

# ARTICLES

## Media and Religious Engagement: Shaykh Seebaway Zakaria and Ghanaian Broadcasting Media

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### Introduction

Media are transitional agencies, instruments, or channels used as means of communication. A 'medium' of a certain kind, whether personal, spiritual or technological, is needed in every religion. Media create a connection between the present

and the absent, or between the visibly present and the invisibly present, or between the physical and the spiritual. Religious media connect first, the physical and the spiritual world and, second, the individual person and the religious community.<sup>1</sup>

Media are the site of religious experiences and communication.<sup>2</sup> Media are as old as religion itself, therefore an integral part of religion. As religion, media change with time. Newly discovered media either replace or complement the old ones.<sup>3</sup> The recent global changes in communication media, from face-to-face to electronic, have influenced Muslims and their religious institutions to respond to these new changes. Many Ghanaian Muslim scholars, likewise, are changing their religious engagements from face-to-face to broadcasting media.

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The change started back in 1943, when Ghana Radio started broadcasting in local languages. Muslim scholars began to feature in some religious programmes that were broadcast mostly by the Hausa section of GBC Radio 2. In the late 1960s, the scholars also started their activities in television with the introduction of Ghana Television (GTV). However, the Ghanaian Muslim scholars' engagement with Ghanaian airwaves became prominent only from 1996, when the media sector was liberalized. Thus, an increasing number of Muslims in Ghana (both scholars and their followers) have embraced this opportunity by using the new media technologies as sources and resources of religious knowledge. Many Muslim scholars today take their messages to radio and television channels in order to reach wider audiences which would never have been reached by the conventional method of face-to-face communication that applied two decades earlier. This paper presents a biographical sketch of Shaykh Seebaway Zakaria, one of the prominent Muslim scholars on the Ghanaian airwaves, to highlight

the intertwining nature of media and religion, and to illustrate how changes in the media affect the religious engagements of Muslim scholars.

### Early Media Engagement (1980-1992)

Shaykh Seebaway Zakaria has contributed greatly towards the development and transmission of Islamic knowledge through the production of Muslim programmes on the Ghanaian airwaves. He was born in the town of Tamale, in northern Ghana, in the mid-1950s. He had his basic education in his hometown of Tamale, and had his high school education at Nafongo, a town in the Upper Region of Ghana. While in Tamale, he attended Ambariyyah Islamic School where many teachers taught him Islamic sciences. He then moved to Accra in the 1970s, where he attended the University of Ghana. He was awarded a diploma in the study of religion, and later a degree in Arabic and Philosophy, followed by a Master's degree in African studies from the same university. He was a veteran teacher. He started teaching at primary school in 1977, and later taught at a secondary school. He progressed to the Islamic University College, Ghana, in 1990 and taught there for eleven years where he served as Head of the Department of Religious Studies. Islamic University College, Ghana, is an Iranian-sponsored institution established in 1988, as a training institute for Islamic Theology. It was granted provisional accreditation as a University in 2001 followed by final accreditation in 2002. Shaykh Zakaria left the Islamic University College for Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, in June 2011, where he continued his career as a lecturer at the Department of Religious Studies.

Shaykh Zakaria started his active religious engagement when he relocated to Accra in the late 1970s. During his school years, he became an imam, a preacher and teacher. He rose from an acting imam to full imam at the University of Ghana. He started by leading prayers whenever the imam was not available. He preached to congregations comprising mostly fellow students every time he led prayers. At that time, GBC Radio, the only radio corporation in the country, was broadcasting religious programmes on the channel GBC Radio 2. There was a thirty-

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minute Muslim religious talk programme on that channel every Friday morning. In 1980, the producer of that Muslim programme, Alhaji Malik Mumini, recognized Shaykh Zakaria's ability and started to invite him onto the programme. It was a recorded programme, so he went to the studio every Thursday for the recording, which was broadcast every Friday morning. He participated in that programme for many years before he started to appear on GTV which was also the only television station in the country at that time. He started appearing on a programme called *Aqeedah*. This lasted for an hour, and the producer and presenter requested the invited guests to speak about various Islamic topics. As in the case of GBC Radio 2, *Aqeedah* was also a recorded programme. The producer gave Shaykh Zakaria in advance a synopsis of every programme in which he was going to appear, so that he could prepare. He went to the station at a particular time for recording and the programme was broadcast at another time.

