

CORRELATES OF ISLAM

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IMAMATE AND PERIPHERIAL ISSUES IN OSHOGBO CENTRAL MOSQUE

By

L.O. Abbas (Ph.D)

INTRODUCTION

Mosque is, succinctly described, as the house of God. It is a place formerly earmarked for the worship of Allah. It is however significant that mosque is the first house built for humanity on earth. This underscores the primary purpose of the creation of man to be for the worship of Allah (Q51:56). There are two types of mosque in every Muslim community, they are: *Ratibi* (local) and *Jum'ah* (Central) mosques.

The Imam is made the leader and the guide of the congregation under him. Not only does he guide them in practical *salat*, he also teaches them the rudiments and the fundamentals of the religion through sermon (*Khutbah*), counselling and at ceremonies like marriage (*Ziwaj*) child naming (*'Aqiqah*) and funeral (*Janazah*) or even at open-air services.

The position of imam is so important to the Muslim community that care must be taken in his selection or appointment. Islam has provided the guidelines and discouraged arbitrariness in the appointment. Such guidelines include knowledge of Islam (*'ilm*), maturity (*bulugh*), being a Muslim and being of good character among others.

However, it is observed that various Muslim communities and Islamic organizations have been discovered to adopt different methods in selecting their Imams. These methods followed no particular paradigm at the initial stage of the emergence of Islam in Yorubaland. Among the traditional communities for example, the system usually adopted was based on what was in operation at the inception of the city or town with little or no amendment.

This paper therefore sets out to examine the level of compliance with the *shari'ah* provisions by the authorities of the Osogbo Central Mosque in the appointment of Imam.

The coming of Islam to Osogbo

Osogbo has, since the colonial days, been known as a prominent commercial town in Yorubaland. Its prominence and fame got its boost when it became the capital of Osun State. The coming of Muslim traders from far and

near into the town for business purposes informally brought Islam into the town around the 1820s¹.

However, the religion was formerly introduced into the town through a prediction of an *Ifa* oracle during the reign of Oba Matanmi I. The Oba had been foretold of the coming of three *Mallams* into the town. It was a usual traditional rite of the town to contact the *Ifa* oracle called Agbaalu during the annual *Ifa* festival which usually preceded Osun festival, to know what the future had for the Oba, the town and its people in general. One Kujenyo, an *Ifa* consultant (*Babalawo*) 'saw' in his divination that three people having turbans on their heads and carrying loads on their shoulders would arrive Osogbo through *Idi Baba* (a boundary towards Ibokun). He advised the Oba to ensure that they were well received and accommodated. He should in addition request them to recite their *Tira* (Al-Qur'an) for the progress and development of the town.²

Nineteen days after the prediction, the visitors arrived as predicted, through *Idi Baba* and, were welcomed by the boundary guard called Ajala. They were migrant *Mallams* who came from Borno in Northern Nigeria. Their language was neither Yoruba nor Hausa, it was pure Arabic. From there, they were taken to Ataoja who welcomed them hospitably and accommodated them.

On the second day, the visitors requested their host to allow them continue their journey to other areas of Yorubaland, but were persuaded against the move by the Ataoja. He asked them to recite their *tira* (Al-Qur'an) for the progress of the town and in particular for one of his wives who was barren so that she could bear children. He pledged that should the barren wife bear a child, he would be made to learn their *tira* and practise their religion. Prayers were offered by the *Mallams* and the Qur'an was recited. Not long after, the wife became pregnant and was delivered of a baby boy named Harun who later became the 9th Chief Imam of the Ibadan Central Mosque³.

However, the visitors, still willing to leave Osogbo, renewed their earlier request for permission to proceed on their journey. The *Oba* accepted their request with a proviso that one of them should stay back so that prayers and recitation of the Qur'an could continue to sustain the town and its entire domain. Surprisingly, the *Mallams* agreed and the most elderly among them, Ibrahim Uthman, volunteered to stay behind with the intention of spreading Islam in the area.

