

EMERGENT ISSUES IN HETERODOX ISLAM AMONG THE YORUBA OF NIGERIA

(Masalah Berbangkit Dalam Islam Tulen Di Kalangan Kaum
Yoruba Di Nigeria)

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ABSTRACT

The field of Islamic Studies is currently witnessing the growth of a sophisticated body of scholarship on “orthodoxy and heterodoxy” in Islamic religious practices. Such a growing scholarship has largely promoted the perception that heterodox Islam otherwise known as local Islam, popular Islam, people’s Islam or cultural Islam, is not the same as orthodox Islam, which is assumed as real, pure, right, official or revealed Islam. Such a perception lends credence to the impression that the dimension of Islamic religious practices in any setting is supposed to be negotiated and determined by the adherents of Islam in such a setting and not by external factors or considerations. The purpose of this article is to examine the continued spread of heterodox Islam among the Yoruba people of Southwestern Nigeria. The article seeks to identify and analyze the factors instrumental to the growing influence of heterodoxy on orthodoxy, and offer practical recommendations for possible purification of Yoruba Islam from traditional, heretical, heterodox or non-Islamic practices.

Keywords: heterodoxy, orthodoxy, popular Islam, Southwestern Nigeria, yoruba muslims, traditional religious practices

ABSTRAK

Bidang Pengajian Islam kini sedang menyaksikan pertumbuhan suatu badan cendekiawan canggih yang menyelami sifat-sifat Islam tulen dan Islam kacukan dalam pengamalan ugama Islam. Pertumbuhan cendekiawan yang sedemikian telah secara langsung menonjolkan persepsi bahawa Islam kacukan yang

difahamkan sebagai “Islam tempatan, Islam popular, Islam rakyat ataupun Islam budaya” adalah tidak sama dengan “Islam tulen” yang telah difahami sebagai Islam sejati atau Islam tulen yang telah diwahyukan kepada rasul-Nya oleh Allah. Pemahaman yang sedemikian akan tetap memberi pengertian yang mendalam terhadap keseluruhan segi amalan-amalan penganut agama Islam dalam pelbagai keadaan yang ditetapkan oleh penganut-penganut Islam tulen dan bukan dipengaruhi oleh unsur atau sumbangan luaran. Maksud rencana ini adalah untuk menyelidiki perkembangan Islam kacukan yang berterusan dan juga untuk memberi cadangan-cadangan kepada kaum Yoruba di barat daya Nigeria. Rencana ini berusaha untuk mengenal pasti dan menganalisis punca-punca yang melibatkan perkembangan pengaruh Islam kacukan yang berkembang luas ke atas Islam tulen, dan rencana ini juga mengutarakan cadangan-cadangan yang mantap untuk memungkinkan martabat kemurnian agama Islam yang dianuti oleh kaum Yoruba daripada dicemari dan dinodai oleh amalan-amalan tradisi yang munafik, bercanggah aqidah atau lebih tepat lagi amalan-amalan kaum fasiq.

Kata kunci: penyelewengan, kelaziman, Islam popular, Barat Daya Nigeria, Muslim Yoruba, amalan agama tradisi

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary scholars and researchers in the area of Islamic studies have contributed immensely to the growing scholarship revolving around the categorization of religious practices into orthodoxy and heterodoxy. According to Calder (2000), the word ‘orthodoxy’ means ‘right teaching’ and in Islam, is used in reference to the Sunni tradition, although it is not impossible that a non-Sunnis, too, such as the shiites can also define for themselves ‘a set of right beliefs and do not go very far beyond them’. It should be pointed out straightaway that Cadre’s view in this regard does not suggest correctly that the Shi’i tradition is accommodated alongside the Sunni tradition in what is traditionally known as Islam orthodoxy. However, Denny (1985) opines that orthodoxy is not the best term to use when characterizing Islam as it is better to use the term ‘orthopraxy’ meaning ‘right practice.’ Calder (2000) dismisses Denny’s view in this connection as untrue and argues that although “it may well be true from the point of view of a sociologist, that in a given Muslim society there are practices which are rejected by that society, it is untrue that the practices of any particular Muslim society will represent orthopraxy”.

Denny’s argument however finds support in Langer and Simon (2008) who posit that “orthodoxy is usually juxtaposed in an implicit or explicit opposition to a number of disparate notions, such as orthopraxy, folk religion, minority view, heresy, or heterodoxy.” Langer and Simon add that “anthropologists who

focus on such concepts do not hesitate to use it in contrast to something like folk Islam”. In the discipline of Islamic Studies, however, Islamic religious practices are described as orthodox when they are based on Quran and Sunna or are established within a certain authoritative mainstream. Such a perception is in keeping with “the Islamic idea that Islam must be understood as determined by its sacred tradition, fixed in the founding texts of the Quran and the Hadith collections (Shrode 2008). Yet it is noteworthy that as ubiquitous as the word orthodoxy is in contemporary Islamic scholarship, it is sometimes avoided but tacitly implied or expressed through the instrumentality of other related terms, whereas heterodoxy is normally openly addressed (Lowenstein 1994).

