

THE SAGE OF SVELUGU:
AN AUDIO-VISUAL DOCUMENTATION OF
CHIEF IMAM IBRAHIM MUHAMMAD
OF THE NORTHERN REGION
OF GHANA, WEST AFRICA

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I. FORWARD

This unsolicited proposal seeks a research grant for a twelve-day expedition to the Northern region of Ghana, West Africa, for the purposes of interviewing and visually documenting the life, work, and memories of Chief Imam Ibrahim Muhammad of Savelugu. The existence of the Chief Imam was brought to the attention of the project coordinator Mr. Taalib-Din Abdul-Wakil by Imam Mikal Huda Baith, founder of the Islamic Theological Institute and African Health Foundation both of Washington, D.C., after visits he made to Ghana in July 1988.

Mr. Abdul-Wakil has visited Savelugu on two occasions, the most recent trip lasting from October 23 through November 16, 1989. Mr. Abdul-Wakil has use of a color videotape of Chief Imam Muhammad conducted with the aid of a Dagbane-speaking interpreter (Abu Musa). Loosely interpolated summaries of the tapes were prepared in February 1990 with the assistance of Mr. Mohammad Ali Idris, a Dagbane speaker who currently resides and works in the Washington, D.C. area as an accountant. The tapes and their transcripts are available for review upon request.

II. INTRODUCTION

The struggle to bring hidden knowledge to public view is a long and tiring one. Yet, the rewards always out weigh the hardship. This has been the case with our effort to recover the historical legacy of the 140 year old Chief Imam named Ibrahim Muhammad from the village of Savelugu in Northern Ghana, West Africa.

Our journey began after receiving information from Imam Mikal Huda Baith, a spiritual leader and co-founder of the African Health Foundation of Washington, D.C., that they had visited this old man during their July 1988 tour. The African Health Foundation has donated medicines, medical equipment and technical medicine support to communities in Ghana since the early 1980's. The trip to Savelugu in the Dagomba region of Ghana was a combination of many other visits they had made to numerous other communities in the past.

My immediate reaction to knowledge of the existence of such an old and learned person was to see him for myself. I flew to Ghana in January 1989 to visit with him and other elders of the religious communities in Ghana. My purpose was to establish a rapport with him as a prelude to future visits for research.

Notably, what had happened between the time I learned of the Chief Imam and my first visit was the announcement by Willard Scott of the Today Show. He said a Florida woman of 114 years old was determined the oldest living person in the world by the Guinness Book of World Records.

I immediately called Mr. Scott's office in New York and informed him of my

newly acquired knowledge of the 139 year old Chief Imam from Savelugu. They took the report seriously, to my delight, and announce it on their show the following day. However, upon their suggestions when I wrote the Guinness Book officials in New York with pictures and a description included—they discounted my information as unfounded because I had no "birth certificate".

Well, the quest to establish the authenticity and relevance of this old man began and I set out to see him for myself and bring back eyewitness information on his existence.

What amazed me most about him was his strength of voice and firm hand shake. At such an age he retains these characteristics of "youth" which are absent in most Americans in their 70's and 80's.

Yet, there is one even more intriguing characteristic—his memory. His fifteen minute prayer honoring our visit was without hesitation or break. He was speaking in Arabic--not his natural tongue of Dagbane, and during question and answer periods his comments on the past and present were equally coherent and fluid.

The second visit, I made in November 1989 solidified my efforts to gain respect and cooperation from him and the village leadership of Savelugu. During this visit, I specifically meant to inquire about his knowledge of the African Slave Trade, his family life, the historical inter-tribal relations of his region, the development of Al-Islam in Ghana, etc.

The transcript we have of our second visit is a prologue to the more definite information we can put on an audio-visual medium for future generations to study. The information gathered from this investigative research will fill the blank pages of history.

The information gathered from this research project has never been recorded. It has value to scholars in anthropology, medicine, genealogy and religion. The age, experience and vision of this man is a unique human phenomena which if lost will never be replace.

Finally, once funded this project will solidify the oral history and traditions already published by previous scholars here in America and Africa. Our museums, schools, libraries and archives will undoubtedly be enriched from these new revelations.

III. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The basic goals of the research trip--using still photography (color and black and white) and broadcast quality videotape, and sound recordings--will be to elicit a detailed life history memoir and to record oral traditions that had been related to Chief Imam Ibrahim Muhammad. Because he is a Chief Imam in a region in which many West African Muslims reside, we expect to gain considerable insight into the origins and dynamics of Al-Islam in a specific locale. We will also be concerned to ask questions and make independent observations of food and medicinal habits, especially as they relate to indigenous

notions seeking to explain and promote longevity.

The project should yield raw research data of broad anthropological, genealogical, religious, and linguistic significance and form the foundation for more systematic and sustained investigations over the long term. The method to be used to collect the life history and contextual materials will be a combination of oral history and documentary photography (both motion pictures and still photography). In anthropology the general approach to be taken is called the ethnographic interview. These inquiries, based on a prepared checklist of topics we hope to cover, will consist of open-ended questions designed to elicit a life history. Basically Chief Imam Muhammad will be encouraged and allowed to tell his story and the story of his society and region as he sees it. Because the research team views this region of Ghana as a potential site for an ongoing project and deserving of longer field stays in the future, we expect the Chief Imam to provide us with the names of other individuals who should be contacted for further information in a network of villages and towns in the Northern region of Ghana. While we may have time to pursue one or two of the most promising of these leads, the principal focus of our effort will be the documentation of this single aged individual as a window into the society in which he has lived for over a century and whose traditions are preserved in his head.

As this is an exploratory effort, there are a few explicit hypotheses to be tested and certainly none that can be framed in a quantitative way at this point.

IV. STATEMENT OF NEED

The urgency of the request derives from several pressing problems and needs. First and foremost, although his precise age has yet to be determined, Imam Muhammad is well over one hundred years old (he is said to be 140 years old by persons in his community) and every minute lost increases the risk that he will die before his story is systematically documented and preserved for future study by scholars interested in a variety of topics about which he has information. Even more importantly, he is not just any old man, but a socially and religiously significant individual whose lifetime spans a period from the suppression of the slave trade through the onset of British and German colonial rule in the sub-region to Ghanaian independence in 1957 and beyond. Furthermore, oral traditions about earlier times were imparted to him by elders entrusted with keeping the traditions of the Dagomba and kindred peoples in the Northern region of what is now Ghana.

V. EVALUATION

Following our return from the field, we intend to seek additional funds to support the preparation of a verbatim transcription of field interviews using the International Phonetic Alphabet as well as the preparation of an English translation. We would then circulate these materials to specialists in several

disciplines (notably linguistics, ethno-botany, history, sociology, and anthropology) who have expertise about Ghana, and especially the Northern region and the Dagomba peoples and their interactions.

VI. HISTORY

One of the ways in which we have gauged the significant topic to pursue was to contact by telephone several Ghanaian scholars (and other Ghanaians with origins or experience in the Northern region) and, with their guidance, to survey some of the existing secondary literature to determine the current extent of knowledge and interest in the Dagbane-speaking peoples and to identify significant gaps in current knowledge about these peoples. According to accounts set down by Robert Rattray, (*Tribes of the Hinterland*, p.xii), about the middle of the fifteenth century invaders from the north-east established rule over the local peoples they encountered and founded the related kingdoms of Mossi, Mamprusi, and Dagomba. As the Ghanaian geographer Kwamina B. Dickson put it, "in Dagomba the establishment of political authority by the invaders was accompanied by much violence towards the indigenous population. In eastern Dagomba the Knokomba were driven from their lands on the right banks of the Oti river and to the north of it, and in western Dagomba the Earth Priests were killed. At the height of its power the Dagomba kingdom extended westward as far as the Ghana-Ivory Coast boundary." (*A Historical Geography of Ghana*, p. 31). Jack Goody, *Ethnography of the Northern Territories*.

