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Research Article

Faith and Fracture: Exploring the Imamship Scuffle in Ojo Town, Lagos State, Nigeria

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Abstract. This paper delves into the intricate dynamics of faith and conflict as it pertains to the Imamship discord in Ojo, Lagos State, Nigeria. By examining the historical, socio-economic and political contexts surrounding the leadership of the mosque, this study illuminates the underlying factors contributing to the fractious nature of religious authority in the community. Through qualitative method approach, combining indepth interviews, community dialogues, archival research and participant observations, the study investigates the underlying causes, consequences and implications of the leadership crisis within the Muslim community. Findings reveal that the dispute not only reflects theological disagreements but also exposes underlying socio-economic tensions and power struggles. The study identifies competing interpretations of Islamic leadership, generational divides and external influences as critical factors contributing to the scuffle. The paper argues that addressing these fractures requires a thorough understanding of the cultural and historical context, emphasizing the need for dialogue and reconciliation within the community. The study proposes recommendations for resolving the Imamship scuffle, emphasizing: inclusive leadership selection

processes, knowledge transfer and contextualized Islamic education. Ultimately, this study seeks to foster a deeper understanding of how faith intersects with social challenges, offering insights that are crucial for conflict resolution and community cohesion in Ojo and similar contexts in Nigeria.

Keywords: Imamship, Islamic Leadership, Faith, Fracture, Power Dynamics.

INTRODUCTION

Religion often serves as a cornerstone of community identity, providing spiritual guidance and fostering social cohesion among its adherents. However, fractures can emerge within these sacred spaces, revealing underlying tensions that challenge the very fabric of belief systems. Ojo, a coastal town in Lagos State, is home to a significant Muslim population. The Islamic community, at some point was embroiled in a protracted leadership crisis, sparking intense debate and division among its people. The Imamship scuffle, a struggle for spiritual authority and control, has exposed deep-seated fault lines within the community. This research study endeavours to explore the complexities of this conflict, examining the intersection of faith, power and identity in the quest for Islamic leadership.

This conflict is not merely a struggle for authority but a reflection of broader socio-political currents affecting religious communities in Nigeria. As different factions vie for control, issues of legitimacy, governance and the expectations of congregants come to the forefront, echoing larger national dialogues around secularism, religious pluralism and ethnic tensions. In this study, effort will be taken to delve into the roots of the Imamship dispute, examining how it mirrors the challenges faced by many religious institutions in contemporary society. Through this lens, we aim to uncover the implications of this local conflict for broader discussions about faith and community in Nigeria, as well as the potential for resolution and reconciliation amid discord.

Origin and Settlement of Ojo Town

Ojo town is an extraction of the Awori, a sub-ethnic group of the Yoruba stock who speak a distinct dialect of the Yoruba language. In other words, it is a town found in the south-western part of coastal Yoruba land. The origin of the Awori people is steeped in history and legends, emerging in the southwestern part of Nigeria. According to folklore and historical accounts, the Awori people trace their roots back to the Oduduwa dynasty, which is believed to be the progenitor of several Yoruba sub-groups (Ajetunmobi, 2003).

The Awori people are said to have originated from the ancient city of Ile-Ife, the spiritual and cultural center of the Yoruba. It is believed that the Oduduwa dynasty, led by the mythical figure Oduduwa, first settled in Ile-Ife and established a prosperous kingdom. Over time, as the population grew and resources became scarce, a group of people led by a legendary figure named Ogunfunminire migrated from Ile-Ife in search of new lands and opportunities. This journey led them to the region now known as the Awori land, located along the coastal areas of present-day Lagos State and some parts of Ogun state (Ajetunmobi, 2003).

There exist two versions of oral tradition about the origin and settlement of Ojo. The first version which was from the Ikemo ruling house is the Esugbemi tradition. It holds that Ojo was founded about 1500 by Esugbemi, his wife Erelu and chief priest Osu who migrated from Ile-Ife to form a settlement named Ilufe. Esugbemi was a hunter who explored the swamp forests in the area which later became Ojo. During his expeditions he became convinced that he ought to expand the settlement. Osu consulted the Oracle which affirmed his decision at Ikemo quarters in present day Olojo district. Esugbemi and his family and co-hunters discovered a flowing stream with birds hovering around it and they concluded that *ibiyi ajo* meaning 'here will be a haven for prosperity'. The phrase was later corrupted to arrive at the present name of the town, Ojo (Oshodi, 1971).

