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Appointment of Imams in Ekiti State, Nigeria: Challenges and Way forward

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the appointment of Imams in Ekiti State, Nigeria, since the inception of Islam in the State. The objective of the write-up is to find out the current situation in the appointment of the Imams in the State. Random samplings of selected towns in the State were made. The write-up examines the meanings of Imam, the past and present appointment of an Imam, reasons for Imamship crises. Factors that accounted for divisions among the Muslims in the State include the jettisoning of the Sharī'ah for the appointment of Imams and predetermined appointment of a given candidate. It was observed that the divisions were more common among members of Central Mosque and *Ansar-Ud-Deen* Society, Nigeria. In some cases, the division leads to a cold war between the Imams of the two bodies. Our recommendations include that the selection of an Imam should be based on sound knowledge of Islam and societal Imams should be distinguished from township Imam at the time of appointment.

Key words: Appointment, Imams, Challenges, Way forward, Ekiti State

1. INTRODUCTION

Ekiti State, Nigeria is one of the States in Yoruba ethnic group. The State is the only monolithic and homogeneous State in Nigeria (Onipede, 2019: 1). It is one of the thirty six States in Nigeria with its administrative Headquarters at Ado-Ekiti. The State was created on the 1st of October, 1996. The State consists of sixteen Local Government Area Authorities (Omilusi 2019, Ajayi, 2017:19). The sixteen Local Government Area Authorities were divided to three Senatorial Districts of Ekiti Central, Ekiti North and Ekiti South (Olaitan, 2021: 54).

The State is located between Longitudes 40° and 51° and 50' 45" East of Greenwich Meridian, and Latitudes 7° 15' and 8° 51' North of Equator (Agbebi *et al* 2021: 59). The State is bordered in the South by Iju and Itaogbolu, Ifedore and Owo Local Governments Area Authorities of Ondo State, Nigeria; in the East by Akoko group of Ondo State, Nigeria; in the West by Kwara and Kogi States, Nigeria (Adu & Oke 2018: 293). The land area covers 5,88,890 square kilometres (Agbebi *et al* 2021: 452). The State enjoys tropical climate of two major seasons-the dry season between March and November, and the raining season from April to October (Kolawole *et al* 2020: 108).

The three major religions in the State are Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion. The adherents of these religions are located in every town in the State.

Politically and administratively, the State came into existence in 1996 as stated earlier, but historically, it has been in existence for a long time before the creation of the State. Islam spread to the State in the eighteenth century (Agbetola, 1988: 22). At its early stage, there was no problem in the appointment of Imams in the State. Many of the Imams of the early periods of Islam in the State were unanimously appointed by the Muslim leaders. Some were even begged to accept the position. For example, in Igbemo-Ekiti, the first Chief Imam of the town, Muhammad Sanusi Bada (1856-1925), was unanimously appointed by the Muslim leaders of the town. The same thing was applicable to his successor, Imam Junaid Ogunmola Agiji Ekudanikansi who was the Chief Imam of the town between 1925 and 1942 (Balogun, 2009c: 20-21). The Imam was not interested in the position.

In fact, he was one of the Muslim leaders searching for a competent and knowledgeable person in Islamic tenets to occupy the position. On mentioning his name for the position, he left the mosque in annoyance. As he was leaving, the Muslims followed him to his house confirming his appointment as the Chief Imam of the town. As they were going, other Muslims and non-Muslims started joining them. The large crowd of people that followed him to his house made him to accept the position reluctantly (Balogun 2009c: 20-21). In Iyin-Ekiti, the first Chief Imam, Imam Ibrahim Ijato, was not in the town while deliberation was going on over whom to become the first Chief Imam of the town. He was at Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria, where he was acquiring Qur'anic education. He was invited by the Muslim Community to come and become their Imam. The two pioneer Muslims of the town, Disu Agbogunleye and Suberu Ogungbesan were sent to Ilorin to invite him to Iyin-Ekiti. After a lot of discussion with him he accepted the position (Balogun, 2005a: 44-45).