Mallam Ibrahim settled at *Idi Ako* near Okoko River and there he built the first mosque in Osogbo. In appreciation of the activities of the *Mallam*, Oba Matanmi gave one of his daughters in marriage to him and she gave birth to Ashir who succeeded his father as Imam when the former died. Among those who attended the *Mallam's* Qur'anic school in his mosque was Harun, the son of the Oba, born as a result of the prayers by the visiting *Mallams*.

The Osogbo system of Imamship

At the inception of Islam in Osogbo, there was obviously no contest for Imamship since the first Imam, Ibrahim Uthman, was the only scholar of Islam around. This stage was followed by a period when knowledge and the practice of Islam by the contestants was the qualification. Thereafter, hereditary succession to the post became the vogue with descendants of past Imams (*Olomo Imams*)⁴ claiming to be the only qualified people to be appointed as the Chief Imam.

Another route to get to the exalted position was to lobby the Oba (*the Ataoja*) of the town who has a lot of influence in the appointment, after all he would give his consent to the candidate selected and also turban him. That was the situation until about the middle of the 20th century, when some members of the Muslim community resolved to introduce knowledge rather than heredity as the only qualification to the post of the Chief Imam.

At the initial stage of the struggle for change, Shaykh Muhammad Bello Arikalamu, a prominent scholar was the first to contest for Imamship purely on the basis of Islamic knowledge. He was denied by a combined team of the descendants of the past Imams and the Ataoja, reason being that his father was never an Imam of Osogbo. He never had the opportunity till he died.

The proponents of the new change led by Alhaj A.S. Kolapo⁵ however continued the struggle. At a time when they felt that their aim might not be realised through the system adopted, they changed their tactics and decided to sponsor candidates for the post of *Mufassir*, which if realised, they opine, could ease his becoming the Chief Imam. In 1960, the group sponsored Shaykh Shittu Onilewura, a renowned scholar, preacher and a student of Bello Arikalamu for the post of *Mufassir*. His candidature was opposed by a section of the people, particularly some members of the Imam in council. However, his supporters managed to have their way and he was turbaned at Ataoja's palace in 1961.

The Re-organisation of the Council

Onilewura's appointment as the *Mufassir* caused pandemonium and confusion so serious that it threatened to break up the Muslim community into factions. Oba Ataoja himself became confused and worried and made all efforts he could to solve the problem, but he could not. The crisis was however resolved by the reigning Olubadan of Ibadan, Oba Salawu Aminu⁶ who, on hearing about the crisis, invited the two factions to his palace and settled the matter amicably. To demonstrate their resolve to work together, the two groups together re-turbaned Shaykh Shittu Onilewura as the *Mufassir*, this time around, at the Central Mosque.

The council then reorganized the contestable positions and streamlined them. Therefore, the posts of *Mufassir* (Exegete) *Naib al-Imam* (Deputy Imam) and the Chief Imam were recognized and approved. The post of *Mufassir* is the

entry point to ensure that qualified scholars who could eventually rise to reach the position of the Chief Imam are made the principal officers of the council.

When the then Imam died in 1969 and the *Naib*, Alhaj Tijani Ajiferuke rose to become the Imam, the *Mufasssir*, Alhaj Shittu Onilewura was to move to assume the post of *Naib al-Imam* which he considered redundant and therefore refused to take. By remaining the *Mufasssir*, he thought, he would be able to contribute more of his knowledge to serve the people through improved quality of sermons, Qur'anic exegesis (*Tafsir*) and open-air services, all of which he had been well known. He however hinted members of the council that should there be vacancy for the post of Imam, he would have to jump *Naib* and assume it.