His continuous religious engagement with the state-owned broadcasting media over a long period influenced him to establish his own religious newspaper called *The Humanitarian*. His reason for establishing that newspaper was to reach out to the Muslim

youth. He felt that there were many things he wanted to communicate to the youth which he could not do in his face-to-face engagements. One of the shortcomings of modern media is that they are capital intensive. Shaykh Zakaria stated that although the paper was not meant for profit and that its purpose was only to reach out to the Muslim community, he needed some sponsorship to cater for the cost of production. Unluckily, Zakaria's newspaper venture did not last because of what he described as lack of sponsorship. After some time, during which publication was irregular, he finally shut down *The Humanitarian*.

### The Growth of Religious Media (1992-2012)

Ghana witnessed very important democratic reforms between 1992 and 1996. The country moved to democracy in 1992, and that facilitated the deregulation of media. As a result, Ghana witnessed the proliferation of both GBC and private FM radio

and television channels across the country. By 2008, the National Communications Authority (NCA) had granted authorization licenses to approximately 237 private broadcasters, with about seventy per cent (166) of these actually being in operation.<sup>4</sup> This wave of media change, particularly the deregulation of broadcasting media, affected further Shaykh Zakaria's religious engagements. He not only appeared more often in the ever-increasing number of radio and television stations, but also focused more on these media as his main method of religious engagement. In addition to featuring frequently in several radio and television stations along other scholars, he was also committed to producing Islamic programmes for TV broadcast at personal level. For instance, between 1996 and 2011, he worked with many radio and television stations on the issue of how to develop their Muslim programmes. In 1997, when many private broadcasting media were established, Shaykh Zakaria personally developed a TV concept to be known as *Children's World*. This was a children's programme in which he taught selected children about the recitation and memorization of Quranic verses, hadith and their meaning in English and Islamic songs. There was also a story time; here stories of prophets and other pious people with moral lessons were narrated. First, a child would read a verse from the Qur'an or a hadith, and the other children would then comment about its importance and lessons. The aim, according to Shaykh Zakaria, was to "make the children conscious of their religion and be proud of themselves as Muslims."<sup>5</sup> He was supported by Talal Fatah who was the owner of Metropolitan Television, popularly known as Metro TV in Accra. They rehearsed and recorded the programme, which was then edited and broadcast on television for other children at home to watch.

As a regular TV watcher, Shaykh Zakaria discovered how, in the last few years, 'reality TV shows' were attracting an increasing audience across the globe. He therefore decided to write and produce a Muslim reality show known as *an-Nujum* (The Stars), imitating a popular reality shown on satellite TV stations. *An-Nujum* features various activities for Muslim youth, competing in various fields such as Quranic recitations, cooking

competitions for girls, Muslim's home management, and various trade craft and professions such as tailoring and journalism. In this show, several contestants are selected and eliminated in turn until the 'Stars' emerge at the end. Shaykh Zakaria claims to have personally and painstakingly sourced all the resources required for this production with the aim of being able to fund the broadcast of the programme on TV3 in Accra.

Shaykh Zakaria also wrote many scripts for children's plays which GTV and Metro TV produced and broadcast for Muslim children during *Eid* celebrations. One example of such script was a play about the conversion of Caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab. He produced Muslim movies that aimed at encouraging behavioural changes among youths. For instance, there was a movie he named *The Way Forward* and he produced it to show how Ghanaian Muslims could address their difficulties. Shaykh Zakaria also made live commentaries for TV3 in Accra, from the prayer ground, during Muslim Eid celebrations. While live pictures of the events at the prayer ground were being broadcast, Zakaria explained to viewers about the rites that were being performed. He answered questions asked by an interviewer regarding those rites. Shaykh Zakaria also presented a live sermon known as *al-Khutbah* every Friday on TV3. His aim was similar to that of a normal sermon given during weekly Friday congregations in mosques. However, he was no longer setting the agenda for Muslims from the

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mosque pulpit but from inside a television studio. In the past, Shaykh Zakaria was the imam in various mosques, including Eid Mosques. By 2012, however, he was no longer leading prayer in any mosque or preaching face-to-face. All his activities are now in radio and television stations across the country.

