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# Kano Studies

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# **The Factor of Shaikh Alimi in the Islamisation of Ilorin**

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## **Ilorin Before the Emirate System**

As an abode or settlement, Ilorin was inhabited by a certain hermit Baruba man of whom nothing is known except that his place thence became known and addressed as Baruba, perhaps to immortalise him. From being the Baruba man's hermitage, Ilorin was transformed into a Yoruba settlement with the incoming of a certain Ojo Isekuse and Eminla successively in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. They were known to be itinerant hunters who erected transit camps at the point of a legendary rock on which they sharpened their iron hunting implements and from which the town allegedly got its name Ilo-Irin (Jimoh 1994:18,25-27).

Nothing significant is recorded about these people and their activities, perhaps because they were itinerant hunters who never stayed there permanently. By the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, records have it that Laderin, the grandfather of Afonja, was the notable personality in Ilorin. After his death Pasin, the son of Laderin, openly and courageously challenged Bashorun Gaha (1754-1774) for being despotic in the administration of the Oyo empire. He was however killed by the men of Gaha, who pursued him to Olla (Jimoh 1994:27).

The position of Bale occupied by Laderin as a chief in the Oyo empire is said to have been successively occupied by Pasin, Alagbin and Afonja who were his descendants (Johnson, 1960:199). From being the Bale of Ilorin, Afonja rose to the exalted position of Aare-Ona-Kakanfo (commander in-chief-of the Army) of the Oyo empire during the reign of Alafin Abiodun Adegolu (d. 1789) (Jimoh 1994:34).

The death of Alafin Abiodun provided the nobility with the long-awaited opportunity to scheme for the downfall of Afonja in the Oyo empire. The nobility had been envious of his exalted position, unprecedented popularity and military prowess. Thus the nobility cajoled the new Alafin Aole to believe that Afonja was likely to usurp his power. To get rid of Afonja, the Alafin was compelled by the nobility to send Afonja on a military expedition to Iwere. Iwere at that time was believed to be impregnable because of its natural fortifications, and so they were optimistic that it would occasion Afonja's downfall. The information on where to attack, which was supposed to be concealed from Afonja, was leaked to him. Afonja was aware that apart from the fact that Iwere was impregnable militarily, it was wrong, according to Oyo tradition, to attack the maternal home of a deceased Alafin, which Iwere was.

Having been told that he was to attack Iwere, Afonja first ordered the execution of the royal party that was accompanying the soldiers on the expedition. Secondly, he ordered Alafin Aole to commit suicide as the only corrective measure for violating a tradition. It is said that on committing suicide the Alafin pronounced a curse on the Yoruba race. Consequently, Afonja declared himself independent of Oyo authority and used Ilorin as his base. Hence the reference to Ilorin as Ilorin Afonja.

## **The Personality of Shehu Alimi (1740-1816)**

The progenitor of the Fulani dynasty in Ilorin and the architect of the reform, spread and supremacy of Islam in Yorubaland was Shaikh al-Salih, whose real name was al-Salih b. Muhammad b. Janata of the Torodbe (Toronkawa Fulani) from Mali. He was born about 1740 at Tankara or Tankur in the Niger Republic and was the son of Muhammed Zubair. Janata, the grandfather of al-Salih, was in the retinue of Jakolo to Gobirland and the perhaps settled temporarily or permanently at Bunza near Birnin Kebbi, the capital of the present day Kebbi State, and there he became father of Muhammad Zubair the father of al-Salih. It is most likely that Zubair was the Muslim name of Janata, while Janata was an acquired cognomen, appellation or traditional name. In the case of al-Salih, Shehu (Shaikh) Alimi ('alim) and Armiyau were acquired appellations for his proven and incomparable intellectual capabilities, religious activities and piety (Jimoh, 1994: 34; Al-Illuri 1990:76; Clarke, 1982:101). Al-Salih began his scholarstic endeavours early in life at Bunza, perhaps first with his father and later with other renowned scholars and teachers. This was the practice among the scholars of that time – fathers first give a rudimentary Quranic education to their children and wards personally before turning to other scholars. This system no doubt ensured physical, mental, moral and even religious readiness of young scholars and made them able to face the challenges of itinerant scholarship (Al-Illuri, 1990:76).