The implication of the foregoing is that there is a variety of concepts through which the idea of orthodoxy is expressed. According to Gibb (1954), orthodoxy is at times described as Sunnism. This in the opinion of Langer and Simon (2008) confirms ‘the Islamic topos that right belief and right behaviour would consist in following the Sunna of the Prophet and heresy in opposing him’ Yet Langer and Simon maintain that although orthodoxy is not an uncommon translation of Sunna ‘to equate orthodoxy with Sunnism results in definition which is too narrow and too broad at the same time owing essentially to the fact that ‘sunnism is not the only orthodoxy in Islam, as there is, at least, the Shiite variant’ Shrode (2008) seems to have drawn the blind and adjusted our view of the subject under discussion when he rationalizes that the popularity of the terms ‘orthodoxy’ and ‘heterodoxy’ in professional jargon is probably due to their superficial clarity owing to the fact that they do not need to be negotiated among scholars, but can be derived from inner-religious principles of ‘right belief.’ Shrode (2008) further argues that definitions of heterodoxy are properly never self-designative although there are particular cases where groups do use ‘heterodox’ as a self-designating adjective - whereas orthodoxy is ultimately claimed by all. This confirms the Quranic stipulation that “every party is pleased with its own style” (Q. 23 : 53 & 16 : 32) and is particularly true of the religious practices of the Yoruba Muslims of Southwestern Nigeria where even the most heretical or heterodox Muslim sees him or herself as practicing the idea Islam. Before discussing the claims or polemics revolving around orthodoxy and heterodoxy among the Yoruba Muslims, it is pertinent to give a geographical description of the area and a historical account of the spread of Islam among its people.

GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION OF THE YORUBA

The Yoruba people are geographically located in a country stretching on the west from around the area of Badagry to around Warri and inland until they almost reach the Niger around latitude 9⁰N (Akinjogbin & Ayandele 1980). There is a natural boundary between it and the Nupe, formed by some parts of the

Nigeria, thereby causing the Yoruba to spread Westwards from around latitude 5°N and cut across the whole of Dahomey and reach into the East of Togo. From the coast, the country rises gradually from low-lying swampy regions with thick undergrowth to forest belt and finally semi-or derived savannah, which in Porto Novo (Ajase), reaches almost to the coast. A country largely constituted by low flat plateau with only a range of hills, the Yoruba hills, running from east to west and almost cutting the country into two. Yorubaland enjoys a fairly stable weather, with two clearly defined seasons in the year, the rainy season lasting from about April until September, to April, whereas from November until February, “the cold dry wind from the Sahara desert, called the *harmattan*, affects the country” (Akinjogbin & Ayandele 1980). Rainfalls never cease completely all the year round which is why there is a favourable climate which itself is favourable to agriculture thereby making it possible to have two harvests in one year (Akinjogbin & Ayandele 1980).

THE SPREAD OF ISLAM AMONG THE YORUBA

Islam spread to Yoruba land through the activities of itinerant preachers from Borno and Hausaland, in the seventeenth century (Balogun 1980). Some of those *mallams* or *marabouts* (i.e. Muslim scholars and spiritualists) and itinerant traders probably ‘moved as far south as old Oyo and a few other urban centres of the old Oyo Empire’. Consequently, a Muslim community emerged in old Oyo by the middle of the seventeenth century. That community was so committed to the Islamic faith that right from its early days it “sought guidance from Katsina on (how to determine the precise time of sunset, may be in connection with the Ramadan fast, which was why in response, Abu Abdullah B. Muhammad B. Masanih, (Dan Masani) wrote *Shifa’ al ruba fi tahrif fuqaha Yoruba* (Bivar & Kiskett 1962).

The implication of this historical event is that Islam was already well grounded and strongly established among such people at the time of their request for such Islamic guidance. According to Balogun (1980), “if, in fact, the document was written to guide the Muslim community in Yoruba land, it could attest not only to the age of Islam in Yorubaland but also to the amount of attention paid to the practice of the religion as early as the seventeenth century.” Relying on Richard and Lander 1838), Balogun opines that it is certain that by the eighteenth century, Islam had spread far beyond Oyo, along the trade routes, to as far afield as Igboho, Kisi, Saki, Iseyin, Ikoyi, Ogbomoso, Owo, Ijana, Ketu and Baagri, each of which was a major and notable settlement or township in Yoruba land. Such a rapid spread of Islam to various parts of Yoruba land, as noted by Balogun (1980) is a pointer to the fact that the Yoruba were, since the seventeenth century, not only practicing but also preaching and promoting the Islamic faith which they even propagated to as far afield as Dahomey, in what is now known as Republic of Benin.

ORTHODOX ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS PRACTICES AMONG THE YORUBA

A meaningful discussion of orthodox Islamic practices in Yoruba land will expectedly begin with a historical flashback into the origins of the individuals who were instrumental to the spread of the religion in the territory. This is so because the nature of Islamic religious practices in Yoruba land is akin to the nature of Islam in Borno, especially during the early years of the religions. As noted earlier, the spread of Islam to Yoruba land was essentially an instrumentality of the effort of itinerant preachers from Borno and Hausa land. To Borno, Islam was introduced by Muhammad bn Wani, an Arab Muslim preacher from Fezzan who spent significant part of his life in the area having witnessed the five-year reign of King Bulum, the six-year reign of King Arki, the four-year reign of King Huwami and the fourteen-year reign of King Hummi who reigned from 1097 to 1085 C.E (Rufai 1993).

After the advent of Islam in Borno attention of Muslims from Central Sudan shifted to it and relations were consequently established between the Borno Muslims and the Arab world especially Maghrib and the Middle East. These relations advanced during the reign of Mai Dunama 1 (d.1150) through that of Dunama 11 (1221 – 1259 C.E), Alli Ghazi (1474 -1503) as well as Idris Aloma (1570 – 1602 C.E) (Rufai, 1993). It is noteworthy that the reign of Idris Aloma witnessed the golden age of Islam in Borno. Aloma had gone on pilgrimage to Makkah in 1579 C.E. where he built a gigantic structure for the accommodation of Borno pilgrims. The influence on him of his experience in the holy lands and the various Arab countries visited by him was so great that, on his return to Borno, he established Islamic courts and substituted the traditional or customary legal system with the Shari'ah (Clark 1982; Ibn Furtua; Rufai 1993).

