

Conversion to Islam and the Promotion of 'Modern' Islamic Schools in Ghana

David E Skinner¹

¹ Santa Clara University, History, Santa Clara, USA

dskinner@scu.edu

Before the establishment of colonial administration in the Gold Coast Muslim merchants and scholars built permanent settlements and promoted the development of Islamic institutions and rituals throughout the hinterland. The schools created during this period were based on long-established patterns of education. Late in the 19th century local converts to Islam, influenced by British ideas of education, began to develop a new school system, often referred to as 'English/Arabic' education. These Fanti converts appealed to the colonial administration for financial assistance and for English teachers in order to educate Muslim students whose parents preferred not to send their children to Christian schools. The British, who had already begun to support Muslim schools for their African troops, acceded to these requests, and from these tentative efforts a process of education for Muslim converts began. This paper examines the gradual conversion of local Africans to Islam, the development of their organisations (such as *Ga Ittihadu Islamiyat*) to promote Islamic values, and the formation of schools to assist Muslim youths to compete in the English dominant colonial environment and throughout the 20th century. Muslim leaders have engaged directly with colonial administrators and with postcolonial governments in their efforts to extend educational opportunities and to promote their interests. With each change of government or regime the tendency has been the creation of Islamic organisations to obtain access to or favour with the new governors. Schooling also consists of missionary outreach, adult education and preparation for the *hajj*, *Ramadan*, and religious festivals. In a highly competitive environment disparate Islamic organisations vie for government recognition and for assistance from a variety of foreign governments and private actors who may contest the definition and the parameters of 'true' Islam. In the final analysis "religious schooling" is political and can contribute to instability and inhibit economic development. The problem to be resolved is how to coordinate and channel the energy and resources produced by religious schooling for the benefit of the broader society in which the educational institutions function.