The teachers of al-Salih included Shaikh Jibril b. Umar, a renowned, radical, exiled Agades scholar who taught within the length and breath of both Agades and Gobir. As one of the academically excellent pupils and a promising prolific and astute preacher, he along with others accompanied Shaikh Jibril b. Umar on extensive tours of Agades and Gobirland (Jimoh, 1994:35, Omolewa, 1986:112; Clarke 1982:101). Al-Salih as a pupil might have also learnt from Futa scholars, because Shaikh Adam Abdullahi Al-Illuri (1990:77) maintains that he left Birnin

Kebbi for Futa before he later came back to Gobirland to see Usmanu Danfodiyo. Jimoh (1994:35) maintains that Usmanu Danfodiyo and al-Salih were pupils under Shaikh Jibir b. Umar, while Shaikh Adam Abdullahi al-Illuri believes that al-Salih visited Usmanu Danfodiyo after hearing about his piety and erudition to obtain knowledge and blessings (1990:77). However, what is clear for now is that they were contemporaries and were both of the Toronkawa clan of the Fulani tribe. It is not impossible that they learnt and sought blessings from one another, but there is not enough proof of this claim.

It is unfortunate that a significant aspect of the early life of this great scholar is shrouded in mystery. This is a pointer to the fact that al-Salih was neither a historian nor a prolific writer, and his children, colleagues and students documented practically nothing significant about his biography. Al-Salih's efforts in Islamic proselytisation in Yorubaland are documented primarily in the works of Shaikh Ahmed Abubakar Fulani and Shaikh al-Hudaj written at later dates (1912 and 1922 respectively).

Al-Salih as an Islamic proselytiser travelled far and wide. He travelled within the length and breath of Borgu, Oyo-Ile, Ikoyi, Iseyin and Ogbomoso. At each of the places he spent one year, but at Kuwo he spent three years. It is not unlikely that he had a more peaceful and pleasant stay at Kuwo compared to the other places, where he was perceived as a threat to the existing traditional authority. In Oyo Ile, the authority planned to assassinate Shaikh because of his growing popularity. In the missionary retinue of al-Salih right from Bunza throughout Yorubaland was a Bunza man called Muhammad Wawu, whose descendants are today the occupants of the Magaji Garin chieftaincy (Al-Illuri, 1990:77 and Jimoh, 1994:387). Gbadamosi notes that:

Shehu Alimi (al-Salih)...travelled extensively...particularly to Oyo, Iseyin Ogbomosho and Kuwo, over a period of years and

had devoted himself to the cause of Islamic reform. He moved and taught within the Muslim communities and became very much revered for his piety and learning. (1978:8).

At each of the places where he sojourned

Shehu Alimi established a high reputation for piety and Islamic scholarship. This coupled with his efficacious spiritual ability won him scores of Islamic adherents who were thirsty of (*sic*) Quranic knowledge and needy of either evangelical assistance or spiritual solace (Jimoh, 1994:47).

For one reason or another the itinerant Shaikh Salih moved from Borgu area to Oyo-Ile. Having heard of a plot to assassinate him in Oyo Ile because of his growing popularity, he escaped to Ikoyi, from Ikoyi to Iseyin, from Iseyin to Ogbomoso, from Ogbomoso to Kuwo and finally from Kuwo to Ilorin at the invitation of Afonja the then Aare Onakakanfo of Oyo and administrator of Ilorin.