As Islam continues to wax stronger in Ekiti State, many Muslims became interested in becoming the Imams of their respective towns, villages, quarters, streets, associations, societies and institutions. Some Muslims are interested in becoming Imam on the basis of the laid down rules and regulations in the Qur'an and Hadith. Some added the local arrangement made by their fore fathers to the injunctions in the Qur'an and Hadith. Some others want to become Imams at all costs irrespective of what happens to the people or group they want to lead. They therefore engage in varieties of fraudulent and fowl means such as the use of charms, divinations, character assassination, bribery and corruption. Some of the people that are being appointed to serve in the Imamship selection committees lack the knowledge of the assignment given to them. Some that have the knowledge are biased in their judgment. These and many other problems that are associated with the appointment of Imams in the present dispensation in Ekiti State, Nigeria would be discussed in this write-up. The question that needs to be answered in the first instance is what actually is the connotation of the word Imam as discussed in this write up?

2. MEANING OF IMAM

Imam is an Arabic word which literally connotes a leader or model. It is used in the Qur'an to mean a leader, guide, and model. It is mostly used for somebody who leads Muslims in prayers or any other Muslim injunctions. The origin and basis of the office of Imam is perceived differently by the various sections of the Muslims and Sects. These differences have cumulated into parts of the political and religious bases for the split of the Muslim Community into Sunnite and Shi'ite Islam (Zeidan, 2021).

The appointment of an Imam in any given community is the responsibility of the Muslims, especially the learned ones in terms of religious injunctions in the Qur'an, Hadith, and other sources of Islamic Law. The knowledge of western education could only be an added advantage but not obligatory. It is to be noted that Imam is liable to error. Such a mistake can only be corrected by the learned Muslims on the basis of Islamic injunctions. Four of such Imams were known as rightly guided Caliphs. They were Abu Bakr al Siddiq, Umar ibn al-Khattab, Uthman ibn Affan, and Ali ibn Abi Talib. None of these righteous Caliphs sought for the office or campaigned for it. As pious Muslims, they were aware that leadership brought no pleasure but heavy responsibilities (Lemu, 1993:260). The appointment of these Imams did not cause division among the Muslims except that of Ali ibn Abi Talib. For example, Abu Bakr did not vie for the position but was appointed on merit and experience. He even regretted for accepting the position. He used to tell his people that:

I swear by Allah I never liked to be a Caliph. I even never thought about it, nor desired it secretly or openly. The yoke of Caliphate has been put on my Neck by force. I which to transfer this trust to a more suitable person (Lemu, 1993:262)

Umar was appointed by his predecessor, Abu Bakr. His appointment did not cause division among the Muslim Community. The selection of Uthman was by vote. The two members of Shurah Committee that were nominated for the position of Imam: Uthman and Ali, casted their votes for each other. At the end, Uthman emerged as Imam while Ali pledged his loyalty to him. The truth maintained in the selection sustained the unity of Islam.

When Ali ibn Abi Talib was appointed as an Imam and there was disagreement between his followers and those of Mu'ayyah, he renounced the position on the basis of the agreement that they should allow the masses to choose the man most fitted to be Caliph (Mohammad, 2016). The trick played by the representative of Mu'awiyah', Amr b. al-As, in the resolution process, led to the division of the Muslim Community into Sunnites and Shi'ites Muslim groupings. This trick is still the major problem that accounts for schism of Muslims in many parts of the World till today over the appointment of Imams, Ekiti State inclusive.

Imam is also used for outstanding scholars or religious figures or authorities in Islam, such as the founding fathers of Hadith and Jurisprudent schools like Imams Malik, Bukhari, Muslim, Hambali, Hanifah, ash-Shafi'l and al-Ghazali. Imam in the context of this write up is an appointed leader of a Muslim Community or association or society who performs among other functions the leading of regular congregational prayers and gives directives on religious matters on the basis of his sound knowledgeable of Islam and moral uprightness.

3. IMAMSHIP CRISES IN EKITI STATE, NIGERIA

As earlier stated, there was no division or partisanship over the selection of Imams in the early stage of Islam in Ekiti State, Nigeria. As at that time, there was no single Muslim society in the state. The Muslims operated under the name of Muslim Community and the Imam of Central Mosque as the Chief Imam of the town or village as applicable. When *Ansar-Ud-Deen* Society came into being in Ekiti State in 1946, the Muslims embraced it because of its educational policy which is to found, build and maintain educational institutions for the Muslim children of school age (Balogun 2007b: 49).

