



## Exploring the Religious Influence of the League of Imams and Alfas on Muslim Communities in Southwestern and a Selected South-South State of Nigeria

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### ABSTRACT

Individually and collectively, Muslims in Yorubaland made various efforts to establish a united body, but to no avail. Their strive was, however, crowned with the successful establishment of the League of Imams and Alfas in Yorubaland in 1962 but officially inaugurated in 1964. The nomenclature of the body was later changed to the League of Imams and Alfas, Southwest, Edo and Delta States because of the joining of the body by the two states. The objective of the paper is to acquaint the readers with the happenings in the League of Imams and Alfas of Southwest, Edo and Delta States. The paper traces the formation of the organisation, reasons for its formation, a list of the executive members to date, its conferment of chieftaincy titles, educational issues, efforts on the sighting of the crescent of the moon of Ramadan, resolution of disputes and other religious activities of the body. Its challenges include differences in the interpretation of the Sharī'ah, tribalism and encroachment on the position of Imams. The recommendations comprise non-encroachment on the power and authority of the Imams, proper education of the Muslims and non-Muslims on the principles of Sharī'ah and the use of dialogue to resolve issues. The research method used is a doctrinal approach with qualitative methods.

**Keyword:** League, Imams, Alfas, Organization, Sharī'ah, Nigeria, South-South, South-Western Nigeria

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is divided into six unequal geopolitical Zones for administrative purpose and largeness of the country. These are the North Central, North East, North West, South-South and South West. The South West is the Yoruba-land and it consists of Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ondo and Ekiti States (Balogun 2022: 271). The six states put together have 137 Local Government Area Authorities. Lagos State (20), Ogun State (20), Oyo State (33), Osun State (30), Ondo State (18) and 16 for Ekiti State (CIRDDOC n.d.).



The population of Nigeria as 2024 is put at 232,679,478 while it is put at 235,611,237 as of Sunday, February 9, 2025. The country's population is equivalent to 2.89 percent of the World population. The country ranks number 6 in the list of the countries and dependencies by population (Worldometer n.d.). The percentage of Muslim population in the country is put at 50.5 while that of Christianity is 45.5 (Nigeria Travels and Tours n.d.). 4 percent of the population of the country practices African Traditional Religion. The Family Search (n.d.) states that the Yoruba tribe is predominantly in the Southwest and the Muslims formed 55 percent of its population while the Christians formed 35 percent. 10 percent formed adherents of other religions. This was corroborated in July 19, 2022, by now President Bola Ahmed Tinubu Campaign Organization Director, Barrister Bayo Shittu when he said that the Southwest Muslims averagely 65 percent. Though we can call it a campaign strategy but one thing that is clear in the campaign is that the Muslims in the Southwest are more than the Christians. This can be deduced from the large population of Muslims in Lagos, Ogun, Oyo and Osun States. The other States that we can say that the Christians form majority are Ekiti and Ondo States.

#### **Formation of the League of Imams and Alfas in Yorubaland**

Allah commands the Muslims that let there arise among them a party, inviting people to do good and enjoining the right things and forbid the wrongs, and these are the people that will be successful (Qur'ān 3:104). This verse inspires Muslim leaders across the length and breadth of Yorubaland to strive hard for the formation of this organization as the Qur'ān 53: 39-42 instruct the Muslims to strive hard in the cause of Allah. The idea of the formation of the League of Imams and Alfas was therefore mooted in 1962 by Shaykh Adam Abdullah Al-Ilory who was the founder of the Institute of Arabic and Islamic Culture (*Markaz*), Agege, Lagos State. The factors that necessitated the formation of the organization include the followings:

- 1 There was no single association that brought the Imams and the numerous Central Mosques in the Southwest together. Many of the Imams were unknown to one another and that there was no opportunity for them to unite on one front (Rufai 2011: 170-171).
- 2 The Imams and Alfas were denied the rights of administration in the matters concerning their mosques by the influential Muslims who used their positions to interfere in the affairs of the Imams (United Muslim Council of Nigeria, Ekiti State Chapter: 1).
- 3 Rufai (2008) states further that the close relationship of the Nigerian Muslims with the Islamic groups/organizations in the Arab countries, served as a motivation for the formation of the League of Imams and Alfas in the Southwest. Oloyde (2014: 14-15) opines that one of such organizations was the Muslim World League (*Rabita al-Ālam al-Islami*) in Makkah, Saudi Arabia, formed on the 18<sup>th</sup> May, 1962. The body is an international non-governmental Islamic organization formed for the following purposes:
  - (i) To express opinions regarding the various issues of concern to the Muslims;
  - (ii) Combating ideological incursions and aberrant thoughts against Islam;
  - (iii) Advocating the freedom of preaching to the path of Allah;
  - (iv) Striving to protect Mosques and Mosque properties against attack;
  - (v) Preserving Islamic endowments and defense of the rights of the Muslim minorities.
4. Akanji (2011: 232-233) asserts that the notion that the Northern Muslims are purer than the Yoruba Muslims and therefore would not condescend to pray behind a Southern Imam made the Imams and Alfas in the Southwest to decide to stand on their own.
5. He states further that the recognition of the Sultan of Sokoto and the Shehu of Borno in the Northern Nigeria as the leaders of the Muslims as against the Imams and Alfas. The Imams