### **The Establishment of the Ilorin Emirate]**

As a result of the unilateral declaration of independence by Afonja from the Oyo authorities, it was clear that war was imminent between Afonja and the Oyo authorities. This situation compelled Afonja to look for military and spiritual aid in preparation for the war. Consequently, according to Johnson Afonja invited the Fulani Muslim priest named Alimi (al-Salh) to Ilorin to act as his priest (1960:193). Afonja invited Shaikh al-Salih having heard about his spiritual efficacy and the growth of the Jama'a; and he learned this particularly from his deputy as Aareonakankanfo, Teyeje the Baale of Ogbomosho, who had hosted Shaikh Alimi. According to Jimoh, Shaikh Alimi buried some charms in Ogbomoso and prayed there that Ogbomoso would never be subdued militarily (1994:50). The test for the efficacy or otherwise of the charms and prayer is beyond the scope of this work. The need for this kind of spiritual assistance,

the numerical strength of the Jama'a, and perhaps other reasons unknown to history informed the invitation of Shaikh Alimi to Ilorin.

As a result of the invitation, al-Salih and his Jama'a (Muslim group) arrived in Ilorin at about the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, meeting the 'four semi-autonomous settlements which confederally formed Ilorin of that time: the aboriginal Yorubas at Idi-Ape, the pastoral Fulanis headed by Olufadi, the Hausa/Nupe/Baruba settlement at Gambari led by Malam Bako, and the Oke-Sunna settlement headed by Solagberu (Tahir). In the view of Jimoh he was a Beri-beri migrant who:

travelled extensively as an itinerant Malam covering a vast area of the northern provinces of Yorubaland. He eventually made Ilorin his permanent base.... Together with (his) compatriots Solagberu built up Oke-sunna as an exclusive community of Muslims in Ilorin before the arrival of Shehu Alimi. The reputation of Oke-sunna as a mini-centre of Islamic tradition attracted many other migrant Muslims from different parts of Yorubaland, especially from Gbanda, Kobayi, Agoho, Kuwo and Kobe (Jimoh, 1994:50).

The Oke-sunna Muslims received the Shaikh al-Salih and his multi-lingual and cultural Jama'a (Muslim group) rousingly and sensationally, and his stay was made pleasant, interesting and fruitful. They gave him a helping hand and showed a high sense of responsibility towards him. As a Muslim brother, al-Salih felt free in their midst and unreservedly demonstrated his high intellect and wide experience in the different fields of Islamic science such as jurisprudence and the Quranic exegesis of Jālalani. Shaikh al-Salih brought to Ilorin the second half of the Quran with the Tafsir of Jalalani which no one else had in Ilorin (Al-Illuri, 1990:79; Aliy-Kamal, 1984:35). He was highly revered by the Jama'a (Muslim group). Afonja, the chief host, was not left out in fine-treating the august visitors. Within a short interval of time he lavished gifts on al-Salih and his Jama'a

(Al-Illuri 1990: 78), and the relationship between Shaikh al-Salih and the Muslim hosts became so cordial that:

...leaders of all the communal groups accepted his (al-Salih) spiritual superiority and subordinated themselves to his leadership for the centralised congregational Jumat prayer which was held at Ori-Oke... The Shehu thus became the first Chief Imam of Ilorin (Jimoh, 1994:468).

In response to Afonja's call for spiritual and military assistance, Shaikh Salih assisted him with the combined spiritual and military might of himself and the Jama'a. Thus the combined forces of Afonja and the Jama'a, successfully crushed the dreaded Oyo army led by Ojo Agunbambaru at the battle of Ogidi in Ilorin. They successfully conducted many military campaigns in Igbominaland, conquering Kanla, Ganmo, Elehinjare, Idofian, Ibare, Igbon, Iresa and a host of others (Jimoh, 1994:54). It should be noted with emphasis that the military assistance to Afonja became a blessing in disguise, as the conquered places and peoples later formed part and parcel of the emirate, and Islam spread there through the activities of the district heads and the itinerant Ilorin scholars (Danmole, 1980:241).