It was during this golden age of Islam in Borno that Borno preachers introduced Islam to Yoruba land. That explains why the puritanical features that characterize Islam during its golden age in Borno, were noticeable among early Muslims in Yoruba land, who tried to practice Islam in its orthodox and undiluted form, at least to the best of their ability. Among the characteristics that were common to Yoruba Muslims of that age was that they had their separate quarters which was normally characterized by features of an Islamic community, 'as soon as their number could sustain a separate community' (Balogun 1980). In such quarters, 'they established mosques and soon acquired distinctive character through some of their habits and customs associated with the practice of Islam such as the five times daily congregational prayers, the mode of dressing and the total abstention from alcohol by some pious Muslims'. This distinctive character of early Yoruba Muslims was actually imbibed from the Muslim preachers and itinerant traders from Borno who themselves had

imbibed such features from the adherents of Islam from the holy lands and various Arab countries.

The alien Muslims from Borno and the Arab world were so much admired and appreciated by some members of the indigenous population, especially the traders who had close dealings with them. According to Balogun (1980), it was these alien Muslim traders, who first exposed the Yoruba Muslims to the outward manifestation of Islam' as "their settlements along the trade routes and in the major trading centres constituted the nursery for the eventual propagation of Islam in Nigeria" of which the Yoruba land is a notable part. The 'right' and 'real' Islamic religious practices inherited by early Yoruba Muslims from the alien Muslim preachers account for the dominant nature of orthodoxy among them for a long time before the infiltration of local, traditional and cultural practices into their Islamic religious life whose pendulum later swung towards heterodoxy which is now fast gaining momentum among them. It may not be out of place to discuss at this juncture the evolution of heterodoxy among them which is the subject of the following section.

THE EVOLUTION OF HETERODOX ISLAM AMONG THE YORUBA

The transition of Islamic religious practices in Yoruba land from orthodoxy to heterodoxy did not materialize just overnight; it was rather one of the three developmental stages experienced by the religion in Southwestern Nigeria. These three stages have been graphically captured by Balogun (1980) where he writes, that "Islam began as a religion of aliens, then became the religion of an influential or ruling elites before it finally got accepted by masses and became popular and later a militant religion"

In the estimation of the present writer, the stage of being 'a religion of aliens' represents the stage of orthodox Islam while that of being 'the religion of an influential or ruling elite' and finally getting accepted by masses and becoming popular, marks the infiltration of heresies into the orthodox practices, whereas 'later becoming a militant religion' signifies the emergence of puritanical movement committed to the eradication of heterodox Islamic practices. It would be noted however that the second stage namely, that of popular Islam is the primary concern of the present article although the other two stages are addressed in passing.

It is not out of place to state at this juncture that the heterodox dimension of Islam is not peculiar to Yoruba land or Nigeria. This has rather been a feature of the religious practices of Muslims in various parts of Africa. This opinion finds support in the words of Peel and Steward (1989) who observe that Islam has been assimilated into African societies in different ways and that each

community of African Muslims had developed its own patterns of relationship with Islam; and the historical circumstances and material conditions of each society determine the nature of things. This is particularly true of Nigeria where the dimension of Islamic religious practices is now being negotiated and determined by the local adherents of the religion and not by external factors or considerations. In fact, the contemporary history of Islam in Nigeria is replete with instances of a wide range of interaction with African traditional belief systems and practices. According to Clark and Linden (1984), 'there have been times when, Muslims being a minority, a pluralist response to other cultures and religions occurred, and 'Muslims took the view that different forms of primal religion could exist side by side with them in the same society, which is why 'individual Muslims, and whole communities, throughout Nigeria have incorporated into Islam to varying degrees different aspects of traditional life...'

The accommodation or toleration of some indigenous religious systems in Yoruba land by Islam is traceable to a number of factors. Notable among such factors was that some of the 'solutions' offered by such traditional religious systems, to problems of explanation, social structure, and fertility have often appeared more effective to the local community (Clark & Linden 1984). The presumed efficacy of such solutions as offered by the traditional system confronted by Islam has remained an attraction that makes difficult their total elimination from the religious practices of Yoruba Muslims. The point being made in this connection has been graphically captured in the words of Clark and Linden (1984), that:

The relevance and immediacy of masked cults and the figurative art of shrines, which at least in theory Islam rejects, have clearly not diminished under the impact of Muslim practice. Indigenous religious systems, embedded in particular social formations and economic activities, have therefore rarely been eliminated in contact with Islam. The process of Islamization has more often produced creative adaptations of traditional categories; the bori cult in northern Nigeria is an example; or wider socio-economic changes have more abruptly destroyed the cultural nexus in which forms of primal religion thrived. In the later case Islam is often the beneficiary but rarely the sole cause.

Clarke and Linden's argument that Islam is often the beneficiary of the destruction of the cultural nexus in the Nigerian religious setting may sound perturbing to an irrational mind. Yet such an argument has featured prominently in contemporary scholarship on African cultures and religions. For instance, Ade Ajayi (2001) a foremost African historian maintains that it is the tolerance of Yoruba traditional religion that metamorphosed into religious cohabitation between Islam, Christianity and traditional religion. He adds that the practice

of divination, as seen in *Ifa* which is closely akin to the system of divination through sand writing as practiced in medieval Islam, attests to early contacts between the Yoruba and Islam. He also adds that 'reference has been made to a history of the Yoruba written in Yoruba with Arabic lettering in the 17th century although no copy of the book has yet been found'. According to him, the implication of this is that traditional Yoruba religion developed on aptitude for toleration and adaptation to Islam even before the 19th century'.

