[2] However, I soon realised that I gained more information from my informants when I posed them open questions, and they elaborated on and provided a deeper analysis on the topic by themselves. The result was a scholarly engagement where the Muslim scholars, mostly senior to me, set the terms of interaction while I listened to their answers and elaborations on the topic. This method proved to be a rather effect-

2 Holger Weiss, Hajj Mumuni Sulemana, Afa Razaq Taufeeq Abdallah, eds., *Zakât in Northern Ghana. Field Notes 1. Interviews conducted during January and February 2000* (Helsinki: Department for African Studies, 2001); "Appendix 1. Questionnaire for Interviews with Muslim Scholars in Northern Ghana January–February 2000," in Holger Weiss, *Begging and Almsgiving in Ghana: Muslim Positions towards Poverty and Distress* (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2007), 160.

ive one as the Muslim scholars articulated and addressed issues that were of importance for themselves.

Therefore, I decided to outline subsequent interviews for further investigations in a similar way, namely as open-ended questions in a semi-structured manner. Together with Yunus Dumbe, I interacted with scholars from Sunni Muslim communities, including the Tijaniyya and the Salafiyya, and imams connected to neither of these two groups. Due to my academic engagement at my home university in Finland, I had to restrict the periods of my fieldwork to two-week intensive interaction each time I was able to travel to Ghana (February 2017, December 2017, September 2018, April 2019, and December 2019). By the end of 2019, I had met over fifty scholars and Muslim activists in six locations, namely Accra, Ejura, Hamile, Kumasi, Tamale and Wa.

COVID-19 spoilt my plans of conducting fieldwork in Ghana in 2020 or 2021, and I decided to recast my original plans and solely concentrate on detecting and identifying Ghanaian Muslim NGOs on social media. I had already traced some of them on Facebook by 2019 but only grasped the potentials of a (almost) limitless archive when I started to work systematically with the internet from 2020 to 2022. Finally, I managed to return to Ghana in October 2022 to follow-up on the activities of Muslim NGOs. Here, I concentrated my fieldwork to Accra and Kumasi and interacted with 24 founders and activists of some of the organisations, associations and youth clubs whose activities I had traced on social media and through newspaper reports.

In conducting the interviews, I deliberately applied the old-fashioned way of making handwritten notes in my field diary instead of recording a session. The reason for doing so was practical: I conducted all of the interviews together with a local person whom the interviewees knew in person, namely Yunus Dumbe (in Accra, Kumasi, Ejura, Hamile and Wa), Mohammad Damba (in Wa), Haji Sullemana Mumuni (in Accra) and Afa Razaq Taufeeq Abdallah (in Tamale). They usually also translated the questions and answers in Hausa, Dagbani and Sisaal.

Each interview session began with introductions. I would gift copies of my earlier books to the interviewee and then asked for permission to make notes on our discussions. I made most of my notes in English, sometimes in Swedish (my mother tongue), when I needed to remind myself of additional information during the interview. The positive effect of my chosen method was that my field diary contains already condensed versions of the elaborations of scholars and activists that I could use in my manuscript. The negative side of it is that the oral raw material and original voices of the interviewees were lost.

The COVID-19 pandemic hampered me from conducting follow-up interviews in autumn 2020 to finish the present manuscript. Hence, Yunus Dumbe

kindly met some of the scholars I had interviewed in Wa (Haji Salifu) and Ejura (Malam Aminu Bamba) and conducted interviews with them based on a written questionnaire I sent to him in advance. He recorded, translated/transcribed the interviews, enabling me to integrate them into the present manuscript. In addition, he contacted Hajia Safia Salifu and interacted with her about some anonymous green collection boxes for *zakat* and *sadaqa* with only a phone and postbox number written on it that I had spotted in Nima in October 2022.

Desk research from 2017 to 2019 revealed that few NGOs had created a homepage and most of them had not updated it for years. Although homepages provide valuable information on the objectives, mission, and vision and, sometimes, projects and programmes of an organisation, it is more of a historical document, a flyer or leaflet outlining the intentions of an organisation. Only in a few cases, a homepage outlines the past and present activities of an organisation. Nevertheless, some organisations do post pictures and progress reports on their homepages, adding to the historical documentation available for analysing their activities.