and Alfas are seen as superior to the Obas in the Western Nigeria. They are regarded as *Baba Oba* (Spiritual fathers to the Kings).

6. The politicization of the Muslim Congress of Nigeria formed in 1948 (Peel 2011: 11) made the Imams and Alfas in the Southwest to decide to form their own group that would be devoid of politics.
7. Facilitation of professionalization of the job of the Muslim clerics across the study area
8. To serve as a catalyst for the promotion of welfare of the less privileged Muslims in the society
9. To bridge the gap between the Muslim Community and the Governments of the study area
10. Eradicating religious ignorance and encouraging acquisition of knowledge among the Muslim Ummah
11. Training and retraining the Imams and Alfas to meet the modern challenges.

Several meetings were held by the Imams and Alfas of the old Western Region of Nigeria at the Central Mosque, Oja-Oba, Ibadan, between 1962 and 28<sup>th</sup> August, 1964, when the organization was formally inaugurated (Rufai 2013: 39-40). Daud (n.d.) states that some of the pioneer members of the organization include Alfa Sanusi Alaka, Alfa Salmon Alawiye, Imam Ahmad Muili of Ibadan and Imam Sehu Tijani of Osogbo.

#### **Executive members of the organization**

The President General of the body in orders of succession includes followings:

1. Alhaji Arimiyau Parakoyi who was the Chief Imam of Ijebu-Ode, the present Ogun State
2. Alhaji Koseem Yahayi Akorede, the Grand Imam of Ondo State and the Chief Imam of Akure land.
3. Alhaji Mustapha Ajisafe, the Grand Imam of Osun State and the Chief Imam of Osogbo
4. Alhaji Shuarau Busari Haruna, the Grand Imam of Oyo State and the Chief Imam of Ibadan, Oyo State.
5. Alhaji Muhammad Jamiu Kewulere Bello, the Grand Imam of Ekiti State and the Chief Imam of Ado Ekiti. (Robitatu-I-Aimmah wal Ulamoh fi Bilaad Yoruba (2024: 4)

#### **The secretaries in the sequent order**

1. Sheikh Adam Abdullah El Ilory, the initiator of the organization and the founder of the Institute of Arabic and Islamic Culture (*Markaz*), Agege, Lagos State
2. Imam S. B. Biobaku, the Chief Imam of Egba Agura and Wakilu Muslim of Yorubaland
3. Sheikh Ahmadu Ruffai Oke-Are, the former Grand Mufti
4. Sheikh Hamzat Hussein Duhak, the former Grand Mufti
5. Fadilat Sheikh Murtada Abdul-Salam
6. Fadilat Sheik Muali Adedimeji Aroworeki Iwo
7. Shaykh (Dr.) Mayor Hameed Olagoke Aladesawe, the Grand Imam of Ondo State and the Chief Imam of Owo (Robitatu-I-Aimmah wal Ulamoh fi Bilaad Yoruba (2024: 4)

The creation of different States from the Western Nigeria made the nomenclature of the organization changed to the League of Imams and Alfas of Southwest, Edo and Delta States. Abbas (2015) asserts that the establishment of the organization was a turning point in the unity of the Imams and Alfas of the Southwest, Edo and Delta States, especially in speaking with one voice on matters of common interest and fighting for their rights in particular and those of the Muslims in general. The formation of



the Muslim 'Ummah of Southwest Nigeria (MUSWEN) in 2008 made the unity to be stronger as both bodies began to work together like a pair of scissors. Their combined efforts have earned the Muslim 'Ummah of the Southwest, Edo and Delta States more recognition by their counterparts in the North.