However, it may not be true altogether to state that Islam is the beneficiary of its cohabitation with traditional religion in Yoruba land. Islam, it may be argued, did not take without giving. It is therefore of great value to point out that the leadership of traditional community as represented by the traditional ruler characteristically hunted for a Muslim scholar with charm, magical power, amulet or Quranic medicine, with a view to supporting himself with such protective and preventive powers from the Quran, the efficacy of which has been widely attested to Balogun (1980) presents a clear picture of the give-and-take relationship between Islam and Yoruba traditional setting when he writes:

The arrival of the Muslim scholar, especially one credited with mystic power, was usually significant. Because of his fame, the Muslim leader could not keep away from the local ruler indefinitely. In fact both the ruler and the Muslim scholar had good reasons to be friends. The ruler saw the Muslim scholar as a mystic who could use his mystic powers to solve some pressing problems, to cause rain to fall during a draught, to make him win his wars and thereby enhance his prestige, and to offer special prayers for protection against witchcraft or nullify the evil effect of witchcraft if its spell had already been cast. It is irrelevant whether or not the Muslim scholar actually possessed the mystic power attributed to him. What is important is the belief that he did possess the power.

In such a scenario as described above, it is not impossible that the ruler would not rely solely on the *mallam* or *marabout* as he would probably consult alongside him, diviners, herbalists, soothsayers and even fortune tellers of the traditional religious orientation. This is not without some implications for Islamic religious practices among the Yoruba who having seen their ruler shuttle between a Muslim scholar and a traditional diviner, no longer see anything bad in an admixture of Islamic and Yoruba traditional practices. Yet that may well be merely a remote factor in the growth of heterodoxy among Yoruba Muslims. The point being made in the foregoing finds an articulate expression in the words of Doi (1984) who observes that Islamic religious practices among the Yoruba are heavily diluted with some Yoruba traditional religious beliefs, customs, antiquated social organizations, cults and philosophy

all of which are interwoven. He further observes that ‘despite the acculturation through the Arabic language, culture and dress that accompanies Islam and the responsive adaptation by the Muslims, there are certain shred of traditional belief in Yoruba gods, customs, superstitious, philosophy, arts and witchcrafts etc., which these Muslims have found difficult to shed.’ According to Doi (1984), the inter-practice of both Islam and traditional religions results in syncretism. However, the present writer does not see most Yoruba Muslims involved in traditional practices alongside their profession of Islam, as practicing traditional religions. Rather, he regards them as merely diluting their Islam with Yoruba traditional practices and therefore prefers to describe them as heterodox and not syncretic.

Nonetheless, this study is not oblivious of the note of warning sounded by some contemporary scholars of Religion, especially De Weese (2002), over the unfashionableness or inappropriateness of the idea of restricting what is ‘Islamic’ to the Quran and a limited body of Hadith. Such a practice is associated with ‘contemporary Muslim fundamentalists and the medieval jurists they cite’ and totally dissociated from ‘the majority of self-defined Muslims over centuries or even of most medieval jurists’ as well as ‘scholars who would analyze and interpret Muslim religious life historically or at present.’ Criticizing De Weese’s view in this regard, Shrode (2008) agrees with the last part of his argument concerning the role of scholarship and disagrees with the idea of absoluteness expressed in the first part of his statement. Shrode (2008) suspects the emergence from such an argument of ‘another dubious dichotomy’ between ‘a new and somewhat foreign fundamentalism’ on the one hand, and ‘a more authentic, lived local Islam, to which the former is suggested to be alien,’ on the other. Shrode (2008) opines that such an argument is capable of promoting the perception that the ‘majority of self-defined Muslims’ practice their religion isolated from global Islamic discourses as well as the historical processes and conflicts such discourses are subject to.

Although Shrode (2008) acknowledges the fact local religious discourses have been affected by ‘fundamentalist’ Islamic ideas and a critique of certain traditional religious practices for more than a century’ and that ‘discourses about ‘truly’ and ‘not truly’ Islamic practices are part of any local Islam within any social setting,’ he ventures to challenge the idea of distinguishing between what is ‘truly’ Islamic and what is ‘not truly’ Islamic among such practices. Unless there is a credible evidence to the effect that such Islamic religious practices are representative of their revealed or original form and totally devoid of any local influence especially in the context of the Yoruba setting such an attempt by Shrode (2008) at challenging the dominant scholarship on the subject may well be dismissed as unfounded. Specific details of such pattern of religious practices may be given in the following section.

HETERODOX ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS PRACTICES AMONG THE YORUBA

There are numerous traditional religious beliefs and practices among Yoruba Muslims. Most of such beliefs and practices are of polytheist orientation and grounded in belief in one supreme deity known as 'Orisa' or Olodumare to whom lesser gods are regarded as subordinates (Idowu, 1966). The Yoruba regard the Supreme Being as so great that he is believed to be so removed from human beings that "they need these subordinate deities as communicating intermediaries between them and the supreme deity" (Doi 1984). Accordingly, they give within their imaginations, names or titles to these deities in accordance with their characters or effectiveness. In the opinion of Doi (1984), the Yorubas "found or felt that these gods or goddesses gave course to their agricultural economic, social and political success" and therefore held them in high esteem, although the development of industries, machines and transports has made some of these gods, goddesses, customs and superstitious more prominent than ever before.