Alfa Salahdeen Ogodu, who was to be appointed as the new *Mufasssir* had to jump to be the *Naib*. When later the position of the Chief Imam became vacant, as a result of the death of Alhaj Tijani Ajiferuke, the *Mufasssir* had assumed that the road to Imamship would be very easy for him, but that was not to be. At the funeral service (*Janazah*) of the departed Imam, Alhaj Onilewura had wanted to lead the *salat al-janazah* (funeral ritual prayer) but he was prevented by the supporters of the *Naib*. They thought that allowing him to lead the *salat* could mean accepting him as the Imam⁷. The *Naib*, Alhaj Salahdeen Ogodu, led the prayers and was later installed as the Chief Imam in 1981. Alhaj Onilewura, this time, had to contend with the position of *Naib al-Imam* while Alhaji Jimoh Atanda, a new entrant, was turbaned as the *Mufasssir*.

The Imam-in-Council then met to emphasize strict adherence to the arrangement of the principal officers of the council. It also ruled that henceforth, nobody would be allowed to enjoy double promotion and anybody who declined promotion automatically forfeited it. The meeting re-emphasized the position of the *Mufasssir* as the entry point and the stage where academic competence and power of delivery of candidates would be assessed. Therefore, the contest for Imamship which was the main focus of members of council actually shifted to the position of the *Mufasssir*. Anybody appointed as the *Mufasssir* would be turbaned as the Imam.

The death of Imam Ogodu in 1987 brought in Alhaj Shittu Onilewura as the Chief Imam. Alhaj Sanusi Atanda, the *Mufasssir*, moved to *Naib* position while Alhaj Ashir Uthman (a.k.a. Alhaj Eko), a notable Islamic scholar and preacher, was undisputably appointed the new *Mufasssir*. Unfortunately he did not spend much time on the position as he died not long after his turbaning. He was succeeded by Alhaj Mustafa Ajisafe (the current Imam) in 1988, an equally sound Islamic scholar. Surprisingly, his candidature was opposed, on ground of his relationship with the immediate past holder of the post who was his uncle⁸. According to his opponents, the post would be reduced to a family one should Ajisafe be allowed to hold it. The council however rejected the protest and

viewed it as mere sentiment. It then resolved that a test be conducted for contestants as earlier ruled while scholars were invited from the Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies, University of Ibadan to conduct it. With this arrangement, other contestants withdrew before the scheduled date, leaving Alhaj Ajisafe unopposed. Thus, he became the *Mufassir*.

The arrangement of only three principal officers of the council agreed upon was disrupted by Imam Onilewura himself. Oba Oyewale Matanmi, the Ataoja of Osogbo, had wanted to impose one Alhaj Ghazali Akorede as a member of the Imam in council without being tested. He therefore lobbied the Chief Imam to create a post for him in the council. The Chief Imam, apparently not wanting to offend the Oba, created the post of *Ekerin Imam* for Alhaj Akorede and installed him in 1993.

This decision of the Imam did not go well with the youths, under the auspices of the National Council of Muslim Youths Organisations (NACOMYO), who viewed the action as been at variance with the joint decision of the Imam-in-council. They saw it as a ploy to, through the backdoor, increase unnecessarily, the principal officers to four and to ensure that incompetent people were smuggled into the council. They therefore called on the Imam to reverse the action. The Imam pleaded with the youths stating that the post was only honorary.

When in 1994, Imam Onilewura died, the *Naib Imam*, Alhaj Sanusi Atanda, became the Chief Imam and the *Mufassir*, Alhaj Mustafa Ajisafe, moved up to the position of *Naib Imam*. The controversial *Ekerin Imam* then aspired to become the *Mufassir* but was disqualified on the basis of knowledge. In desperation to assert his presence in the council at all costs, he lobbied the Ataoja again to use his powerful office to see him through. The new imam could not reject Ataoja's request; he created another office, *Otun Naib (Assistant Naib)*, for him.

Seeing the extent of Ataoja's influence on the council and coming from the same zone with the Ataoja, Alhaj Musa Animasaun, who was afraid of undergoing test for the post of *Mufassir*, lobbied the Ataoja to ensure his appointment as the *Mufassir* so that the zone could be represented on the council. The agreed arrangement notwithstanding, Ataoja directed the Chief Imam to appoint his candidate to the post and that was done immediately.