Aside from the interest that the region holds for Africanist, it is also of interest of scholars of African-derived populations in the Western Hemisphere because available written documents from the era of the trans-Atlantic slave trade clearly indicate the transportation of peoples from the Northern region of Ghana to the coast for shipment across the Atlantic. Using documents collected by Elizabeth Donnan, the physical anthropologist William S. Pollitzer has estimated that 13 percent of the Africans imported as slaves into South Carolina between 1733 and 1807 came from the area that includes all of present-day Ghana, most of Burkina-Faso, and parts of Togo and Ivory Coast.

Administratively during the early 1970's the area was sub-divided into the Western Dagomba and the Eastern Dagomba units. Neighboring ethnic groups include the Wala, the Mamprusi, the Grusi, the Nanumba, the Gonja.

VII. PERSONNEL

Personnel for the project consists of a maximum of four persons: a research scholar, a sound engineer, a producer/camera operator, and a liaison/advance person. Any reduction in personnel will not negate the requirement for expertise in these areas.

VIII.**PROJECT BUDGET**

SALARIES (reimbursements for loss of pay):

4 Team members (\$150.00 x 12 days)	\$7,200
TOTAL Salaries	\$7,200

TRAVEL AND SUBSISTENCE:

Round-trip airfare for team of 4 @ \$1700 per person	\$6,800
Ground transportation 12 days x \$50 per day	600
Meals and accommodations @ 4 persons x \$50 x 12 days	2,400
TOTAL Travel and Subsistence	\$9,800

EQUIPMENT (rental)

Video Camera & supplies (VHS stock)	\$2,000
Tape Recorder & cassettes	300
Miscellaneous	500
TOTAL Equipment	\$2,800

INSURANCE

Personal Flight & Ground \$250 x 4 persons	\$1,000
GRAND TOTAL	\$20,800

AUDIO (MP3) OF INTERVIEW WITH CHIEF IMAM IBRAHIM MUHAMMAD:

http://hesaidthetruth.org/mp3/Savelugu_Interview-01.mp3

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW WITH CHIEF IMAM IBRAHIM MUHAMMAD:

With the name of Allah, the Most Merciful, (Bismillahir Rahmanir Rahim), this is the translation of the interview of Chief Imam Ibrahim Muhammad of Savelugu. The interview is being translated by Brother Mohammed Ali Idris in Alexandria, VA on the 8th of February, 1990.

Abu Mwusa (Ghanaian Interpreter): When the chief of Savelugu died... (noise, noise)

He said I should stop saying translating that he would talk and then you will record.

"When the Chief of Savelugu died, why we needed somebody. Abukari and Issifu, both children of the deceased, were contesting the throne. Abukari disagreed with the ?Rumayahin?. Abu bakr and Abukari is the same.

Abdul-Wakil: How do you spell that?

Mr. Idris: Abukari is spelled, ah, A-B-U-K-A-R-I.

In the Abukari, the students were????

I have nominated myself. You did not nominate me as your chief, I have nominated myself. I don't care whether you nominated me at all or you nominated me or not. I have nominated myself as the chief of Savelugu. And the person who nominated the other person as the Chief of Savelugu, was not actually entitled or was not the right person. He was not even included in the nomination process. Issifu and Abukari, both children of the chief were fighting to claim the throne.

Issifu is spelled I-S-S-I-F-U.

Abukari and Issifu had the fight. Abukari killed Issifu in the process of the fight.

Eleven cities, were behind Issifu in this struggle. In Abukari, is part of all the eleven cities behind Issifu, Abukari, in a war, conquered all the eleven cities.

Okay, Abukari, conquered all those eleven cities and as a result, of that, brought about slavery. Because Abukari killed Issifu in this war that they were engaged in. He conquered Gatua...The villages or the cities that he conquered, before them one after the other, 'til he went in one conquered them and put his own person there. And you know, like, kind of enslaved them -- went to the next village conquered them, of course mentioned the villages names, but I cannot tell you unless you back to ?Menachem? mentioned them the eleven villages he mentioned them. So he conquered one after the other. So you know whether he was able to conquer all those eleven cities or eleven villages so that came about slavery for conquering and putting your own person to proceed with the activities of enslaving the natives, I mean, the cities being conquered, which of course supported Issifu in the war.