Giving specific instances of this, Doi (1984) adds that *Ogun*, esteemed as god of war in the age of internecine wars among tribes is now prominent as the god of iron in the age of industrialization. It is pertinent to point out that experience has shown that there is no significant difference between the Yoruba adherents of traditional religions and their Muslim counterparts, with regards to their view of *Ogun* whom they all give its deserved regard as the god of iron. This confirms Doi's assertion that 'most of the Yoruba superstitions connected with the road, with *ogun* worship and the circumcision of children interact with Islam'. According to Doi (1984), the belief that 'ogun' would be annoyed if a driver killed a duck or a lamb on the road still remains unchanged and 'if this happens, and if sacrifice with dog-killing, roasted yam and palm wine etc is not made, nor a price paid on the victim on the spot the driver is likely to be involved in a ghastly motor accident.' This, as noted by Doi (1984) and as confirmed by the present study (2001), is still commonly believed by Muslims, Christians and the pagans alike.

Other deities concerning which some Yoruba Muslims hold similar beliefs are Sango (god of thunder), *Osun* (god of river), *Esu* (devil) and *Ifa* (the great oracle). A credible evidence of this practice is that most Yoruba Muslims still derive from these gods and goddesses names for their children or new born. Today (2011) as was the case during Doi's study in 1984, many Muslims bear names like *Fasakin* (*Ifa* is brave), *Ogundipe* (*Ogun* is grateful), *Sangoleye* (Sango is praiseworthy) and *Esugbayi* (*Esu!* Accept this). Yet such active or passive involvement in traditional religious practices may not necessarily deter such Muslims from being frontliners in da'wah or Islamic work nor from even becoming imams or notable Islamic scholars in Yoruba land.

Another aspect of the heterodox dimension of Islam among the Yoruba is their belief in various kinds of spiritual being who are present and believed to be capable of intervening in the lives of human beings. In this connection, many Yoruba Muslims believe in various categories of witchcraft, as well as in *emere* and *abiku*, all of which belong to supernatural and mysterious societies. These beings are so dominant in the belief of many Yoruba Muslims that it is common to hear an imam leading a public Muslim supplication, say, '*Olorun maj'owo aye o'tewa,*' meaning 'may we not be overpowered by the supernatural or mysterious world', or '*maj' aarabi ku*' meaning 'may we not encounter an *abiku*' thereby exposing the centrality or prominence of such beings in their estimation. The nature of the interaction between Islam and traditional religious beliefs among the Yoruba is articulated by Doi (1984) when he writes of a man who turned into a deer to eat in an *Okro* farm in the early 1980's:

The deer was shot dead by a hunter, and when it fell, it fell with an unnatural voice belonging not to a deer. "For this reason, the hunter quickly destroyed the heart of the killed deer, before this was requested for by other men. When the hunter confessed that the heart had been destroyed, the deer-human affirmed that nothing again could be done to save him. Shortly after this, he died without previous sickness having vomited some quantity of blood. After all, he was named Yesufu (a Yoruba version of Yusuf). No doubt he was a Muslim, and besides being a Muslim, he was a wizard. What an interaction!

Again, there is hardly a significant difference between the Yoruba pagans and their Muslim counterparts with regards to belief in supernatural spirits. It is not uncommon to see Yoruba Muslims seeking refuge or offering preventive, protective or propitiative sacrifices to appease gods and seek their support against the evils of such spirits. Yet such practices do not deter them from reading the Quran or fulfilling various Islamic religious obligations such as *Salat, Zakat, Sawm* and others.

It may be inferred from the foregoing that the need to seek refuge against the evil of such supernatural spirits and other factors of similar nature probably accounts for the association of many Yoruba Muslims with secret societies such as *Ogboni* Fraternity and others. The present writer confirms through rigorous investigation and painstaking and persistent inquiries that such secret societies attract members from Muslim and Christians, alongside pagans. The present study therefore confirms the view that:

Such secret societies... draw their members from Muslim and Christian dignitaries, witches and wizards, judges and magistrates, police and military officials, government secretaries and executive

officials, businessmen and women, *babalawos* and *oniseguns*, (i.e. diviners and herbalists), principals of schools and teachers, managers, proprietors and corporation officials etc. (Doi 1984).

Doi (1984) rationalizes that it is not easy for a Muslim to preserve his faith in keeping with the Quran and Sunnah, in the face of the temptations posed by such influential secret societies. Consequently, he infers that even if he does not belong to any of such societies but only believes in their existence and the efficacy of their power or influences, his faith cannot be regarded as being in a state of purity or totally devoid of elements of syncretism. This writer aligns with Doi (1984) in this line of argument but insists that such an experience is better described as heterodox than syncretic.

The same factors that were responsible for some Yoruba Muslims' association with secret societies have been identified as instrumental to their scramble for other forms of magical and medicinal powers. Accordingly, many Yoruba Muslims consult *alfas* (Muslim diviners) and even *Ifa* priests to protect themselves against evils or any unpleasant experience, or to have amulets prepared for them or 'certain medicines injected into their blood to make it taste sour.' It is hardly ever possible for many Yoruba Muslims to do without consulting diviners or medicine men in this regard.

