

*The*  
**MUSLIM WOMAN**  
*And the Challenges of the*  
**CONTEMPORARY**  
**SOCIETY**

PART 2

*National Editor*  
**Y. O. Imam, Ph.D**

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# AN OVERVIEW OF THE RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL LEADERSHIP OF A MUSLIM WOMAN

L. O. Abbas

## Introduction

The term Imam is derived from the Arabic word 'amma' which denotes three different meanings. The first one means to go, to take oneself, go to someone and has *ammam* as its verbal noun. The second one means to lead the way, lead someone by one's example, to lead someone in *salat* and has *imamah* as its verbal noun. The third one means to be or become a mother and it has *amumah* as its verbal noun<sup>1</sup>.

Imam is used for the leader. Imam as a political head of a Muslim government could be called the Imam or the *Khalifah*. The four Orthodox Caliphs for instance succeeded the Prophet in both the spiritual and political administration of the Muslim state. In another context, Imam is used for leader of theology or Law. In this regard it refers to the founders of orthodox Schools of Law. They are Imams Abu Hanifah, Malik, Shafi' and Hanbal. However, the Shi'ite as a sect, more than the Sunni, applies the title of Imam for both the spiritual and political head of the community. It even specifies the kind of people who could be honoured with that title. Imam is also used for a leader of prayer in the mosque who is a person elected or appointed based on some qualifications like knowledge of Islam, good manners etc. Such an Imam leads the Muslim congregation in either daily, Friday or eid prayers.

In this paper, an attempt will be made to discuss the religious and political leadership of a Muslim woman. Before doing that, we shall briefly examine the status of women before and after the emergence of Islam.

## Women before and after the Emergence of Islam

The *Jahiliyyah* period relegated women to the lowest ebb in socio-political and religious lives. Women were only tools in the hands of men. They could not hold properties as they were part of the properties to be owned. They could not inherit but could be inherited.<sup>2</sup>

The emergence of Islam about 610 C.E. reversed the status of women from what it used to be. Islam gave equitable status to men and women in the social, political, economic and religious spheres. In the economic pursuit for instance, Islam permits for men and women, any *halal* -lawful business and endorses whatever profit that may accrue therefrom on equal basis (Qur'an 4:32.). This was unprecedented in the history of human being and that was the practical beginning of human development. In the holy Qur'an, whenever mention is made of men, on a matter of human interest, it is also made of women as well (Qur'an 24:30-31 and 33:35).

Like men, 'A'ishah the wife of the Prophet was a scholar of note, specializing on hadith studies. On the political level, there is a limit to which a Muslim could attain without jeopardizing her primary roles and duties in the home front.

The status of a woman as far as religious activities are concerned is not totally the same with that of a man. The physiological composition of a woman and the peculiarity of her nature realistically account for some differences in the observance of religious acts like the ritual prayer-*salat* and fasting- *sawm*. Generally, Islam does not absolve any sex from the practical worship as that is the primary motive for human creation (Qur'an 51:56). Yet, there are principles that guide and regulate it for it to be meaningful to the life of human being and acceptable to Allah. While a man has no hindrance in his observance of *salat*, *sawm* or even *hajj* except for general

excuse, woman has physiological development that can prevent her from such acts for sometimes<sup>3</sup>.

### **Appointment of Imam**

For a candidate to be eligible for the post of an Imam, he must possess, according to the jurists, certain qualifications or qualities. One of these qualifications is that he must be a male. A female, they ruled, is not fit to be an Imam on the ground that her functions are more at home than in the public. Again, by her natural make up, a female has to forgo *salat* for some days of the month. The fact that her monthly period could start while leading could adversely affect the validity of the *salat*, goes to support her being unfit for Imamship. She can however lead where only females are present and she has to be on the same line with them and not in their front<sup>4</sup>.

Only Hanafi disallows congregational prayers for females only except in *salat al-Janazah* (Funeral Prayer). However, this position of Hanafi runs contrary to the report by Dar Qutni from Ummu Waraqah that the Prophet once allowed her to lead women of her house in *salat*. It is even reported that ‘A’ishah, the wife of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) used to lead women in *salat* and that she would stand in their midst.<sup>5</sup>

### **Admission of Women into the Mosque**

There are different opinions on the legality of the presence of women in the mosque. While all the jurists endorse their right, like men, to worship and engage in other activities of Islamic importance in the mosque, others opine that women’s worship in the mosque should be discouraged. This is perhaps the reason why many mosques in the Northern parts of Nigeria are without provision for women’s space.