As a result of the close alliance between Afonja and Shaikh al-Salih, the population in Ilorin swelled tremendously. Different people flocked to Ilorin for learning and spiritual guidance, trade and security. By this time two groups had emerged: the Muslims (the majority) and the idolators (the minority). They were mutually intolerant and were waiting for the opportunity for a show-down with each other. This opportunity came during the yearly Egungun festival, when a Muslim is said to have provoked an Egungun. The Egungun pursued him to the house of Shaikh al-Salih. At the Shaikh's house the Egungun was assaulted and thrown out naked by the Muslims (Jimoh 1994:56). This soured the good relationship between Shehu Al-Salih and Afonja and ill-feeling filled the atmosphere. Both groups knew that war was

already inevitable and were cautious and suspicious of each other. Knowing his military weakness Afonja secretly appealed to the Onikoyi for military aid to deal suddenly with the Jamaa (Johnson 1960:197). The plans leaked to the Jama'a, and so while Afonja was waiting for the military aid they struck preemptively. The soldiers of Afonja were shattered and Afonja was killed (cir. 1812) (Sambo 1998:25).

Consequently, the Jamaa established the emirate system in Ilorin with Shaikh Al-Salih as the Amir al-Mumini; hence Ilorin ceased to be Ilorin Afonja but Ilorin Garin Al-Salih. After the death of Shaikh Al-Salih, his son Abdulsalami, the first Emir, wanted to secure himself on the throne and therefore wrote to the Emir of Gwandu, Muhammad Wani b. Abdullah, to place the Ilorin emirate under his supervision and guidance (Tajudeen 1999:6).

With the establishment of the Al-Salih dynasty and an emirate system of government, the land of the Ilorin emirate land between the period of Emir Abdulsalam (1816-1842) to the period of Emir Momon (1891-1896) extended to all the states of the northern province of the old Oyo Empire. Incursions in the eastern territory were halted at Osogbo. Iwo, Ekiti, Ago-Oja and Offa were overrun and subjugated and made subject to Ilorin. The entire Igbominaland from Illa-Orangun in the south-east and Share in the north-west was a fief of Ilorin, and the Igbominas were Ilorin's vassals (Jimoh, 1994:15,109,133,114,117,118,125).

As a result of the success of Ilorin soldiers in their expansionist wars on the one hand and the prominence of the city Islamically on the other hand, the city which was primarily populated by the Yorubas became peopled with different tribes and ethnic groups from within and outside the emirate and the Nigeria area at large. The people that populated Ilorin included Sudanese Arabs, Kanuris, Barubas, Malians Nupes, Hausas, Kwaris, Yorubas, Kemberi, etc. (Jawondo, 1999:14, Aliy-Kamal 1984: 38-43).

Al-Salih preached to and taught his Jama'a to be pious, righteous in thought, utterance and deed, and forbade them to practise wrongdoing. At al-Salih's mosque, different scholars of differing backgrounds from within and outside Ilorin flocked to listen to the Tafsir (Quranic exegesis) and teaching on Islamic jurisprudence, and to participate in the praise of God under the banner of the Qadiriyyah brotherhood (Toriqat Qadiriyyah) (Al-Illuri, 1990:78-79 and Jimoh, 1994:24).

During Ramadan, al-Salih engaged in an intensive Tafsir exercise, closely assisted by Shaikh Yusuf al-Mali and Shaikh Ahmed Sanni, who were reciters. This marked the beginning of the traditional Ramadan Tafsir still held in the Emir's palace till today (Jimoh, 1994:468). At this juncture, it is important to point out that the preaching and teaching of al-Salih aided the spread of Islam in Ilorin. The Jama'a was well grounded in the area of Islamic jurisprudence, Quranic exegesis and, of course, Arabic grammar. At the death of Shaikh al-Salih most of the members of his Jama'a, who were already scholars on their merits, became itinerant scholars and moved to the different parts of the emirate and beyond. Some of them returned to their localities, especially after the sack of Oyo, to propagate and consolidate Islamic religion and knowledge in Yorubaland (Ikime (ed.) 1980:348).