However, an entirely different argument has been advanced for the spread of magical and medicinal practices among Yoruba Muslims. Such argument which seems to be providing a rationale for such practices is that:

The new converts to Islam are especially afraid that after leaving their forefathers' animist beliefs and practices, they will be made victims of any of these evil powers. In this case, the *Limamu* (the Imam) a *Mallam* or *Alufa* (a religious teacher) is asked to counteract through prayers, charms or native medicines. This is the reason why the African Muslim ulama (the learned men in religion) are usually engaged in praying for people, preparing amulets (*Tira*) with Quranic medicine over and above their responsibilities of leading prayers in the mosques and teaching in the Quranic schools. In small villages all these responsibilities combine in one man, but in large towns there are found Muslim 'medicine men' in the Muslim societies whose function is to smell out witches before something is done to cure the victim. The old traditional beliefs of their ancestors continue in spite of the fact that people have Islam and fulfill all the Islamic obligations (Doi 1984).

There is yet another dimension to popular Islam among the Yoruba. This concerns the various forms of heresies that are associated with sufi practices among the Yoruba Muslims. For instance, some Yoruba Muslims attach more

importance to *Salat-al-Fatih* than the Quran and even esteem their *shaykh* above the holy prophet of Islam. Such careless and reckless practices as arrogating divine powers to one's self and laying false claim to esoteric knowledge or hidden knowledge (*al-ilm al-batin*), total absorption in God (*fana'*) unity of being (*Wahdat-al-wujud*) as well as fanatical hanging of rosaries on one's neck as a symbol of piety, are not totally in consonance with orthodox Islamic teachings and practices. Closely related to these are healing rituals, divinations and other spiritual manipulations or medicinal practices that are associated with sufi *shaykhs* in Yoruba land. There also are specific sufi recitals that are normally recommended to be performed for special purposes at specific locations near the shrine of a particular saint where the spirit of the saint or *waliyy* is asked for favour or support, owing to the belief that he disposes of special power.

Several reasons have been adduced by sufis for visiting a saint's shrine. These include various personal concerns and spiritual purposes such as state of infirmity, financial handicap, unfulfilled desire, and general spiritual fulfillment. Notable among such sufi shrines as being visited in Yoruba land are those associated with Shaykh Muhammad Jamiu Bulala in Offa, Kwara State, Shaykh Namud-din Al-Kubra in Ibadan, Oyo state, and Shaykh Muhammad Awwal in Oshodi, Lagos State. It is noteworthy that notwithstanding the preponderance of heterodox practices among the Yoruba Muslim sufis, the relationship of the two leading sufi brotherhoods in the country namely, the *Tijaniyya* and the *Qadiriyya* has been one of hostility thereby posing a challenge to various Islamic reformist or revivalist efforts targeted at the enthronement of orthodox Islam. Before making an analysis of such attempted reforms, it is pertinent to discuss the dominant nature of heterodox Islam among the Yoruba, which is what follows next.

THE DOMINANCE OF HETORODOX ISLAM AMONG THE YORUBA

The dominant nature of heterodox Islam among the Yoruba may be illustrated with the growing influence of the *Obas* in the religions. *Obas* are the traditional rulers of various Yoruba townships. They are the custodians of the Yoruba culture and tradition and in fact, chief priests with regards to Yoruba religious practices. Accordingly, they are chief executives in all of the activities going on in their domains which are pagan and animist in religious orientation. That explains why it is paradoxical that *Obas* whose roles and responsibilities include what has been described above now combine such roles with leadership positions in Muslim organizations, settings or communities. A good example of this concerns the positions of the *Obas* in the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) which is the umbrella body for Muslims in Nigeria. Many Yoruba *Obas* occupy the positions of Vice President-Generals in the apex Islamic body which appoints at least a Vice President-General from each state.

Accordingly, the traditional ruler of Oyo generally known as the Alaafin, is the Vice President-General for Oyo State, that of Osogbo known as the Ataoja, is for Osun State, and that of Ondo known as the Osimowe, for Ondo State. It is only in a situation where there is no leading Muslim traditional ruler in a state that any leading, wealthy and influential Muslim personality in that state is appointed as Vice President-General. This is the case with Lagos and Ogun States where business moguls, Chief Abdul Wahab Iyanda Folawiyo and Chief Moshood Abiola were appointed Vice President-Generals, respectively.

It is interesting to note that there is a provision for the position of these *Obas* in the NSCIA, in the apex Islamic body's constitution/organizational structure. Their influence among Yoruba Muslims is so great that the NSCIA requires that cases of Ramadan Moonsighting be referred to them for confirmation and subsequent announcement to the people. This, in clear terms, shows how Yoruba *Obas* combine their traditional and cultural roles with Islamic leadership position. One of the major effects of this is the growing practice of some influential or wealthy Muslims who now pronounce on Islamic theological issues publicly without consulting the Imams.

It should be pointed out that the influence of *Obas* on Yoruba Muslims is not peculiar to the Muslims among them, as non-Muslim *Obas*, too, play Islamic leadership roles in Yoruba land. For instance, it is the *Obas* who appoint and turban the Imams and it does not matter whether the *Oba* that is involved is a Muslim, at least, nominally or an unrepentant pagan. This practice has been institutionalized among the Yoruba without any regard for Islamic principles or regulations. There have been several instances of long delay in the turbaning of the Imam of a town owing simply to the fact a new *Oba* has not been crowned who is the appropriate traditional authority to turban the imam. The rampant nature of the practice was attested to by late founder and former Secretary- General of the League of Imams and Alfas (i.e. Islamic Scholars in Yoruba land, Shaykh Adam Abdullah Al-Ilori, who lamented in 1990 that "it is now over a decade since the *Oba* of Iwo town in Oyo State died. But because no other *Oba* has been crowned, the Muslim community of that town whose imam also died for almost a decade now is yet to know when it will have another imam, not because there are no qualified people but because they are still waiting for an *Oba* to make the choice for them" (al-Iluriyy n.d). Al-Iluriyy further captures the essence of the issue under discussion when he adds that:

The confusion being caused by the traditional rulers in the process of choosing imams for the Muslims is not dissimilar from that of rich men who buy Islamic titles in the mosque in order to have influence on the imams and even acquire the power of kingmakers in the mosque.