Okay. Three cities were behind Issifu -- and Abukari with his troops conquered what led to Issifu and his supporters and that's what I (was told). Abukari killed Issifu in the process. Galiwey--he conquered Galiwey and Gatua.

TRANSCRIBER'S NOTES: My sense is that the Chief Imam is describing the chronology of each of the eleven conquered cities.

Mr. Idris: ... conquered Dikpan and Warmiya and Gundogu village. And conquered also Saakpali village. And that's what actually brought about slavery and that, I mean the ...You can actually trace your (Abdul-Wakil's?) background to these villages, ten cities that were actually conquered in the process of this war.

Abdul-Wakil: Ten or Eleven?

Mr. Idris: No, eleven, eleven, eleven villages in this process. Okay the cities, Gagaliwey - bogu, Gatua is the second city G-A-T-U-A; (city 3) Tananga, T-A-N-A-N-G-A (city 3); Kpasaribogu, (city 4) that is the fourth city; the fifth city, Gugu, G-U-G-U (CITY 5), That's city five; (city 6) Dikpan that's city six; (City 7) Warmiya; (city 8) Saakpali, is spelled as S-A-A-K-P-A-L-I that's city eight okay; (city 9) Gundogu, is spelled as G-U-N-D-O-G-E; Dipaly is the last conquered city spelled D-I-P-A-L-Y, and that is the last conquered city.

The ten cities are part and parcel of the ten conquered cities -- Issifu supporters were taken captives. So when Abukari conquered all the ten cities, they all became servants! He took them captive so they were now to pay allegiance to Abukari who became

the chief. So since the ten cities were behind Issifu, and Issifu was gradually conquered in the war, they were like slaves to Abukari. You see the misfortune of northern slavery actually began in Savelugu because that's where the whole idea started -- where two brothers actually were (sic) supporters ended up becoming slaves because Abukari conquered so the misfortune of northern Ghana; slavery actually started here.

After all, to settle the dispute, some people came in with the intention of helping, which is supposedly why they came in with the purpose of helping to resolve all this, not knowing they had intentions of actually taking the land or they had sensed something about the richness of the soil -- this is literal translation -- they had sensed something, and this is exactly what he said, 'They had sensed something' that attracted them to the land so what they can actually get from this they will do anything to get it. So by doing all this then they took some slaves along with them, they took some people, within the area along with them because they came in with the intention of helping this Abukari guy who had defeated his brother Issifu. You know, so with that in mind, they set up this kind of ???, that is something, your possession. So with slaves people became their like personal property.

So that is one place was actually not conquered which is Gbagu, Gbagu.

Abdul-Wakil: What does that mean?

That they were not able to conquer that last village, Gbagu -- known as Gbagu.

Abdul-Wakil: The name of the village was what?

Mr. Idris: The name of the village was Gbagu.

Abdul-Wakil: How do you spell it?

Mr. Idris: Okay, the last city Gbagu, wasn't actually conquered. And it is spelled G-B-A-G-U.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES: The preceding passage does not include any questions posed to Chief Imam from Abdul-Wakil directly. The conversation took place between Abdul-Wakil and Mohammed Ali Idris who was working from the Chief's recorded comments.

Abdul-Wakil: Chief Imam, would you tell us if you witnessed any

of the, ah, fighting and if you witnessed any of the slave traders, ah, actually taking, ah, captives, ah, to the South through Elmina and to the Cape Coast castles?

Comments from Chief Imam.

Mr. Idris: And the Chief Imam said that he was not actually there to witness all the slaves being taken to the South.

Comments from Chief Imam.

Mr. Idris/Onlooker: Somebody whispered to him what happened. That is a long time...it's been a long time, he wasn't there. Okay the Chief Imam says he was not actually there -- because this was like a long time ago, years back, and what he heard also about, all this was a long time ago, he heard this a long time ago -- and somebody passed it on to him and that's a long time ago when this was actually passed on to him. So he wasn't actually there, it had been a long time he wasn't actually there to witness people being shipped or taken to the South to Elmina and other places that are slave traders.

Comments from Chief Imam.

Abu Mwusa: He said, okay, that it is not now its a long time. He wasn't there then, ah, and since he has ??? since we know he is an old man.