The second version which was recorded in Iloro ruling house was the Aseba tradition. The account stated that Aina Aseba was a prince from the royal house in Benin. He left Benin with his wife, Iyelaje, his son, Ebuli and a few followers and travelers to Iddo where he met Olofin Onido. He was said to have brought beaded crown, a horse-tail embroidered with beads, a necklace of beads and 'Gbedu' drum (a royal drum) with him from Benin. He was also reported to have brought his own personal god known as Orisa Alaworo. After a brief sojourn at Iddo, Aina Aseba was advised by Olofin Onido to move to another place when it was discovered that he was a prince. Consequently, Aina Aseba together with his family and followers traveled westwards till they came to a place now known as Ojo where they settled down. Prior to this time, Ojo was a free land unoccupied by anybody. After Aina had long settled down at Ojo, an Ifa priest from Ile-Ife known as Osugbemi came to visit him. Aina requested Osugbemi to consult the Ifa Oracle as he wanted to know what the future had in store for the new settlement. The Oracle divined that the place would abound with people and enjoy great wealth, health and immense popularity. And to accomplish this, a sacrifice must be made with the following materials: eight pigeons, eight kolanut, eight bitter kola, eight hens, eight cowries, eight alligator pepper, eight snails and other minor items, all in eights (Town Series, 1979).

These two versions revolved around two founding fathers (Esugbemi and Aina Aseba) with whom others later settled. There seems to be sharp discrepancy between them about the founder or the first settler. The descendants of Esugbemi and Aina Aseba as a matter of history tried to twist the traditions to favour their claims. By inference, they have both been able to spotlight the town as a place of abundant wealth, health and immense popularity. More so, the name Ojo was derived from the two accounts, the first was the phrase 'Ibiyi ajo', meaning here will be a good destination, arising from the submission of the first settlers of the fertile nature of the area; while the second account was a coinage of the word 'Ejo' meaning eight, as a result of the sacrifice the oracle demanded from the early settlers to make which involved eight items each, such as pigeons, cock, hen, snail, alligator pepper, bitter kola, kolanut, cowries.

Location

The geographical entity known as 'Ojo' is located in the southwestern area of Lagos State, 32 kilometers from Badagry. It covers an area of about 70 square miles or

182 square kilometers. It is bounded on the north by Iba town and on the west by Otto-Awori. In the east, it shares boundaries with Amuwo and in the south with coastal towns such as Ikare, Irede, Iyagbe and Irewe etc. (Lawal, 1991). The town is situated on the bank of one of the Badagry creeks. It is between 0-50 ft. above the sea level.

Economic Activities

As one of the coastal towns in Lagos State surrounded by lagoon, the people of Ojo according to Rufai were subsistence farmers and fishermen. The farmers cultivated, essentially, food crops such as yam, cassava, maize, vegetables and pepper. They also planted coconut trees for the production of coconut for local consumption and for sale. The Ilufe village constituted the major area of their farming. The fishermen engaged in fishing activities on the lagoons stretching from Igbala to Eriwa, up to the Lagos lagoon. Ojo fishermen use canoes for their fishing and spent several days away from home. The women engaged in mat weaving and trading, especially of their local products such as fish, mats and farm produce like coconut. The Alaworo market used to be the major site where different commodities were exchanged between the people of Ojo and other neighbouring Awori towns and villages. (Rufai, 2017)

Religious Practices Before Islām in Ojo

Prior to the arrival of Islam, the inhabitants of Ojo town were immersed in various indigenous belief systems, each with unique customs and traditions. In other words, the people of the town were predominantly traditional religionists, worshipping different types of idols, divinities and images. Notable among these are: Ogun, Oro, Orona, Orisa Alaworo, Isaere, Egungun etc. They also belong to many occultic groups, such as Awo Opa, Oloru, and Osugbo etc. (Rufai, 2017). The pre-Islamic religious practices in Ojo town played a vital role in the spiritual and social fabric of the community, offering insights into the cultural heritage that continues to resonate today and encouraging tolerance in a rapidly changing world.