The achievement of Islam and the extent of its spread could as well be measured by the fact that the pagan Yoruba families in Ilorin town - Aare and Baba Isale - also accepted Islam. Many of the early leaders of households became Muslims, at least judging from their names. For instance, the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Magaji Aare, who were Musa Ajilesere, Haruna Ajuwon, Aliyu Musa, Ahmadu Ladejo and AbdulRahman Ladejo respectively, were Muslims. In the same vein, the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Baba Isale, who were Abdullahi, Salihu Baba Ago, Umaru Sanda and Muhammadu Jimoh respectively, were Muslims (Jimoh, 1994:388-390, 393-396). Today, members of the Aare and Baba

Isale families are practising Muslims and have produced reputable scholars in Islamic science.

In Ilorin, the foundation for Islam and Islamic scholarship was laid by Solagberu, Bako and Olufadi and their men (Jawondo, 1999:14), in the sense that they were the first set of Muslims and Islamic scholars in Ilorin. However their activities were restricted to their settlements. No serious efforts were made to convert the large pagan population of Ilorin to Islam. There is no evidence too that the three distinctive Muslim groups ever interacted with one another before the arrival of Shaikh al-Salih. Strict discipline and religious observance were maintained in their monasteries. With al-Salih and his men in Ilorin, through piety, erudition, administrative ingenuity, oneness of purpose and determination to spread Islamic religion and knowledge among the people of Ilorin and beyond, the situation changed. They turned:

...Ilorin from obscurity to fame as a torch of Islam and had transformed the city from an essentially pagan community to a centre for Islamic studies to which Muslims from different geographical directions flooded in search of both Islamic knowledge and spiritual solace (Jimoh, 1994:60).

On the nature of Ilorin during the period of al-Salih, Gbadamosi remarks that the town became “a sort of Islamic lighthouse, a local Mecca to which the Yoruba Muslims turned for study and guidance” (1978:10).

Al-Salih was credited with establishing the Al-Salih dynasty and Islamic government in Ilorin. Among his four sons and one daughter, Abdulsalam and Muhammad Shitta succeeded him in turn, and their descendants have jealously and dutifully guarded the dynasty till today.

## **Conclusion**

Islam is a complete way of life; thus Muslims should also be refined in all senses. A Muslim must be worthy of emulation. The prophet of Islam was able to carry out his missionary assignment by being honest, trustworthy, dedicated, loving and sympathetic to all and sundry. It is important to stress at this juncture that the achievement recorded by Shaikh Salih in the Islamisation of Ilorin could not have been significant if not for his charming personality. This point will be better appreciated when one remembers that there were Muslim scholars in Ilorin before his arrival.

Shaikh Al-Salih was widely travelled both as a pupil of Jibril b. Umar and as an independent Muslim scholar. His wealth of experience and sound knowledge of the Quran and other Islamic sciences assisted him in bringing together Muslim scholars in Ilorin, who had previously lived independent of one another, under his umbrella and tutelage.

The Shaikh was said to be indifferent to things of this world. He was opposed to being a political leader; rather he was known as the spiritual leader (Imam) of the Jama'a. The Shaikh was a strong soldier of Islam, ably assisted by the strong, volatile and zealous Jama'a with which he prosecuted the Jihad in Ilorin. The presence of Shaikh Salih in Ilorin increased the demography of Ilorin. Muslims from neighbouring towns and villages flocked to him in Ilorin to either escape maltreatment from their overlords or rulers or to acquire more Islamic knowledge. Non-Muslims also migrated in large numbers to Ilorin, either to accept Islam or for safety.

From the foregoing it could be deduced that the presence of Shaikh Salih in Ilorin and the exercise of his knowledge, honesty, sincerity, high sense of responsibility and piety affected the religious, social, economic and political status of Ilorin.

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