Some towns turned their existing Central Mosque to *Ansar-Ud-Deen* mosque and changed the nomenclature of their Imams from the Chief Imam of their respective towns to that of *Ansar-Ud-Deen* Society. In later years, other Muslim organizations started to emerge in the State, such as *Zumuratul Mu'minu* (1953), *Nawair-Ud-Deen* Society (1987), *Ahmadiyya* (1940) and host of others with their own separate Imams or Missionaries as applicable, depending on the rules and regulations guiding their operational system. There were also other umbrella organizations such as the National Council for Muslim Youth Organizations (NACOMYO), formed in the State in 1996, Federation of Muslim Women's Association in Nigeria (FOMWAN) in 1997, Nigeria Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs in 1996, and League of Imams and Alfas in 1997 (Balogun, 2016e: 280-285).

The presence of these numerous Muslim organizations in the State made many of those towns and villages that had changed the nomenclature of their Imams to that of *Ansar-Ud-Deen* Society realized that the Imam of a Society cannot claim the ownership of the Chief Imam of the town except that of its own society. This accounts for the re-emergency of Central Mosques in many of those towns and villages as umbrella Mosque where the activities of all the Muslim organizations are co-ordinate. Where there is the Imam of Central Mosque and those of other Muslim organizations or societies, the Imam of the Central Mosque is recognized as the Chief Imam of such a town while those of organizations or societies are recognized as Imams of their respective societies. This was the verdict of the League of Imams and Alfas of Ekiti State, Nigeria in 2011 over the leadership crisis between the Imam of Central Mosque of Igbemo-Ekiti and that of *Ansar-Ud-Deen* Society in the town (League of Imams and Alfas in Nigera, Ekiti State Chapter 2011: 1). This is equally the situation in most towns in Yoruba land and other parts of Nigeria.

Most of the problems and divisions that arose over the appointment of Imams in Ekiti State, Nigeria, are traceable to Central Mosques and *Ansar-Ud-Deen* Society. All other Muslim organizations are yet to be actively involved in the Imamship crises. For example, the Imamship crisis that started in 1956 in Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria, divided the *Ansar-Ud-Deen* Society in the town into two-Oja Oba and Odo-Otu Central Mosques, Ekiti State, Nigeria. Oja Oba mosque claimed *Ansar-Ud-Deen* Society one while Odo-Otu mosque took *Ansar-Ud-Deen* Society two. This was the situation till 1980s when Oja Oba mosque was suspended in *Ansar-Ud-Deen* Society over the hosting right of the national body of *Ansar-Ud-Deen* Society in Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria. They therefore renounced their membership of *Ansar-Ud-Deen* Society and continue with the name Central mosque, Ado-Ekiti.

The Imam of Central mosque, Ado-Ekiti, Alhaji (Dr.) Muhammad Jamiu Kewulere Bellow was recognized as the Chief Imam of Ado-Ekiti and later, Grand of Imam of Ekiti State while late Alhaji Ameen Hadi Adebayo also continued with the position of Chief Imam of *Ansar-Ud-Deen* Society, Ado-Ekiti and later Missioner, *Ansar-Ud-Deen* Society, Ekiti State (Balogun 2007b: 56-59). Alhaji (Dr.) Muhammad Jamiu Kewulere Bellow was installed as the President-General, League of Imams and Alfa, Southwest (Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ondo and Ekiti States), Edo and Delta States, Nigeria in 2015 (Balogun 2016e: 158). In Emure-Ekiti, Nigeria, the Imamship crisis that started in 1950s between late Imam Sadiku Ayeni and Zakariyyah Zuyuti cumulated into the division of the Muslim Community into Central Mosque and *Ansar-Ud-Deen* Society. Eventually, Zakariyyah Zuyuti became the Imam of the Central Mosque while Sadiku Ayeni became that of *Ansar-Ud-Deen* Society (Balogun 2007b:60).