Abdul-Wakil: So, at what age is he now?

Mr. Idris: Now you want to know his age. He is amazed -- he is over a hundred years. His age is over a hundred years. That's what he told me.

Abu Mwusa: His age -- he is over a hundred years. Now he is over a hundred years, but he can tell you actually the age he is to be.

Mr. Idris: Okay you want to know specifically, how old are you, you say you are over a hundred years, this specific statement was -- and the Chief Imam said 'well, I'm over a hundred years' you know, and the age is in the neighborhood of 121 years.

Abdul-Wakil: Is it possible that the Chief Imam does not know how old he is really?

Mr. Idris: It's possible. Because though it is an encounter, he wasn't actually there. And as he said earlier in his tape, that even he wasn't there, when the hospital was constructed by the white man. So if you can even take the hospital, the age of the hospital, which is actually documented, then there's over a hundred years, when the white man came into the northern territory. And Chief Imam, his father, actually laid the stone area for the hospital to be built the hospital is one hundred years.

Abdul-Wakil: Okay, so when he says that he is 121, he says so in response to my request for a precise age. But he in fact, does not really know a precise age.

Mr. Idris: He does not actually know a precise age. You asked a question and now I will respond to the question.

Abdul-Wakil: Will you explain to me now the reason why the Chief Imam expressed to me in the tape, his age of 121 years and the reason you were giving me was the way in which the Dagomba interpreted their age, what was that?

Mr. Idris: Because actually, in the actual sense, I mean, ah, we do not, or before then. People didn't even know how to count in the English way. And like the English counting is actually different from the way our age is documented. You know. and Dagomba way for all of the Dagomba traditions, we go by events. If one was born, when we had a terrible storm, they mark it down, the historians mark it down. So when we have another storm, even in English calendar years, ten years after that, you would still be considered one year old 'til your first year. So in my estimation, my grandmother was like even a baby, with Chief Imam! The Chief Imam at that even when my grandmother was 95, the Chief Imam was like and they used to tell us stories about him that this man, they can't believe that this man is still alive! And they were even estimation that this man was over 150, close to 150! If we were to go by English calendar, he's over that! You know, so therefore, I mean the age how this is recorded in English, I mean the English calendar is actually different from the way that the Dagomba actually documented their age or the way they count their age. So the calendar is different so therefore, the best estimation relative to 121 could be short by like 15 years, or 20 years or 23 years or 24 years. In addition to what he has actually given.

Abdul-Wakil: ... 151 years or, ah, 151, ah, would you please ask Imam of the ten villages, are these the villages that most of the Ghanaians who were taken into slavery, that most of them came from or were there others in other regions beyond this one?

Comments from Chief Imam.

Mr. Idris: Okay you asked a question. Whether those, I mean, ah, conquered, the ten villages conquered, were there Muslims among them? In those days every village where you went, they had at least one person, one Muslim in that village, they had Muslims, Islam. But the question now is, ah, he's telling you even those days, they did not have that many Muslims around. His grandfather brought Islam to Northern Ghana. His grandfather brought Islam, he introduced the religion in that area. So therefore, you're talking about years back. So those days, they didn't have that many Muslims.

Abdul-Wakil: Were others in other regions beyond this?

Mr. Idris: Well, He said even in the village, even if those people weren't Muslim, one must learn in that village, or every village, you should be a Muslim. Because they have to have people to lead them spiritually, so of course they have some Muslims and then he said that will, they were not that many. There were no Muslims in the North. His grandfather brought Islam into Northern (Dagban) Ghana so there was no such thing as a Muslim or not -- he brought Islam, his grandfather brought Islam into Dagban.

Okay they had three Mosques in the whole of Northern Ghana. Savelugu Mosque, Kpabiya and Gambaga those were the three cities with mosques. Okay these are the mosques in Northern Ghana in those days -- one was in Savelugu which was of course Chief Imam's grandfather was the spiritual leader or Imam. So the first city was Savelugu; it's spelled as S-A-V-E-L-U-G-U. City two is spelled as K-P-A-B-I-Y-A. And the city 3 is Gambaga, G-A-M-B-A-G-A.