The Antecedent and Introduction of Islām in Ojo

Religion plays a vital role in shaping the cultural fabric of societies. In the case of Ojo Town, Lagos state, Nigeria, the emergence of Islām has left an indelible mark on its history. This section aims to explore the historical background and trace the remarkable journey of Islām's influence on the development and architectural landscape of Ojo Town. By delving into the rich historical context and examining the social, economic and cultural aspects, we can truly appreciate the transformation brought about by Islam in this community. Through its gradual growth and persistent influence, Islām has significantly shaped the religious, social and architectural aspects of Ojo Town, becoming an integral part of its identity and cultural heritage.

Date of Arrival

The exact date of introduction of Islām in Ojo cannot be fixed with precision. This is partly because of lack of scholarly activities and adequate records of events at

that period. However, an oral tradition revealed that Islām arrived around the mid 19th century, during the reign of Baale Alaka (1839-1884) (Rufai, 2017).

Origin and Introduction of Islam in Ojo

The emergence and introduction of Islām in Ojo town cannot be adequately traced without the influence of Eko (Lagos Island) where as at 1775, Islām had become entrenched and a mosque had been built at Idoluwo (Adetona, 2012). History has it that during this period, Islām was more or less practiced in secret, as calls to prayers were usually made inside palm wine gourd for fear of being persecuted. It was not until the year 1841 that the Lagos Muslims were allowed to worship openly for the first time (Adams, 2004). The first Jumat service was held in that year at the Animashaun Mosque at the junction of Shitta Street, by Animashaun lane; and the chief Imām was Imām Salu. This was made possible, among other factors, by the arrival of Muslims from Sierra-Leone in many groups and the re-installation of Oba Akitoye on the Lagos throne. Thus, Muslim community gradually became very large and important in the influence of neighbouring towns and villages (Fasinro, 2004).

Due to the economic viability of Lagos, it used to attract a horde of traders from neighbouring towns who visited the place for commercial activities – buying and selling of different types of commodities. It was during one of such trade routines that some youths of Ojo, who had witnessed the practice of Islām, felt the need to introduce it in the town (Rufai, 2017). As at that time, Lagos used to parade a number of Islamic scholars, some of whom were itinerant scholars from northern parts of Nigeria and others from some parts of Yoruba land, like Ilorin, Iseyin, Oyo, and Iwo etc. (Doi, 1984). A man called Baba Sala, another account referred to him as Mallam Yusuf, was reputed to be a scholar in his own right, by virtue of being leading a small congregation and also teaching children the Qur’ān around a corner on the Lagos Island. He was thus approached by the Muslim youths on their decision to introduce the religion of Islām in their town. After necessary arrangements and preparation, he was invited to the town to commence the religious campaign. He was consequently accommodated at the ‘Oju Oba Ebule’ compound by Labinjo, where he immediately started to teach Islām to the people and exhibit the ideals of Islamic culture (Rufai, 2017).

Early Muslims/Reverts in Ojo

He (Baba Sala) began his religious campaign by inviting people into the religion through lectures; and teaching them the rudiments of the religion and Qur’ān literacy. Of course, this was met with series of persecution from the traditional worshippers. They were highly hostile to the new religion and made efforts to halt its spread. In spite of all these, people started coming to him and entrusted their children under his care for Qur’anic education and upbringing. Among the first set of people to embrace the religion were the youths that initiated and facilitated the coming of the introducer. They were thus referred to as the first reverts and the early Muslims in Ojo town. They include:

1. Shuaib Olugbemi, who later became the first chief Imam of Ojo central mosque.
2. Sule Alaka, the son of Baale Alaka

3. Salami Aya, the first Mu'adhin of the Ojo central mosque
4. Ojo Are
5. Ali Kiniun
6. Ali Labinjo (Rufai)
7. Aguda
8. Dauda (Rufai, 2017)

In consonance with the tradition of Islām, the new reverts underwent processes and procedures to make them Muslims; these include pronouncing the statement of testimony of faith (shahādah) spiritual bath (ghusl dukhūlul Islām), change of name and indoctrination through basic teachings of Islām. In this way the new reverts/early Muslim began to bear Muslim names thereby jettisoning their former names that have idolistic connotations.