Nevertheless, a systematic search on Facebook showed that Ghanaian Muslim NGOs who previously had started publishing a homepage or a website had moved their communication to a Facebook page. Most, if not all, third generation NGOs only used Facebook as their tool for disseminating calls and orchestrating campaigns. Some also used their Facebook pages for progress and achievement reporting or for publishing statements on accounts or lists of donors. From the historian's perspective, Facebook thus presents as a valuable alternative source for information that would otherwise rarely be collected and stored in the national or regional archives in Ghana: flyers, leaflets, calls, sermons, videos, poems, personal reflections, official statements, to mention a few.

Facebook, however, poses several challenges to information search, not least identifying Muslim NGOs as there exists no directory of them in Ghana and there is no clearcut definition of how to identify a Muslim NGO as discussed in Chapter 1.2. An 'open end' and holistic solution to this challenge is using different keywords and combinations of them (e.g.: 'Muslim', 'Islamic', 'NGO', 'Ghana', 'Zongo', 'women', 'youth', etc). Another approach involves keying in the names of those NGOs already identified in a search engine such as Google. Universal resource locators (URLs) of hyperlinks posted on the Facebook pages of some identified groups also provide snowball references to other associations, foundations and NGOs. These URLs also give pointers to new keywords or a combination of keywords in searching for relevant information on the internet. The Facebook accounts of the myriads of youth, Zongo and women associations and groups are sources to identify and trace secular Muslim NGOs or

the broadly defined category of Muslim NGOs (for a discussion on the framework used in this study, see Chapter 1.1). These information search approaches yielded a database of information on 683 narrowly and broadly defined Muslim NGOs (listed in Appendix) by December 2023.[3] Notwithstanding, about 60 of the associations, clubs, foundations, movements and organisations listed in my database could not be identified given the limitations of remote research, such as technological and geographical barriers. None of the unidentified ones has left any traces on the internet, do not use social media, or have ceased activities.

Information provided on Facebook is both quantitative and qualitative. Typically, quantitative data from a Facebook account comprises numerical information about the date an account was set up, how many followers it has, and the last update or posting date. A potential limitation of such data is that it does not reveal the date of the establishment of a group or an organisation (although sometimes one finds information about this among the first postings), how many members the group has or when it ceased to be active. Qualitative data, however, hints about an organisation's outreach, potential, and activities. Less than 100 followers typically indicate a rather finite outreach and hence a limited potential to gather support or donations from donors; a Facebook account with thousands of followers indicates the opposite. Although the pages do (usually) do not reveal the location of followers of a Facebook account, social media transgresses national borders and NGOs of the 'Facebook generation' operate simultaneously on different scales and locations. Their space, in other words, is multi-scalar and trans-locational compared to the NGOs of the first and second generations who relied on personal contacts and networks. Moreover, Facebook challenges the categorisation between formal organisations and informal groups, especially when an informal group publishes an open call for a clean-up rally or a food and cash donation campaign in support of a hospital, orphanage or prison on its Facebook account.

The fast changes in the internet landscape is the reason for including Facebook as a main source of information on Muslim scholars and NGOs in Ghana. Many Ghanaian Muslim NGOs originally started by establishing homepages but soon ceased to update them. Therefore, some of the homepages contained obsolete information and material (but important for a historian like me interested in tracing changes and ruptures). Some homepages I consulted during my previous research no longer existed, some of them have updated versions since I consulted them in 2017; a few of them have updated 2022/2023-versions.

3 The database for the *Moving Mountains* (2022) book contained information on about 430 Muslim NGOs.

However, my research archive includes printed and digital copies of the various homepages I had checked and consulted during my previous and present investigations. These copies make up a corpus of sources for tracing the emergence and content of Muslim empowerment in Ghana.

Similar to any written announcement and declaration, homepages are important sources for tracing public statements of Muslim NGOs. Homepages are, in a sense, public domains and open sources as they present an organisation, its vision and mission, and its board and public activities. Some organisations had also published official documents, reports and statements. I downloaded material I came across each time to update my research archive with the latest information on a homepage. A newer version of a homepage does not necessarily contain the same information or the same uploaded materials as the previous one. In addition, some homepages contained valuable information on the local, national and international networks of organisations listed as their partners.

However, there are downsides to depend on homepages for official and updated information or continuous communication. All NGOs that had a homepage some five years ago had moved their public and open communication to their Facebook accounts. As my investigation is focusing on the public discourse on the provision of social welfare in Ghana, Facebook and WhatsApp accounts restricted for members were of little interest as they are, per definition, closed and non-public domains.