### Religion and Media: The Contemporary Ghanaian Experience

The above discussion has clearly highlighted the interlacing nature of media and religion, and has shown how the religious engagements of the contemporary Muslim scholars changed in response to changes in the media. Media are an integral part of religion and no religion could be experienced

without it. Nonetheless, religion is not static. It changes with time from signs to words; from oral to written to electronic media. These changes have happened in parallel with changes in religious engagements. In the case of Shaykh Zakaria for instance, his preoccupations changed to meet the requirements of the new media so that he could participate effectively in their programmes. The message he presented had changed from teaching basic religious rituals in the face-to-face media to Muslim image (re-)making and identity reconstruction in the new media. Analyses of most Muslim programmes on Ghanaian radio and television stations showed that they maintain a balance between image creation and identity reconstruction.<sup>6</sup> The national broadcasting media presented their programmes mainly to create a 'national' image and identity of Muslims. The private stations also tended to be supportive of these objectives and the media practitioners produced their programmes in line with them. Thus, all participants in their programmes must promote those objectives, either deliberately or unintentionally. The analysis of Shaykh Zakaria's programmes upholds this view. For instance, the films attributed to him were all directed either at boosting the image of Ghanaian Muslims or attempting to reconstruct their identity in line with national philosophies based on an austere work ethic. A film *An-Najum (The Stars)* attributed to him was totally in support of national policy on employment. He was trying to convince the Ghanaian Muslim youth that they have to work hard to succeed. He identified and exposed them to various trades and handcrafts as means of survival. That was also a response to a stereotype of idleness often associated with Muslim youth in the country. Another film he produced, *The Way Forward* was about how Ghanaian Muslims should overcome their socio-cultural and political problems, which were part of the greater national problems. Both films appeared to be absolutely supportive of national development policies. On the other hand, Shaykh Zakaria used to engage his audiences in local languages during his previous, face-to-face religious engagements. Since his movement into the new media, he gradually resorted to using only the English language. This can be interpreted as being

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part of the Muslim image-making objectives of some television programmes. Shaykh Zakaria's television producer,<sup>7</sup> in fact, told the writer that his organization deliberately decided to present its programmes in English rather than in Hausa, the main supra-ethnic vernacular used by the

many Muslim linguistic groups of the country, in order to dismiss the stereotype that Muslims cannot communicate fluently in English, which is the national language. This shows how media practices have changed in parallel with the religious engagements of the scholars who have used those media. The movement of Shaykh Zakaria into the new media impacted on his objectives or on what he considers to be the right religious engagement. It has affected his religious expression and the meaning of his religious identity. Media therefore, are an agent of religious change.

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## Notes

- 1 De Witte 2003, p.174.
- 2 Martin-Barbero 1997.
- 3 For more on history of communication and media see Innis 1951 and Diringer 1977 & 1982.
- 4 For more, see the National Communication Authority list of licenced Stations available at [http://www.nca.org.gh/downloads/LIST\\_OF\\_VHF-FM\\_IN\\_GHANA%20DECEMBER%2010.pdf](http://www.nca.org.gh/downloads/LIST_OF_VHF-FM_IN_GHANA%20DECEMBER%2010.pdf). Last accessed 3 August, 2012.
- 5 Zakaria, Seebaway. Interview with the author in Accra, January, 2012.
- 6 Ibrahim 2013
- 7 Abu-Bakri Yusuf Sizalo was a producer of a programme Al-kutba on TV3, Accra, and Shayk Zakaria was the regular presenter.