## 2. THE EMERGENCE OF CHIEFTAINCY TITLE IN ISLAM

Chieftaincy title is an important aspect of Islam. Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) is reputed to have said that when three people set out on a journey, they should appoint one of them as a leader (Sunnah.com). The idea of this *Hadith* cuts across every aspect of Islam. At one time, Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) was the leader of the Muslims all over the world. After his demise, we had the Rightly Guided Caliphs. We also had a lot of other caliphs after them. The selection of a leader for the Muslim community is not an invention in Yorubaland. Sulaiman (2011: 164) opines that chieftaincy institutions among the Muslims is as old as Islam itself. He states that it is Allah Himself that made Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) the leader of the Muslim Community all over the world. He also conferred titles to prophets and people according to their work and performance on earth. The prophets conferred with titles included Prophets Ibrahim who was named Khalilullah (Friend of Allah), Musa was given Kalimullah (One to whom Allah spoke), Isa (Ruhullah-The Spirit of Allah) and Muhammad was given the name 'Habibullah' (Beloved friend of Allah). Some of the women honoured by Allah were Asiyah who was the wife of Pharaoh (The Confidant of Allah) and Maryam who was given the title of As-Siddiqah (A woman of Truth).

Prophet Muhammad himself conferred titles on some Muslims that surrounded him. Bilal Ibn Rabah was named Muezzin (Caller to the prayer), Abubakr was given the title of As-Saddiq (The Trustworthy), Umar (Al-Faruq-the Just), Uthman (Dhu-Nurayn-possessor of double stars) and Ali (Asadullah-The Lion of Allah). After the death of Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.), different titles emerged as the names of the leaders of the Muslim Community. These include *Khalifah*, *Amiru'l-Muminin*, *Amir*, *Imam* and different other names. Other chieftaincy names that we can find in Yorubaland under an Imam include Balogun, Are, Baba Adini, Iyasuna, Iya Adini, Iya Alaslatu and a host of others. Awhen and Ayiri (2023:88) state that chieftaincy institution is one of leadership the traditional societies like Yorubaland land, which may be attained through heredity or by turn. This idea is totally out of Islam. The position is totally on merit as could be seen in the apportioning of the position by Allah and Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.). The practice in some Muslim Yoruba Communities to base the appointment of Muslim leaders on hereditary is totally unacceptable in Islam.

### Conferment of Chieftaincy title

Chieftaincy title according to Sulaiman (2011: 163-170) could be conferred on a person because of the following reasons:

1. Encouragement to the Muslims who had contributed immensely to the growth of Islam.
2. Administrative purposes and expansion of Muslim activities.
3. To discourage Muslims from taking non-Islamic titles.
4. To prevent conversion of Muslims to other religions
5. To access the wealthy, influence and knowledge of Muslims
6. Political consideration, especially those who are in the position of authority and are Muslims
7. Tribal affiliation. To unify every segment of Muslims irrespective of which tribe or race or geographical location the person comes from



8. Ego and selfish interest. This is the most dangerous aspect of the conferment of title in Yorubaland. It is a means of appease a person to allow peace to reign in the Mosque or Muslim Community.

#### **Importance of chieftaincy title among the Muslims of Yorubaland**

1. They are expected to be more devotional and closer to Allah
2. They are expected to contribute financially and morally to the progress of the mosque and Islam in general
3. It is an attempt to remove bad habit from them
4. It is an attempt to solidify the unity of members of the mosque
5. It removes tribalism and racism from the mosque
6. It encourages the chiefs to be more knowledgeable on the tenets of Islam
7. It reforms their mode of dressing. They are no more free to wear any type of cloth. They must dress according to Islam culture. Otherwise they would be termed as bastardizing Islam in their localities (Qur'ān 7:26, 24:30-31, 33:59)
8. They must mind what they say in public. Whatever they say must be in conformity with the principles of Islam

It is to be noted that the League of Imams and Alfas in the Southwest, Edo and Delta States is a religious organization, that is, the umbrella body for all Imams and Alfas in the above named states. By extension, the umbrella body for the Muslims in the stated states. The Jama'atul Nasril Islam (Society for the support of Islam) is a pan Northern Islamic Organization in Nigeria (Adua 2015:70). The Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs is the apex Muslim body that links the Northern and Southern Nigeria together (Suberu 2022:25).

### **3. LAUDABLE ACHIEVEMENT OF THE ORGANIZATION**

#### **Successful Turbanning of the Grand Imam of Ekiti State as the President-General**

Alhaji Muhammad Jamiu Kewulere was appointed as the President-General, League of Imams and Alfas Southwest, Edo and Delta States, at Ibadan, Oyo State, on the 4<sup>th</sup> June, 2015 (Programme of events 2015: 28). His appointment to the position was one of the designs of Allah. Allah says in Qur'ān 9:51 that nothing will happen to a man except by His permission. In another Qur'ānic verse, Allah says that He is the one that made you successors on earth and He has raised some of you above others in degrees or ranks in order to try you with what He has given you (Qur'ān 6:165). This is an indication that being in a position is a challenge to try a person whether he will succeed or not. If he or she administers the position well, people will appreciate him and at the end, he may enter paradise. If otherwise, he or she will incur the wrath of Allah and the hatred of people.