Appointment of Imāms and Leadership Rift in Ojo

The Imām is viewed as the leader who not only leads but also guides the congregation under him. His leadership role involves leading in five obligatory and ceremonial Ṣalawāt, Janāzah (funeral) prayer and conducting ceremonies like marriage, child naming. He also teaches them the rudiments and the fundamentals of the religion through sermon (Khuṭbah) and counseling. In view of the onerous task of the post of Imām, Islām provides adequate selection processes and conditions to be followed in its appointment. Such conditions include sound knowledge of Islām ('ilm), maturity (bulūgh) and being of good characters (Abbas, 2009). Over the years, the appointment of chief imams and the leadership of the town's Muslim community have been a subject of controversy and rift among the Muslims. This ongoing dispute has resulted in divisions within the community, leading to a significant strain on the cohesion and unity that once characterized Ojo town.

Appointment of First Chief Imām of Ojo Central Mosque (1875 – 1949)

The first appointed Chief Imām of Ojo Central Mosque was Imām Shu'aib Olugbemi, who was unanimously chosen and endorsed by the royal head. He was appointed by virtue of being one of the persons that facilitated the introduction of Islām in Ojo, and having gained a level of Qur'ān literacy from Baba Sala (the introducer of Islām). Imām Shu'aib who was a son of a prominent figure in Ojo, Bashorun Olugbemi led the Muslims in prayers and other religious activities for many years until his death in 1949. During this time, there was obviously no contest for the post as Islām was still at its infancy and the Imām was more knowledgeable in his own right (Rufai, 2017). Imām Shuayb after his death in 1949 was buried around the premises of the mosque.

Appointment of Second Chief Imām of Ojo Central Mosque (1949-1962)

After the death of Imām Shu'aib in 1949, his nephew Abdul Azeez Gbadamasi became the second Chief Imām of Ojo Central Mosque. He led the Muslims in prayer for few years before he became incapacitated due to illness. During this period, Imam Folami in 1958 had been nominated to act as the Chief Imam until he died in the year 1962 and was buried around the premises of the mosque (Raji, 2019).

Imamship Tussle after the Death of Imām Abdul Azeez

Due to the death of Imām Abdul Azeez Gbadamasi in 1962, the need to appoint a new Chief Imām presented itself as there should be no vacuum in the post of Imām. Consultations were made as to who should become the next chief Imām. It should be noted that while in search of a new Chief Imam, Alhaji Folami continued the role of Imam in acting capacity. The Olugbemi family who had produced the two previous Imāms in succession, once again nominated a member of the family by name Muritala Olugbemi, the son of Imām Shu'aib against the preferred choice of the jamat (congregation). The jamat had wanted Alhaji Lamina Folami to become the substantive after the death of Imām Abdul Azeez (Rufai, 2017). According to Rufai, Alhaji Lamina Folami led the Muslims in prayers for upward of six years in acting capacity before the demise of Imam Abdul Azeez Gbadamasi.

For avoidance of any rift, the jamat later agreed to the nomination of Olugbemi family and Alfa Muritala who was living in Mushin was brought to the congregation for public approval. Certain amount of money (10 pounds precisely) was handed over to the Jamat as nomination fee, which was shared among the elders and Alfas of the mosque. Alfa Muritala however pleaded that he should be given some time, 2 years precisely for him to officially retire from public service after which he will assume fully the position of Imam. The two years grace elapsed and Alfa Muritala failed to show up and assume his duty as the Imam. It was also alleged in some quarters that Alfa Muritala was discovered to be grossly deficient in Qur'ān literacy as he could neither read nor write any portion of the Qur'ān. It was even worse as he cannot recite Sūratul Fātiḥah perfectly (Chapter One of the Qur'ān) which is a basic condition for a valid Ṣalāh (Okin, 2020). The question that agitated the minds of the elders was that, how can the nominee perform the duties of Imām with his level of illiteracy?

In view of this development, the Olugbemi family demanded from the jamat that the nominee should be given a little time to learn the basic knowledge of the Qur'ān, and that Alhaji Lamina Folami should continue as the Imām in acting capacity. The elders on behalf of the jamat acceded to their request, but alas, Alfa Muritala Olugbemi for several years waiting was found unfit for the post of Imām (Rufai, 2017). This was the situation of things until 1975 when a new king was installed in the town.