Social media has become the main tool for Ghanaian Muslim organisations to reach out to their members, potential supporters, and local/national/international donors. In essence, if an organisation has no presence on social media, it is unseen and 'dead' as it is limited to only a few means of communicating its existence to anyone outside the locality of its activities. Social media, therefore, marks a major breakthrough on the social landscape of Muslim activism in Ghana. Any Muslim NGO established since 2015 operates a variety of digital platforms for communication. In fact, all Muslim NGOs established since 2015 immediately launched an online presence, most of them on Facebook, as will be outlined and discussed in Chapter 1.6.

Social media has also changed the communication landscape of Muslim scholars in Ghana. While none had a Facebook account before 2015, many imams and scholars nowadays use social media to disseminate their sermons and religious messages. Sermons and calls are posted as written comments/texts or videotaped recordings in English or local languages (e.g. Hausa) and Arabic. Most of their Facebook accounts are open and accessible without a need to register; some accounts have thousands of followers, see further Chapter 1.6.3. The number of followers is not necessarily equivalent to the

absolute number of adherents and supporters of an imam in a specific locality in Ghana or the members of a given community; the number of followers rather indicates the relative impact of the imam, scholar or religious community/organisation. Arguably, (some of the larger) virtual communities contain followers outside Ghana, although this observation needs further investigation.

Besides, postings on Facebook are valuable sources as they also (sometimes/generally) contain comments by followers. These, in turn, can give insights into the reaction to calls for *zakat*, *zakat al-fitr*, *sadaqa jariya* or other donations, as is demonstrated in Chapter 5. Additionally, some of these postings reveal the distribution of these donations, the target groups, and the activists' locations and activities. Taken together, the postings on Facebook constitute another corpus of source material that I have used in depicting and analysing the landscape of Muslim self-empowerment in Ghana.

However, tracing discourses on *zakat* and the activities of Muslim organisations on social media presents some challenges. One is obvious: not all Facebook accounts and no WhatsApp group are publicly accessible; hence, I focused only on the open ones. Another challenge for a historian interested in recording and analysing the changing discourses and the landscapes of activities is social media's unstable condition, as observed with the homepages above. Social media is, per definition, fluid and transformative, being constantly updated and older postings might not necessarily be publicly visible anymore.

Searching for the Facebook account of a specific group can be arduous as the group or organisation sometimes used a different spelling of its name on Facebook (and would therefore not be listed in search results from Google); some also used the Arabic version of Facebook (this is especially the case of some Salafi organisations). Finally, the expansion of social media over the last decade and the launching of new platforms such as Instagram, Tiktok, Twitter (X) and WhatsApp opens up yet another potential digital space worth investigating. Nevertheless, I decided to exclude them in the current investigation.

The third category of sources for tracing Muslim empowerment are (online) Ghanaian newspapers. In contrast to homepages and social media, i.e., domains that Muslim scholars and activists control, newspapers contain public announcements and expressions by Muslims that are filtered and reproduced by a journalist or a news agency. Sometimes news reports contain quotes from Muslims although they rarely reproduce original texts. However, the news landscape in Ghana has undergone profound changes during the last decades, directly linked with the accessibility to the internet and the establishment of Muslim news corporations and online radio and TV stations. Texts and com-

ments disseminated online through these means constitute a valuable corpus for outlining and analysing the width and breadth of the activities of Muslim NGOs as well as *zakat* discourses in contemporary Ghana.

The various categories of primary sources enabled me to chronicle and analyse the changing landscape and space of Muslim NGOs in contemporary Ghana. Chapter 1 serves as a backdrop and establishes the fundament of the present investigation, outlining the gradual marginalisation of Muslims in Ghana since independence 1957 and their attempts to tackle this process through self-representation and self-empowerment through capacity building since the 1990s. While representative bodies and councils serve as their mouthpiece in interacting with the Ghanaian state at large, a myriad of Muslim social movements have since then become part of Ghanaian civil society. Moreover, an ever-increasing number of Muslim associations, movements, union bodies, and thinktanks mark the contemporary Muslim landscape. As an outcome, I have identified three generations of Muslim NGOs, pointing to an ever-increasing NGO-isation of the Muslim sphere in Ghana, paralleling similar processes throughout sub-Saharan Africa. The most marked phenomenon of this NGO-isation is the extensive usage of social media by associations, clubs, foundations, and organisations; the chapter closes with a quantitative analysis of Muslim NGOs on Facebook.