Also, in Ikere-Ekiti, the Imamship crisis between the supporters of late Alhaji Adam Kolawole Ibraheem and late Alhaji Abdul-Ganiyu Olowoniga led to the division of the Muslim Community into *Ansar-Ud-Deen* Society and Oyopeju Muslim Community. The *Ansar-Ud-Deen* Society appointed Alhaji Adam Kolawole Ibraheem as their Imam in 1986 while Oyopeju Muslim Community appointed Alhaji Abdul-Ganiyu Olowoniga as their Imam. The Oyopeju Muslim Community was renamed *Nawair-Ud-Deen* Society in 1987 and Alhaji Abdul-Ganiyu Olowoniga was appointed as its Imam (Balogun 2007b: 64-66).

Balogun states further that in Ise-Ekiti, Nigeria, the Imamship crisis that started in 1988 between the supporters of Alhaji Uthman Ayolo on the one hand and that of Alhaji Idris Adedeji on the other, led to the division of the Muslim Community into two major groups: the Central Mosque which comprises all the Muslim organizations in the town and *Ansar-Ud-Deen* Society. They dragged themselves to court both on the position of Imam and the ownership of the Central Mosque. At the end of the case, Alhaji Uthman Ayolo and his group was given the Central Mosque and was consequently installed as the Chief Imam of Ise-Ekiti while Alhaji Idris Adedeji was installed as Imam of *Ansar-Ud-Deen* Society and members of the Society were given another site to construct their own mosque (Balogun 2007b: 61-64).

In Igbemo-Ekiti, Nigeria, a 15 man Imamship Committee was set up in 2006 for the selection of the Imam of the town. The committee invited three learned men in Arabic and Islamic Studies to conduct interview for the contenders. These three learned men were Imams of the University of Ado-Ekiti, Dr. M. A. Abddu-Raheem (later, Professor), from Ikare-Akoko, Alhaji Abbas Abubakr Muhammad, and from Ikere-Ekiti, Alhaji Ahmad Baba Abdus-Salam, to conduct interview for the contenders on nine major aspects of Islam. These areas and their marks are:

1. Educational qualifications (Qur'anic and western education)-10 marks
 2. Understanding of Arabic language-10 marks
 3. Soundness in English language-5 marks
 4. Mastering of the Holy Qur'ān-20 marks
 5. Knowledge of Hadith -10 marks
 6. Sharīa'h-15 marks
 7. Goodness in sermon techniques-10 marks
 8. History of Islam-10 Marks
 9. Current Affairs-10 marks
- Total=100 marks

Six people applied for the position. One of them late Alhaji Mubarak Ademola Bada, the grandson of the first Imam of the town, Muhammad Sanusi Bada (1856-1925) was screened out by the Committee members on the ground that he was a member of *Ahmadiyyah* Muslim *Jama'at*. Each of the panelists scored each contender independent of each other. At the end of the interview three contenders performed above average. Late Alhaji Engr. Kareem Oluwasola Balogun came first, Alfa (later, Alhaji) Ibraheem, second while Alfa (later Alhaji) Abdullah Kolawole Jamiu came third (*Ansar-Ud-Deen* Society, Igbemo-Ekiti, 2007: 5). Initially, Alhaji Abdullah Kolawole Jamiu did not participate in the interview on the ground that he was the unanimous candidate of the Odo-Igbemo quarters where the Imams of the town had always emerged since the inception of Islam in the town in 1940s. After a lot of meetings it was resolved that addendum interview be conducted for him on the same platform like others.

The result of the interview placed him third. Before the official release of the overall result of the interview, the supporters of Alhaji Ibraheem Yusuf Ogunmilade had fashioned out their own criteria which placed him first in the interview even among the committee members. They said that knowledge of Arabic, Qur'ān and the Sarī'ah are the major criteria for the selection of Imam. They arrived at this conclusion on the ground that their candidate came first in Arabic and the Qur'ān and second in the Sarī'ah in the first round of the interview while Alhaji Engr. Kareem Oluwasola Balogun came first in seven areas.