Royal Directive for the Installation of a Substantive Imām

After the death of Oba Moses Erinle in December, 1970, there was a vacuum in the stool of the Olojo, and after years of scheming and searching, the lot fell on Yakubu Daudu, who was thus installed as the Olojo of Ojo on the 14TH of March, 1975. Being a Muslim monarch, he intended to mark his 3 months coronation by observing the jumat prayer as a mark of appreciation, albeit with pomp and pageantry. For being aware of the vacuum of a substantive Chief Imām of the Central Mosque, he directed that a substantive Imām be installed forthwith. A letter to that effect was received (see appendix) on the 14th of June, 1975 by the jamat and read to the hearing of all by the General Secretary of the mosque, Alhaji A.G.T Idowu, and with the urgency of the directive (Idowu, 1975). In realization of the royal directive, the jamat wasted no time in presenting Alhaji Lamina Folami who had all along been

acting as the Chief Imām of the Central Mosque, especially as the nominee of Olugbemi family, in all fairness, was not up to the task.

The choice of Alhaji Lamina Folami was unanimous, owing to his good disposition and excellent performance as the acting Chief Imām, and his vast knowledge in both Islamic and western education.

More so, the Jamat felt the need to perform the official installation of the Chief Imām together with other prominent Muslim title chiefs of the central mosque. Preparations were in top gear as several meetings were held at Olorunsogo mosque, Idowu close, Ojo. It is instructive to note that the Olugbemi family and some members of the Oke Ojo Muslims were initially involved in the whole arrangement but later opted out for personal reasons. Those who used to be part of the meetings were: Alhaji Amodu Ayilara (Chairman), Alhaji L.A. Folami, Alhaji A.M.H. Tijani, Alhaji Saka Sule, Alhaji Ahmed Rufai, Alhaji Jubrila Seriki, Alhaji Abbas Liadi, Alhaji Sabitu Idowu, Alhaji A.G.T. Idowu, Alhaji J.J. Okin (Secretary), Alhaji Suberu Ariyo, Alhaji Kamoru Idowu, Alhaji Saka Ogundare, Pa Yaya Amodu (Ladani), Pa Saka Itogbeamu, Pa Aliyu Jinadu, Pa Asani Buraimo, Pa Teslimi Liasu, Pa Sule Okunade, Pa Nasiru Mustafa, Pa Musari Jinadu, Mr. Yisa Abibu, Mr. Rafiu Alimi, Alfa. Jimoh Ijis, Alfa Jafar Raji (Raji, 2019).

The date of the official installation (turbaning ceremony) was fixed, 30th of August, 1975, and invitation cards were distributed all over Lagos State. At the initial stage, the following 9 personalities were nominated as titled chiefs of the central mosque, but some rejected their nominations while only five were turbaned.

1. Alhaji L.A. Folami - Chief Imam
2. Alhaji A.M.H. Tijani - Seriki Musulumi
3. Pa Sule Okunade - Baba Adini
4. Pa Yaya Amodu - Ladani Agba
5. Alhaji Suberu Ariyo - Giwa Adini
6. Pa Saka Itogbeamu - Alaga Adini
7. Pa Aliyu Jinadu - Balogun Adini
8. Pa Yakubu Kasumu - Sarumi Adini
9. Pa Abu Alaka - Noibi Imam

Few days to the historic event, the Chief Imām-Designate, Alhaji L. A. Folami was nowhere to be found, he had fled to a neighbouring town, Agbara in Ogun State for being apprehensive of later development which he was not favourably disposed to. After much persuasion, he was led back to the town with assurances that all will be well (Rufai, 2017).

First Turbaning Ceremony in Ojo

On Saturday, 30th August 1975, the first turbaning ceremony in the history of Ojo town was held at Esa square in front of the central mosque with pomp and pageantry. Alhaji Al-Amīn Aḥmad Folami was officially turbaned as the third Chief Imām of Ojo Central Mosque; Alhaji Abdul Mumin Tijani as the Seriki Musulumi; Alhaji Sulaiman Okunade as the Baba Adini; Alhaji Pa Aliu Jinadu as the Balogun Adini and Pa Sulaiman Itogbe as the Alaga Adini respectively. The turbaning was

performed by the duo of Alhaji Ahmad Rufai and Alhaji Abbas Liadi. The programme was coordinated by Alhaji A.G.T. Idowu and Alhaji J.J. Okin (Raji, 2019).

Being an epoch making event, it was graced by eminent personalities and crème de la crème of the society, they include: Alhaji Babatunde Jose, the Managing Director of Daily Times Group of Companies who was the Chairman of the occasion; Alhaji Wahid Elias, the Baba Adini of Lagos State as the Father of the Day and Alhaja Nusirat Kekere Ekun as the Chairlady (Raji, 2019).