The zonal sentiment employed by the Ataoja in bringing in the *Mufassir* was also used by the Imam to create another post – *Otun Mufassir* – for Alhaj Harun Adediran who was from the same zone with the Imam. The youths again kicked and protested against the post and the holder. They argued that the holder, who might become the *Mufassir* later, was incompetent and the development was against the earlier agreement reached on the number of principal officers on the council. They had consulted a lawyer and a notice of injunction was about to be

served when some Muslim leaders intervened and appealed to the youths to suspend their action for a peaceful resolution in the interest of Islam.

Another problem surfaced again in 1997, when the Chief Imam, Alhaj Sanusi Atanda died. It was normal and automatic that the principal officers of the council move up to their respective next ranks. There was disagreement on what would become of the post of *Otun Mufasssir* whether to scrap it or not. There were series of meetings held on the matter between the scholars, the Muslim title holders and the youths. The following resolutions were made:

- (i) That the post of *Otun Mufasssir* be filled for that period after which it would be scrapped.
- (ii) That the position be given to a young but competent Islamic scholar with sound western education.
- (iii) That for equal representation, the holder be taken from the zone of the present Imam and
- (iv) That all arrangements agreed upon be documented and signed by the representatives of each section of the meeting immediately after the installation.

One Alhaj Mas'ud AbdulRaheem was finally selected and installed as *Otun Mufasssir* along with other principal officers. Thus, the number of the principal officers rose from the original three to five. It is however noteworthy that a decade after the agreement was made, it is yet to be documented and signed.

Job of the imam and Council Members

As stated in the introduction, the Imam's duty is to lead the congregation in *Salat* and other aspects of their lives as Muslims. They should be able to ask for clarification on issues not clear to them from the Imam while he (Imam) should be in a position to answer and put them through. Other members of the Imam-in-Council should, on their part, be given responsibilities peculiar to their offices.

In Yorubaland in particular, apart from leading *Jumu'ah* services and the daily *Salawat* (plural of *salat*, i.e. ritual prayer) by the Chief and Ratibi Imams respectively, they concentrate only on the ceremonial aspects of the Islamic practices like: *Janazah*, *Ziwaj*, *Aqiqah* and housewarming etc. this perhaps is done principally for monetary benefits and is done to the neglect of the essential areas that are fundamental to Islam⁹.

Such neglected areas include enlightenment on *Zakah*, its collection and distribution amongst the lawfully qualified recipients (Qur'an 9:60); enlightenment on Ramadan fast in a manner that would eliminate the annual controversies that have bedeviled its commencement and termination.

Other neglected areas are intervention in *hajj* (pilgrimage) operations with a view to collaborating with the federal and state governments in stemming the

perennial hardship the Nigerian pilgrims are subjected to and contributions to national issues on the governance of the country. Ironically, Muslim scholars do not concern themselves with all these. They rather fight themselves or others who may want to stand in their ways to Imamship or other positions of their interest.

Conclusion

It has been established from the foregoing that the method of selection or appointment of Imam in Osogbo is at variance with the rules of the *Shari'ah* or, simply put, that it is not *Shari'ah*-compliant. While the situation is not as a result of dearth of qualified candidates among the contenders, principal officers tend to see their posts as a goldmine where their livelihood is easily guaranteed. Sadly, however, it encourages laziness, indolence and corruption.

Since Islam has a set of rules and regulations and the Imams are made leaders of the Muslims in their respective areas of operation, it is now time to discard sentiments and tribalism in their appointments in order to enable the Muslims match others in confronting the modern world challenges, otherwise, they would be left behind.

The *Ummah* should be courageous in changing the old order of heredity in the appointment of imam. They should try to enforce the provisions of Islam on the subject as no substitute can succeed against the rule of Allah (Qur'an 48:23). To eliminate poverty, which has become endemic within the community of Muslims in Nigeria, *Zakat* collection and distribution must be taken seriously as it is the most viable institution to solve human financial problems.