The protagonists base their opinion on the fact that women had unfettered access to the mosque for worship during the time of the Prophet and the Orthodox Caliphs. They rely on the hadith reported by Ahmad that states that women should not be barred from going to the mosque.<sup>6</sup> The antagonists too rely on some *ahadiith* that quoted the Prophet as preferring the conduct of *salat* at home for the believing women.<sup>7</sup>

While the two positions have backing in the law of Islam, it then behoves the Muslims in a particular environment to honestly and realistically select one that can promote the understanding of Islam amongst the women folk. Those who would encourage women's *salat* at home should ensure provision for their understanding of Islam outside the mosque. It is certain that attendance at *Jumu'at* service is both for *salat* and the improvement of one's knowledge and understanding of the religion through the *Khutbah*. A woman, who may not attend *jumu'at* service (because she has an option), may as well lose the value of the sermon. In a society like Nigeria, such trend is causing a lot of drifts to other religions, largely because of non-provision of avenues for Islamic education for the Muslims. It should be stated that there is allowance for women in both Harams of Makkah and Madinah, the two holiest mosques in the world.

#### **Establishment of Women Organisations**

Lack of adequate Islamic education to enable women understand their religion, coupled with the seeming discrimination in the leadership of the community became worrisome to the Muslim women. They were tired of going to the mosque and attending other Islamic programmes without having a say in the decisions of the community. They began to form societies and organizations where they elect officers from amongst themselves to lead them.

Some of these organizations are; *Alasalatu Ibadu Rahman*, established in 1982, Federation of Muslim Women Association of Nigeria (FOMWAN) founded in 1985, *Jama'atu Lailaha illa Allah* and *Tawakalitu Alasalatu* both founded in 1985. Although there were other Alasalatu societies established and headed by men, the above enumerated were established by women and are run by them.

In these organizations, various programmes of religious, educational, social and even political importance are organized. Weekly or monthly *asalatu* for example are held to engender the understanding of the fundamentals of Islam by members. Other programmes they engage in are lectures, symposia and periodic seminars. Some of them establish schools and even encourage individual members to do same. The only orphanage tagged "FOMWAN Home" in Oyo State is owned by FOMWAN.<sup>8</sup>

Some of the leaders of these organizations lead their members in all activities even in the observance of *salat*. On her own, the founder and leader of *Jama'atu La Ilaha Illa Allah*, Alhaja Hawwah Ajibike popularly called "Shaykhah" does not lead the prayers (*salat*). She stands on a line parallel to that of the Imam while men would form their rows behind the que and to be followed by other women of the group. This act of the founder generated controversy in the Muslim circle as many people condemned it and even consider it wrong. The woman and members of the group see nothing wrong with the system moreso when there is an appointed Imam who is very knowledgeable.<sup>9</sup>

The position of the group seemed vindicated when on Friday March 18, 2005, one Amina Wadud, a woman Professor of Islamic studies, led a *Jumu'at* prayer comprising a congregation of one hundred men and women faithful in the USA.<sup>10</sup> The action of the Professor generated heat discussions. Many leading Muslim

scholars like the Imam of London Central Mosque. MS Soad Saleh of Cairo and Sheikh Yusuf al-Qardawi condemned the action of the woman.<sup>11</sup> However, the Egypt's Grand Mufti, Sheikh Ali Guma, declared that Islam permits women to lead prayers of mixed-gender congregation. He cited Imams Tabari and ibn Arabi as scholars who have endorsed the practice. Sheikh Ali Guma was of the opinion that where there is disagreement on issues such as this, the decision should be left with the congregation.<sup>12</sup> It was later discovered that Professor Amina Wadud was not alone in the act. A forty-year-old woman was also reported to have disguised as a man to lead the *khutbah* and lead a congregation of seven thousand worshippers in the Island state of Bahrain. The woman was however arrested by the police and taken to the detention.<sup>13</sup>

## Conclusion

Men and women are creatures of Allah endowed with intellect and capabilities. They both can perform wonders. However, each of the two sexes has peculiarities that are different from another. Each should identify his own and contend with it to the satisfaction of the creator.

Women are considered feeble and can hardly contain hardship and this is associated with leadership. There may be few cases of women leaders who are able to weather the storm, they are certainly exceptional cases. Majority of women leaders have paid dearly for it in some other areas.

The Muslim leaders should not take the aggression of women for leadership for granted. They should organize fora where such issues would be discussed to stem the tide as failure to address it may portend danger in the community.

## Notes and References

1. J.M. Cowan (ed) *Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, Modern Language Services, p.25.
2. H. M. Balyuzi, *Muhammad and The Course of Islam*, Dar al-Fikr, Beirut, 1975, p.8.
3. There are periods when a woman must not perform *salat* or *sawm*. These are when she is on monthly period when she has just delivered baby in times etc.
4. W. Az-Zuhayli, *Al Fiqh al-Islami wa Adillatuhu*, Dar al-Fikr, Damascus, 1984, p. 1194.
5. M. B. Ismail, *Al-Fiqh al-Wadiah*, Dar al-Manar, Cairo, 1997, p. 216.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Az-Zuhayli, p.
8. EGMWAN, Oyo State chapter has its office and the orphanage at Bashorun Area, Ibadan.
9. Oral interview with one Miftau Azeez (60), a foundation member of the group on 22/10/06 at Bashorun, Ibadan.
10. Down loaded from internet titled 'Payback time' on iranian.com on March 21, 2005.
11. *Ibid*
12. *Ibid*
13. Arab News of 15/11/2004