Such societal influences on the imam and the mosque as described above explain a major dimension of the infiltration of alien practices into Islam in Yoruba land.

The interplay or interaction of Yoruba tradition and Islamic religious may also be explained through the involvement of some notable Muslim leaders in traditional practices. For instance, the current Secretary General of the apex Islamic body in Nigeria, NSCIA, Dr. Abdul-Lateef Adegbite a Yoruba man, was appointed in August, 1978, as Seriki of Egbaland, and was later installed in January, 1979. By this time, Adegbite had earned a reputation among Nigerian Muslims as a leading Islamic figure, having founded the Muslim Students' Society of Nigeria (MSSN) in April, 1954, the Western State Joint Muslim Organization (WESTJOMO) in August, 1972, and cofounded the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs in 1973, and being a serving National Legal Adviser of the NSCIA. The Seriki title that was conferred on him is a traditional one in Yoruba land. It was not known to the Egbas, who are currently the inhabitants of Abeokuta in Southwestern Nigeria, until 1829 when, dispersed and chastened, they resorted to Ibadan, which proved to be the rallying point of the Yoruba, by regrouping themselves and evolving the first truly Federal Organisation and an all-Egba Military Command (Biobaku 1957).

Consequently, the Egba adopted 'Oyo-Yoruba ideas and titles for their forces'. It should be noted that Seriki is a Hausa word signifying a King (Johnson 1960). However, Biobaku (1957) refers to the Seriki as the general of the youths and the Balogun as the general of the veterans. The implication of this is that the Seriki is a leading War Chief and a remarkable force to reckon with in the Egba Community. The appointment of Adegbite, a frontliner in the propagation of Islam, to such a traditional post attracted diverse comments and criticisms especially from Muslim youth organizations under the umbrella of the National Council of Muslim Youth Organisations (NACOMYO) whose leadership did not equivocate in declaring Adegbite's acceptance of such a title as being at variance with Islamic teachings.

He was presently with insignia of office before he took the oath of office which was followed by Royal Blessing by the paramount traditional ruler of Egbaland, His Royal Majesty Oba Oyebade Lipede, all on the day of the installation. Almost two decades after that event, the same traditional ruler told the present writer in an interview in his Ake Palace, Abeokuta, on March 11, 1997, that as Seriki of Egbaland, 'Dr. Adegbite has remained a devout Muslim, a loyalist, traditionalist and a man of pleasant manner.' It is interesting to note however, that being 'a Muslim' and at the same time 'a traditionalist' is the most articulate description of 'heterodox Islam' in Yoruba land.

It is not out of place to add that the same individual was appointed Secretary-General of NSCIA in 1989 and Baba Adinni (Father or Patron of Islam) of Egba land in November, 1997, thereby combining both traditional and Islamic leadership of his people. This again shows clearly the nature of the interaction between Islam and traditional practices in Yoruba land.

Closely related to that was the experience recorded in Nigeria in 1999 when the traditional ruler of Oyo empire in Yoruba land known as the Alaafin, granted an interview to the *Vanguard Newspaper* and declared that the Yoruba tradition stipulates that a deceased Oba be buried according to the traditional rites, regardless of whether he was a Muslim or a Christian. It is interesting to note that the Alaafin in question is himself a Muslim who had just led the Nigerian intending Muslim pilgrims to the holy lands, in his capacity as the National/Amir-ul-Hajj, and is even till date the Vice President-General of the NSCIA from Oyo State. The interview attracted comments from various quarters. Notable among those who reacted to that public declaration was another leading Yoruba, traditional ruler, the Awujale of Ijebuland who also is a leading Muslim personality. The Awajale's comments were published by the same newspaper, the following Saturday. He posited that notwithstanding that an Oba is a traditional ruler, the burial of a Muslim Oba should be conducted according to Islamic rites while that of a Christian Oba should be done according to Christian rites. The controversy generated by the publishing of these two opposing views of two leading Yoruba rulers who are both respected Muslims attracted the intervention of a distinguished and most respected contemporary Yoruba historian, Professor Saburi Biobaku who, also himself a Muslim, confirmed the validity of the Alaafin's view. The present writer was able to confirm from within the fact that the Yoruba Obas can hardly dissociate themselves from the traditional institution they represent. This writer confirmed this during his research visit to the Palace of the Alaafin of Oyo on March 11, 1997, that of the Ataoja of Osogbo in Osun State on March 12, 1997, and that of the Awujale of Ijebuland on July 15, 1997. The implication of the writer's observation during such visits is that Islam has not really brought to an end the many traditional practices that are prevalent in the religious practices of Yoruba Muslims.

Other heterodox religious practices among Yoruba Muslims include the use of forbidden stuff such as alcohol for medication, the act of inheriting a deceased's wife alongside his properties, the use of left hands in eating, prostrating while greeting, elaboration of burial ceremonies, wearing black cloths during mourning, and others that have been well articulated by al-Iluriyy (1979).