The next three chapters outlines the contours of the Muslim NGO landscape in contemporary Ghana. Chapter 2 introduces some of the key Muslim activists and philanthropists, ranging from Muslim scholars to business entrepreneurs, politicians, celebrities and social media influencers. Especially the two latter ones are products of the internet age. A new phenomenon is the mushrooming of youth organisations, being a marked phenomenon in the urban predominantly Muslim inhabited areas known as Zongo. The internet age, furthermore, has revolutionised social movement activism as social media transgresses locational and territorial borders and enables youth and other groups to link up with members, peers and sympathisers (almost) anywhere on the globe. An effect of this "globalisation" is the virtual explosion of non-Ghanaian Muslim charities and NGOs. By the early 2020s, Muslim NGOs from all continents except Latin America and the Caribbean are either directly or indirectly present (i.e., working through local NGOs) in Ghana.

Chapter 3 depicts Muslim faith-based humanitarian relief, such as providing food (Iftar and Qurban) and clothes during religious festivals, feeding orphans, widows and (the very amorphous/unspecified group of) needy persons, and prisons inmates. A new phenomenon on the Muslim landscape of philanthropism is the building of schools for persons with hearing and visual disabilities. In addition, the chapter traces campaigns and rallies by local Muslim NGOs and

youth movements to solicit *sadaqa* and donations for combined *daʿwa* (call to Islam) and humanitarian outreach to deprived Muslim rural communities, often (in recent) years combined with educational, mosque and water projects.

Chapter 4 introduces eight forms of community development spearheaded by Muslim NGOs, ranging from scholarship, sanitation and hygiene, health, clean water, to community centre and green environment programmes. Most ambitious of them is the construction of clinics and hospitals; the most innovative is the building of a school out of used plastic bottles. The last-mentioned project is also an example of the difficulty to define a Muslim NGO—the movement in charge of the project was founded by a young Muslima but the organisation is not religiously-oriented and site of the project is in a rural village with few if any Muslim inhabitants. I still decided to include the project in my presentation as it serves as an example of the large spectrum of Muslim activism in contemporary Ghana.

The final two chapters outline the contemporary discourses and activities on Islamic social finance as a tool for self-empowerment and capacity building. Chapter 5 identifies three discourses on *zakat* or mandatory almsgiving, namely the traditional, horizontal and informal one, and the two more recent ones, the instrumentalist and the institutionalist versions of vertical philanthropy. Chapter 6 outlines the (still unfulfilled) attempt to introduce Islamic banking in Ghana as well as the existing forms of Islamic investment, microfinance and *waqf* (pious endowments). Taken together, the two chapters point towards the limitations and potentials of institutionalised capacity building. The former one highlights the fluidity and short lifespan of these activities, especially when they lack support from an affluent group of members who are committed to long-term if not life-long continuous investments. The latter one recognises that the emergence of a Muslim middle-class and wage-earning formal sector households in addition to a few Muslim High-Net-Worth Individuals has in the last decade opened up a window for the self-empowerment of Muslim communities on a scale hitherto not known. In this sense, Muslim activists and NGOs have started to move mountains. In which way and to what extent they have been successful will be the objective of future studies.

Holger Weiss
Helsingfors, 15 December 2023

Acknowledgments

This book encapsulates insights from numerous Muslim scholars and activists as well as colleagues and friends I received over the past forty years. Some of the discussions were informal, others planned interviews. All of them have shaped my understanding of Muslim activism and intellectual reasoning on poverty alleviation and socio-economic improvements. Without these inputs, the book would never have been completed. I therefore offer special thanks to all interviewees mentioned in the text for sharing with me your time and wisdom.

Furthermore, I am very grateful for encouragement and stimulating discussions I have received from many friends and colleagues in Ghana, Finland, Germany, and Sweden, most notably Yunus Dumbe, Haji Mumuni Sulemana, Afa Razaq Tawheed, Haji Mohammad Damba, Sani Mohammed Sani aka Garba, Franz Kogelmann, Roman Loimeier, Rüdiger Seesemann and Torsten Hylén as well as the manuscript's two anonymous reviewers. My research on Muslim empowerment in Ghana would never have reached its final stage without your positive response and support. But most of all, I thank my wife Minna for companionship and encouragement.

I am also grateful to the Research Council of Finland and Finnish Society of Sciences and Letters for funding my fieldwork in Ghana, the editors of Brill's Islam in Africa series for accepting my manuscript, as well as Åbo Akademi University for funding the Open Access publication of the book.

Tables, Graphs and Figures

Tables

Graphs

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