Their addition of the three placed him in the first position. They also said that the first person in the interview, Alhaji Engr. Kareem Oluwasola Balogun cannot be appointed as Imam because the Balogun Muslim of the town had been permanently zoned to their family. If this is accepted, that means Alhaji Ibraheem Yusuf Ogunmilade could not be the Imam because no Imam has been installed in his house since inception of Islam in the town. By the time the addendum interview was conducted for Alhaji Abdullah Kolawole Jamiu, he came first in these three areas, that is Arabic, Qur'ān and Sarī'ah while Alhaji Engr. Kareem Oluwasola Balogun came first in the remaining six aspects. There was no place that Alhaji Ibraheem Yusuf Ogunmilade comes first. When all efforts by his supporters to appoint him as the Chief Imam of Igbemo-Ekiti failed, the Muffasir of the town by then, late Alhaji Abdul-Rahman Balogun stood on after Juma'at service on Friday 28th of September, 2007 and pronounced Alhaji Ibraheem Yusuf Ogunmilade as the Imam of Igbemo-Ekiti without consultation with the Executive and leaders of Muslims of Igbemo-Ekiti. His declaration as the Imam of *Ansar-Ud-Deen* Society, Igbemo-Ekiti was later confirmed by the *Ansar-Ud-Deen* Society of, Nigeria, Ekiti State Chapter (Balogun 2009c: 21-23).

The supporters of Alhaji Engr. Kareem Oluwasola Balogun and Alhaji Abdullah Kolawole Jamiu teamed up with the name of Central Mosque, Igbemo-Ekiti under the Acting Imamship of Alhaji Bakare Abiola Maliki who was appointed before the death of the immediate past Chief Imam of the town, Alhaji Abdullah Junaid Agiigi Ikudanikansi who died in 2004. When all efforts to reunite the two factions together proved abortive, Alhaji Abdullah Kolawole Jamiu was therefore appointed by Members of Central Mosque Igbemo-Ekiti in conjunction with the League of Imams and Alfas of Ekiti State as the Chief Imam of Igbemo-Ekiti in 2009. Alhaji Engr. Kareem Oluwasola Balogun was appointed the Balogun of Islam of the town in 2011 (Balogun, 2009c: 21-23).

The above random sampling of Imamship crises in Ekiti State indicated that the members of Central Mosque and *Ansar-Ud-Deen* Society are mostly involved in the crises. The reason was that they are the most populated groups of Muslims in the State. Also, their methods of appointment of leaders are not totally based on Islamic injunctions. Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) is reported to have said that:

It has been reported on the authority of ‘Abd al-Rahman b. Samura who said: The Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him) said to me: ‘Abd al-Rahman, do not ask for a position of authority, for if you are granted this position as a result of your asking for it, you will be left alone (without God’s help to discharge the responsibilities attendant thereon), and if you are granted it without making any request for it, you will be helped (by God in the discharge of your duties) (Abd-al-Hamid Siddiqui: n.d.).

In another Ḥadīth, Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), is reported thus:

It has been narrated by Abu Musa who said: Two of my cousins and I entered the apartment of the Holy Prophet (may peace be upon him). One of them said: Messenger of Allah, appoint us rulers of some lands that the Almighty and Glorious God has entrusted to thy care. The other also said something similar. He said: We do not appoint to this position one who asks for it nor anyone who is covetous for the same (Abd-al-Hamid Siddiqui: n.d.).

An x-ray of this problem revealed that each of the contenders had the ambition to become the next Imam of Igbemo-Ekiti, Nigeria. If they and their supporters had abided by the injunctions of Islam on the matter, there could have been no division among them. The inordinate ambition on the part of every group to produce the Imam of the town is a major factor for the division.

4. IDENTIFIED REASONS FOR IMAMSHIP CRISES IN EKITI STATE, NIGERIA

- ✓ **Lack of adequate knowledge of the criteria for selection of Imam:** Many of those who are involved in the selection and appointment of Imams in the State are not well versed in the rules and regulations guiding the appointment of an Imam. Many of them are selected on the basis of personality and closeness of candidate to them, not on the Sharī’ah.
- ✓ **Pre-interview decision:** Many of the leaders had made up their minds on whom they wanted to appoint as Imam before the interview. Once the result of the interview did not favour their candidate, they jettison the result in favour of their anointed candidate.
- ✓ **Inordinate ambition to become an Imam:** The idea of using charms, character assassination, fowl play and other negative methods to become an Imam or the Imam of a given town were common among the Imams and their supporters. Those who were not favoured with the position do find excuses for establishing another mosque.
- ✓ **Bribery and corruption:** Some contenders do go to the extent of bribing those who are involved in the selection and appointment. At the end, decision is made in favour of the highest bidder.
- ✓ **External influence:** The cases of Imamship that supposed to be resolved internally are taken to the external bodies for resolution. This has always compounded Imamship crises in the State. The external bodies used to take the advantage to impose the candidate of their