The Aftermath of the Turbaning Ceremony

The first turbaning ceremony was adjudged to be successful and it brought good reputation to the town. The status of the Chief Imām was raised, so much so that it was classified next in hierarchy to the chief Imām of Badagry in the entire Badagry division of Lagos state. Barely a week after the installation of Alhaji Lamina Folami as the Chief Imām of Ojo central mosque, precisely 5th of September, 1975, the first Friday after the official installation, the Olugbemi family shut the entrances of the mosque, barring the entire jumat from observing the jumat prayer. As a result of the closure, the entire Muslim Jamat observed the jumat prayer at the front of the mosque, and subsequently moved to Isale Oro mosque in Ikemo Quarters and later to the mosque of the Chief Imām Folami in his compound in Mapowu, where a number of jumat prayers were held (Rufai, 2017)

In a bid to settle the rift between the two parties, a reconciliation team instituted by the then Chief Imām of Lagos Central mosque, Alhaji Liadi Ibrahim and headed by the Olori Ratibi of Lagos, Alhaji Balogun visited Ojo on the 12th of September 1975 and sat at the palace of the Olojo of Ojo, Oba Yakubu Daudu (Idowu, 1975). After listening to both parties, the reconciliation team tried to broker a truce but it was unfortunate that the reconciliation proved abortive as Olugbemi family was hell-bent on its position. (see appendix for minutes of the reconciliation)

Period of Litigation

Not done, the Olugbemi family, afterwards, instituted a legal action against the Chief Imām for occupying a post in a mosque allegedly owned by their late patriarch. They had argued that Imām Shu'aib who was the first Chief Imām of the Central Mosque had laid the foundation for their family to occupy the post in succession. In other words, they had laid exclusive claim to the post of Chief Imām of the Central Mosque. The legal action was instituted at the Ajegunle Ajeromi Magistrate Court and the plaintiffs in the case were Moriamo Olugbemi, Habibu Olugbemi, Memeunat Olugbemi and Saibu. The defendants were Alhaji L.A. Folami, Alhaji A.M.H. Tijani, Alhaji Sulaiman Okunade, Alhaji Saka Togbe, Alhaji Saka Sule, Alhaji Ahmad Ayilara and Alhaji Andu. The plaintiffs basically sought the relief that Alhaji L.A. Folami should abdicate the post of Chief Imām which was their exclusive property. The court on the 25th of October, 1975 granted their relief ordering Alhaji L.A. Folami to vacate the mosque and cease to be the Chief Imām of Ojo Central Mosque in order to avoid violence and public disturbance (Olorunfunmi, 2021).

Split of the Jamat (Congregation) and Birth of a New Central Mosque

Following the judgment of the court, Alhaji L.A. Folami and some elders of the jamat decided to appeal against the rulings of the Magistrate court. As the process of appeal was ongoing, some members of the jamat prevailed against this move and suggested that another piece of land be purchased for the construction of a new central mosque. In this regard, Alhaji Nafiu Sanni, Alhaji Isa Mustafa and Alhaji J.J. Okin intimated Alhaji Ahmad Rufai of the availability of a piece of land which had earlier been partly secured by Alhaji Nafiu Sanni for personal use. The cost of the land was put at N2, 400 (Two thousand and four hundred naira). Alhaji Rufai Ibrahim approached the chief Imām and requested for the jamat's money, six hundred naira (N600) kept with him for the payment of the land leaving out a balance of one thousand eight hundred naira (N1, 800). The balance was contributed by the following twelve members of the jamat: Alhaji A.G.T. Idowu, Alhaji K.F.B. Omoledun, Alhaji Rufai Ibrahim, Alhaji Isa Mustafa, Alhaji Nafiu Sanni, Alhaji Rahman Onilado, Alhaji Abu Sanni, Alhaji Kamoru Idowu, Alfa Jafar Raji, Alhaji Rahman Rufai, Alhaji Lamidi Rabi'u and Alhaji J.J. Okin. With the money completed, the piece of land with survey No. BOE/LA5088/84 drawn by B.O. Ejekwe was officially purchased from Idowu Abotajagbe family of Mapowu, Ojo. The twelve members also contributed N80 (Eighty naira) each and two bundles each of Zinc, nails, planks and other materials needed for the temporary construction of the new central mosque. Thus a new central mosque was birthed on October 18, 1976 giving a relief and an end to the legal tussle between the two parties (Olorunfunmi, 2021).