End of side A, tape 1.

Beginning of side B, tape 1.

Mr. Idris: He says that he is actually grateful that you have asked this question concerning the Muslims and how Islam actually came about in the area. Because his grandfather was actually the architect that's the way I would put it, the architect of the whole thing. So he's grateful that you have actually asked this kind of question.

Abdul-Wakil: Will he name his grandfather? Did he name his grandfather?

Mr. Idris: No, he didn't name his grandfather.

TRANSCRIBER'S NOTES: Stray comments ... something about three months.

Mr. Idris: The man that I showed you in the picture, the Chief Imam of Tamale, I mean the Chief Imam of Tamale, even though the Imam was in Tamale, you could not even call people or summon people, to prayer. That the Chief Imam of Tamale was a bigger city. Tamale is the capitol of the North, Northern Ghana. So you could not even call people to prayer. There were no Muslims in Tamale. But those days, they didn't; even have mosques in Salaga. There were no Muslims there. But today it is the center of you know, Islam or Muslims.

Okay his grandfather, he referred to them, this portion of the tape as 'Yidana?', his grandfather 'Yidana.'

Abdul-Wakil: How do you spell that?

Mr. Idris: Yidana is spelled ah, okay his grandfather, chief Imam, Yidana and Yidana is spelled Y-I-D-A-N-A. Okay, ah, Yidana actually came to Tamale because they were trying to establish the hospital or build a new hospital in the North. So Yidana was called upon to come and bless or lay a stone or bless the building. So what happened was he dug the foundation and Yidana and his entourage came to the site and offered their blessing to the new building or the new hospital that they were planning to build in Tamale.

Comments from Chief Imam.

Mr. Idris: Okay, but then the, ah the authorities wanted to know, or wanted to see the object or anything the Chief Imam Yidana grandfather, I mean because when he came to the site, he started quoting verses, and then put something in the foundation or the hole they dug, and the authorities asked 'We actually want to see the object, or the thing that you say is going to protect this building. Show us the thing that is going to protect or bless this hospital.' So they in turn wanted to see or visualize the whole concept. And the Chief Imam Yidana said, 'Okay, what I have just put in the ground that is exactly what is going to protect this building and that is enough to protect and bless the hospital!'

Abdul-Wakil: Did he say what it was?

Mr. Idris: No. just that he put something; he did not specify. But he said what I put in there, is enough to protect this whole building.

Comments from Chief Imam.

Abdul-Wakil: 50 or 15 miles?

Mr. Idris: Fifteen, to Tamale the seat of the government in the North. Okay he was invited to come and bless the hospital so, I mean, when he came, -- he got to Tamale on a Wednesday -- so he thought when he came in he was just going to do it and go back to Savelugu. An authority, which of course, the white man told him, 'Well, uh-uh, we want you to stay for 20 days.' They started off by staying there one day -- because he came in for one day, on a Wednesday, so it turned out that they wanted him to stay 20 days. But then he said, 'Okay. What I have put in here in the ground is going to lessen evil, can't pass or even goes across or even comes close to the hospital or any bad spirit or anything can't come close to the new hospital.' So it's kind of shield (sic), or protected from the evil or any thing bad that's coming around it. So what he actually put in the ground, served as a shield to protect the hospital.

Abdul-Wakil: Did Chief Imam Ibrahim Muhammad say why his grandfather was asked by the white man to stay 20 days?

Mr. Idris: No he did not. I think he's going to say it in the next ...

Comments from Chief Imam.

Mr. Idris: Okay, because any man or any sacred leader wherever they go, they actually have to maintain, wherever you are, you have to pray. And since he went there with this entourage; the Chief Imam, he was present. So okay they were at the time, okay we are going to stay here 20 days. Where are we going to pray? There were no Muslims in Tamale. There was just one. So where are we going to pray. So they kind of, ah, converged, you know they got some people to help them to just go the bush and got them some, you know, trees or sticks and with that, they were able to erect a shade which now serves as the central mosque of Tamale. So that's how this central mosque came about and the central mosque is Zamigu. That is the name of the central mosque, Zamigu.