THE CHALLENGE OF ISLAMIC REFORMS IN YORUBALAND

Despite the rapid growth and spread of Islam among the Yoruba, the Yoruba Muslims generally were not regarded by their Hausa/Fulani Muslim brothers

as attaining the same level of perfection in the religion. This observation as made by Balogun (1989) is a product of ‘certain cultural practices among the Yoruba, which were readily cited as evidence of religious imperfection, even though certain individuals could be recognized and respected as pious, learned and upright Yoruba Muslim scholars, teachers and leaders’. Specific details of such ‘cultural practices’ and their interaction with Islamic religious practices in Yoruba land have been given in the previous section. Consequently, the interaction of the ‘culture’ and the ‘Islam’ practices has culminated in the dominance of heterodoxy or popular Islam among Yoruba Muslims and has “certainly created gaps in communication and interaction between them and their colleagues in the North thereby leading to a situation of crisis of confidence”.

While it is understandable that cultural differences alongside the dichotomy between orthodoxy and heterodoxy in Islam are partly responsible for the North/South dichotomy, it is both perturbing and inexplicable that ‘the Muslim North is sometimes violently torn apart by the tariqas – the *Qadiriyya* and the *Tijaniyya* and their opponents, the *Izalah*,’ an Islamic puritanical movement committed to the elimination of Islamic religious innovations or heterodox practices among Muslims. The relationship of hostility between the *Qadiriyya* and the *Tijaniyya* continued until the two found a common enemy in the *Izalah* movement which was founded by Malam Ismaila Idris in Jos in February, 1978 (Balogun 1989). The movement ‘condemns belonging to any *tariqah* arguing that with Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) as the last Prophet of Allah, nobody could claim to have received any new message from Allah and that belonging to a *tariqah* is tantamount to saint worship’.

Balogun (1989) graphically captures the various encounters between the *Izalah* and the *Tariga* where he writes,

Several clashes have occurred between the *Izalah* and the adherents of the tariqas. For instance, on April 21, 1978, *Izalah* and *Tijaniyya* members clashed in Margu, Pankshin Local Government area of Plateau State when one person was seriously wounded. On 19th and 20th June, 1978, *Izalah* members and *Tijaniyya* adherents clashed in Gombe, Bauchi State. As a result, three vehicles of Ishaku Gwamma, a *Tijaniyya* member were damaged, and a number of people arrested. When on 22nd June, 1978, *Izalah* members, armed with bows and arrows attacked three police, the latter opened fire and killed one Ibrahim Magaji Sule. The clashes which involved physical attacks were not all. At the level of the leadership of the various groups the ideological and doctrinal differences were also expressed in intellectual disputations and controversies. In fact, the major sources of the physical clashes were the conflicting ideas disseminated by the leaders.

It should be pointed out that although the activities of the *Izalah* movement were recorded more in the North, the puritanical influence of the movement was felt in various part of the South especially Southwestern Nigeria or Yoruba land where youthful Islamic scholars and the enlightened elderly ones equipped themselves with religious information obtained from *Izalah* publications and public presentations, in refuting and deflating the various heterodox Islamic religious views and practices that were dominant among Yoruba Muslims.

It is noteworthy that long before the emergence of the *Izalah* group in the country and thereafter, a handful of Islamic organizations had emerged among Yoruba Muslims with the aim of propagating Islam and protecting the interest of the Muslims. However, none of them can lay claim to being a puritanical movement on a large scale, except Shams-al-Din al-Islamiyy Movement of Nigeria which was founded in the 1990s and may be regarded as fulfilling among Yoruba Muslims the same puritanical role being fulfilled by the *Izalah* in the North. However, the non-militant nature of Shams al-Din makes it significantly different from the *Izalah*. Another major difference between the two lies in the highly sophisticated Islamic scholarship that characterizes the leadership of the *Izalah* movement, which is not totally possessed by the leadership of Shams-al-Din. Yet, the latter is not less effective than the former in its areas of coverage. If commitment, consistency and sincerity of purpose were variables whose degrees can be easily measured or determined by a researcher, the present writer will readily rate the Shams-al-Din higher than the *Izalah*.

The Shams movement preaches fearlessly against the various heterodox Islamic religious practices among Yoruba Muslims especially those concerning their belief in magical and medicinal powers, consultation of diviners and herbalists, Islamic scholars' use of amulets and various forms of medicinal concoctions, partial embrace of Islam, divided attention to Allah and various dimensions of associating partners with Allah. The movement normally organizes and holds open-air lectures at various locations and relies heavily on the Quran and Sunnah in its preaching. However, a major shortcoming of the movement is the failure of its leadership to benefit from the growing body of Islamic scholarship on the subject of their preaching and teaching in order to reflect such new dimension to the issue of orthodoxy and heterodoxy among Muslims. This may not be unconnected with the fact that most of the individual members of the leadership of the movement are not highly educated on Islam. Nonetheless, such efforts as being made by them have not really reduced heterodox Islamic religious practices among the Yoruba.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined the continued spread of heterodox Islam among Yoruba Muslims. It reviewed the existing body of scholarship on the subject of orthodoxy and heterodoxy in the Islamic tradition. The article situated Yoruba land whose Muslim inhabitants are the focus of study, in the gamut of the discourse and traced the spread of Islam into that geographical location, with special attention to the evolution of orthodox Islamic practices in Yoruba land, as well as that of heterodoxy among the Muslims in the area. The paper gave specific details of heterodox Islamic religious practices as well as of the efforts being made to arrest the situation through Islamic reforms. The paper concludes that although the Yoruba Muslims embraced Islam in its orthodox form, heterodox Islamic practices have been part of their religious life for long, and even currently dominates the religious scene among them. The paper recommends continued effort on the part of informed Muslims to enlighten their brethren who are heavily soaked in cultural practices, with a view to bailing them out.

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