In a new development, the foundation block for the construction of the permanent central mosque was laid in February 1978 to the glory of Almighty Allāh, and the official launching of the mosque was held on February 4th 1979. In view of the event that led to the Imamship crisis (that borders on knowledge) and the split of the jamat, the new central mosque was therefore named 'The Central Mosque, Ojo (Imololadini)' (Rufai, 2017). This goes to confirm the position of Islām that the post of an Imām should be based primarily on sound knowledge and not hereditary.

In this way, Alhaji Lamina Folami became the first chief Imām of the Central Mosque, Ojo (Imololadini). During the period of his incapacitation, Alhaji Mumin Tijani acted as the chief Imām until 1995 when he could no longer do so due to health challenges. Afterwards, Alhaji Rufai Ibrahim took turn as the acting chief Imām until the death of Alhaji Lamina Folami in 2001, after which he became the substantive Chief Imām of the Central Mosque (Rufai, 2017).

Implication of the Conflict on the Community Cohesion and Islamic Practice

The Imamship conflict in Ojo town, Lagos State, has far-reaching consequences on the unity and cohesiveness of the Muslim community. Disputes regarding the selection of the Imam from the outset, led to divisions within the community. Two factions emerged, each supporting a particular candidate, resulting in a fragmented Muslim identity. This fragmentation actually weakened communal bonds, making it difficult for members to collaborate on social and charitable initiatives.

The conflict created mistrust among community members. Individuals began to question each other's motives and loyalties, undermining the foundation of mutual respect and cooperation that is essential for a cohesive community. Many community members felt disillusioned or alienated, leading to reduced participation in communal prayers, events and activities. A case in point was the situation of the first central mosque, Ojo being deserted for quite a long period occasioned by the actions of a particular family laying claim of ownership of the central mosque. This decline in engagement diminished the vibrancy of the first central mosque. Moreover, the conflict hindered collaborative efforts to address pressing social issues such as education, poverty and healthcare that were enjoyed by other neighbouring communities. Young Muslims in Ojo were particularly affected by the conflict, as they were torn between differing factions. This actually resulted in a loss of interest in religious practices and community involvement, which can have long-term implications for the future of the Muslim community in the area.

While the imamship conflict brought about a fractured Muslim community, it also presents opportunities and benefits. Positively, the conflict led to the establishment of two indigenous central mosques, a development that has brought about several benefits to the community. In other words, it is viewed in some quarters as a blessing in disguise, as the two mosques later encouraged collaborative efforts to bridge differences and work towards unity, promoting tolerance and understanding within the community. More people now have access to mosque services, alleviating congestion, and ensuring a more comfortable worship experience. With two centers for worship, community members have more opportunities to participate in religious activities, educational programmes and social services. Each mosque now caters for different needs, preferences and cultural backgrounds, thus enhancing community engagement and involvement.

Pre-requisite for Appointment of Chief Imam in Islam

At this juncture, it is pertinent to briefly discuss and highlight some of the pre-requisites and conditions for the appointment, nomination or selection of an Imām according to the Islamic provisions, which of course overrides the idea of hereditary succession and discourages arbitrariness. In view of this, extra care must be taken in the selection or appointment of an Imām in any Muslim community.

Selection Process and Methods of Appointing an Imām

The Imām according to the Shari'ah is appointed on the basis of his competence and qualities. He must possess theoretical knowledge of various aspects of Islām as well as their practical application in everyday life. The following conditions, among others validate the leadership of an Imām in a given community. In other words, a prospective Imām must possess certain qualities which include:

1. Adequate knowledge: Ample knowledge is the first core quality for the selection of an Imām in Islām. Members of the Islamic faith look to the Imam for answers and guidance, so knowledge is critical for an Imām. He should have complete knowledge of the Qur'ān and Islamic faith and of spiritual and religious laws (Shari'ah). He must know and understand the practices of Islam and comprehensive meanings of the

teachings of the Islamic jurisprudence, Aḥādīth and other sciences of Islamic studies (Musa, 2007).