choice on such mosque or society. The cases in point were the rivalry between the Imams of Central Mosque and that of *Ansar-Ud-Deen* Society, Ado Ekiti, the Imams of Central Mosque and that of *Ansar-Ud-Deen* Society, Igbemo Ekiti. The problem had reduced with the demise of Alhaji Imam Hadi Adebayo who was the Chief Imam of *Ansar-Ud-Deen* Central Mosque, Ado Ekiti and the State Missioner of the Society in Ekiti State. Another Imam, Alhaji Abdul-Muttalib had been installed as the Imam of the Society in Ado Ekiti. The State Missioner of the Society had been transferred to a nearby town of Ikere Ekiti, Nigeria, on rotational and qualification platform. The name of the current State Missioner of the Society in Ekiti State is Alhaji Ahmad Baba Abdus-Salam, the Chief Imam of the Society in Ikere Ekiti, Nigeria (Balogun 2012d: 142).

5. CONCLUSION

The appointment of Imams, as could be deducted from this study is dated back to the advent of Islam in Ekiti State, Nigeria, in the eighteenth century. At the inception, there was no crisis in the appointment of Imams in the State. The Muslims of a given community spoke with one voice on the choice of candidate for the position. There was no record of division on the basis of being dissatisfied on the choice of an Imam. Divisions were noticed as from 1950s. These divisions were mostly noticed among members of Central Mosques and *Ansar-Ud-Deen* Society of Nigeria, Ekiti State Chapter. In some cases, the divisions lead to cold wars between the Imams of Central Mosques and *Asar-Ud-Deen* Society.

The position of Imam, as it is seen in this study should not be a do or die affair. It is a position of responsibilities that requires sacrifice. It is a position that a good Muslim is not expected to fight for. Hence, whoever is appointed as an Imam should have the fear of Allah in discharging his duties and responsibilities, and whoever is not appointed should accept it in good faith, after all, the position of Imam is not a license to Paradise.

6. SUGGESTIONS

The following suggestions were made:

- ✓ Selection and appointment of Imams in the State should be based on truthfulness, fair play and the fear of Allah. This would give room for the candidate that would be generally accepted to emerge as Imam. All injunction of Islam should be abided by.
- ✓ The Muslim leaders should desist from the imposition of Imam on their followers. This would make them have confident in their leadership and at the same time sustain the unity of the Muslims in the State.
- ✓ Those that are versed in Islam and the criteria for the selection and appointment of Imams should always be appointed to serve in the Imamship committee to enable them take the decisions that would be satisfactory to the people on the basis of Shari'ah.
- ✓ Imamship is not a do or dies affair. It is position of responsibilities which entails sacrifice. Whoever is not appointed should accept his fate and not be discouraged in his religious activities. It is only those that Allah has given the position that will get there.
- ✓ Societal Imams should always be distinguished from the township Imams at the time of appointment. This would prevent power tussle between the Imam of a town and that of a society. It is to be noted that it is the Muslim Community in conjunction with the League of Imams and Alfas that have the power to appoint the Imam of a given town, not the leader of a society.

- ✓ The umbrella organizations in Ekiti State, Nigeria such as the National Council of Muslim Youth Organizations (NACOMYO), Federation of Muslim Women's Association in Nigeria (FOMWAN), Nigeria Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, and League of Imams and Alfas should double their efforts towards the sustenance of unity among the Muslims of the State. This could be done through regular meetings and prompt settlement of disagreement that may lead to disunity among the Muslims of the state. The verdict of these bodies, especially the League of Imams and Alfas, should be abided by all the towns, villages, Imams and Muslim organizations or societies in the State.

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