2. Mental stability: For the Imām to discharge his responsibilities effectively, he must be in full control of his senses. This is because if an Imām is discovered to be momentarily insane, any cognate actions he takes within the period of his mental instability becomes ineffectual.
3. Maturity: A prospective Imām must have attained the age of legal responsibility so that he can discharge his duties with utmost ability.
4. Sound Health: A prospective Imām must be of sound health, free from any ailments or deformities that could hinder him from performing his duties effectively.
5. Honesty: He must be honest in all his dealings and eschew all acts of indecencies.
6. Moral Qualities: An Imām's morality and ethics must be above reproach. He should be pure and free from sin. He must infallibly follow all of the laws of Islām and not make errors in his everyday life. As a leader, he must lead by example and earn the trust of his followers and of society.
7. Boldness and Courage: An Imām must be the bravest individual of Islamic society because without that courage of the leader, it is not possible to accept him as a leader. He must have courage in face of the difficult events of life and sudden and unexpected happenings. He must be courageous before those who use coercion and who are oppressive and courage before external and internal enemies of Islam (Musa, 2007)

Criteria for Selecting the Most Qualified Imām in Islām

The Imām of the Muslims undoubtedly should be such a person who possesses the deepest knowledge and understanding of the Qur'ān. He should have committed a large portion of it to memory, and should be able to recite it well with the Tajwīd. In addition to this, he should have deep insight into its meaning, contents and understand its messages well.

However, in a situation where two or more candidates are equal in the above quality, the Prophet (SAW) recommends additional considerations for selecting the best candidate from the pool of qualified individuals. This is highlighted in the following prophetic tradition:

The Imām of the people should be the one who is the most versed in the book of Allāh (Qur'ān). If they are equal in this, then the one who is most knowledgeable of the Sunnah. If they are equal in the Sunnah, then (it is) the eldest. And no man should be an Imām for another when the other holds authority and one should not occupy his place of honour in his house without permission. (Ahmad and Muslim)

Arising from the above tradition, all the four schools of Islamic Law elaborate on the criteria for determining a most suitable candidate for the post of an Imām. This is summarized as follows: Accuracy in Qur'ān recitation, knowledge of fiqh, piety, age, moral conduct, historical antecedents, especially in upholding tenets of justice, voice quality, boldness, hygiene, physique, family nobility, and experience as a subsidiary Imām (Abdul Aziz, 2011).

1. In the same vein, the agreed method of selecting an Imām is through Shūra, which is made up of committee of learned scholars in Arabic and Islamic knowledge in the Muslim community. This Shūra method had been in practice since the period of the

Prophet as the appointments of the orthodox caliphs were done via this method. The Qur'ān illustrates the significance of Shūra in a number of verses as pre-requisite for the selection and or appointment of an Imām in Islām (Salisu, 2005).

In other words, the Shari'ah allows Muslim members of a community to choose someone who is considered knowledgeable and wise in the knowledge of Arabic and Islām. This should be based on the earlier analysed criteria as the Imām represents the holy Prophet in the mosque and his duties and responsibilities are of unique importance and significance in the religious system of Islām. Only such a person, therefore, should be appointed for this job, who is on the whole the best man available among the worshippers not only in matters of knowledge, righteousness, spirit of sacrifice and insight into religion (which are the necessary qualities of an Imām), but he should also possess leadership qualities to guide them in the practical affairs of life (Lateef, 2003).

CONCLUSION

This study has provided an in-depth examination of the imamship scuffle in Ojo town, Lagos State, Nigeria, revealing the complex interplay between faith, power and identity. The study underscores the significance of understanding the intricacies of Islamic leadership dynamics, community conflicts and the quest for spiritual authority. The imamship tussle stemmed from a combination of factors, including differing interpretations of religious tenets, personal rivalries, hereditary succession and external influences. The community, known for its rich cultural heritage, found itself polarized between competing factions. These divisions manifested in disrupted prayers, fractured communal gatherings, and even public debates that attracted attention beyond the town.

This conflict reveals not only the deep-rooted tensions within religious leadership but also highlights the broader socio-political dynamics at play in Nigeria. The imamship dispute serves as a microcosm for examining how hereditary succession and arbitrariness as regards Islamic leadership can polarize communities, while also acting as a catalyst for social cohesion among different factions. Moving forward, fostering dialogue and understanding among various religious groups is essential for mitigating such conflicts, promoting tolerance and enhancing unity in an increasingly fragmented landscape. Ultimately, the resolution of these disputes must balance respect for tradition with a commitment to inclusive governance, ensuring that faith serves as a bridge rather than a barrier in the quest for communal harmony.

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