Alhaji Muhammad Jamiu Kewulere Bello succeeded Shaykh Shuarau Busari Haruna, the Chief *Imām* of Ibadan-land and the President-General, League of Imams and Alfas in South West, Edo and Delta states (The Guardian April 9, 2015). He occupied the position for less than one year (September, 2014-9<sup>th</sup> April 2015). By the tradition of the organization, he was supposed to succeed Shaykh Mustapha Olayiwola Ajisafe, the Chief Imam of Osogbo and President-General of the organization who died on the 8<sup>th</sup> September, 2014 (The Nation, September 10, 2014). He was his Deputy till his death. He stepped down for Shaykh ShuarauBusari Haruna and remained a Deputy to him (Bello 2025).





The fact that he did not contend the position with Shaykh Shuarau Busari Haruna, earned him a unanimous support of all the Imams including the present Imam of Ibadan, Shaykh Abdul-Ganiyy Abubakri Agbotomokekeri, who declined to contend with him. His turbanning as the President-General of the League of Imams and Alfas Southwest, Edo and Delta States on the 21<sup>st</sup> November, 2015 in Ekiti State marked the first time that an Ekiti indigene is occupying the number one position amongst the Imams of the eight States that constitute the body. These States are Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ondo, Ekiti, Edo and Delta States. The events also marked the first time that a large crowd of Muslims from all parts of the Country converged in the State for the honour of an illustrious Muslim of the State (The Nation, November 20, 2015; Balogun 2020: 245). The turbanning united both the towns and Muslim organizations in the State together because every town and organization in the State contributed their own quota towards the success of the programme. Apart from their financial contributions, a large number of them attended the occasion. A galaxy of traditional rulers like Ewi of Ado-Ekiti, Oba Rufus Adeyemo Adejugbe Aladesanmi III, Alara of Aramoko, Oba Olu Adeyemi and Olukare of Ikare, Oba Akadiri Momoh, as well as Christian leaders like Are Afe Babalola, the founder of Afe Babalola University, Ado Ekiti, also witnessed the occasion.

Apart from the nine million and nine hundred thousand naira donation towards the programme by the Ekiti State Government, the then Governor, Mr. Ayodele Fayose, was represented in the programme by his wife, Mrs. Feyisetan Fayose. The nine million and nine hundred thousand naira was divided into two by the State Government. Five million naira was given to the celebrant to expend on his personal needs while the other four million and nine hundred thousand naira was given to the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, Ekiti Council, to be spent on the programme. A sum of five million and six hundred thousand naira was contributed towards the programme by individuals, organizations and the sixteen Local Government Areas in the State. The money was expended on the programme without remaining. A sum of three and a half million naira was collected as gifts to the League of Imams and Alfas, Southwest, Edo and Delta States during the programme. Each of the eight States was given three hundred thousand naira, totaling two million and four hundred thousand naira only. The balance of one million and one hundred thousand naira only was deposited in the National Executive Committee's account for the development of the organization.

#### **4. INSTALLATION OF CHIEFS**

Many other chiefs that were installed by the body across the length and breadth of Yorubaland, Edo and Delta State, to pay way for the unity of the Muslims in the study area include:

1. Amirul Mulukil Muslimin-Oba (Dr.) Sikiru Kayode Adetona GCON, CRF, JP Ogbagba II, the Awujale and Paramount Ruler of Ijebuland
2. Grand Mufti-Sheikh Abdul-Razak Abdul-Azeez Ishola
3. Wazeeru-Shaykh Dr. Ahmad Abd'Lateef Adekilekun
4. Faharul Ulamai-Shaykh Surajudeen Batuta
5. Asiwaju-Alhaji (Dr.) Khamis Olatunde Badmus
6. Aare Musulumi-Alhaji Mankajuola Akinola
7. Baba Adeen-Ambassador Sharafa Tunji Ishola (OFR)
8. Wakeelu-Sheikh Iskeel Kolawole Lawal, pouparly known as Sugar.
9. Iya Adeen-Alhaja Sekinat Adekola



10. Iyalode Adeen-Alhaja (Chief) Sidikat Aderibigbe (Robitatu-l-Aimmah wal Ulamoh fi Bilaad Yoruba 2024: 14-26).

### **Building of secretarial**

The organization has built a world class secretarial at Bodija, Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria for the benefit of the Muslims in general. This secretariat is serving dual purposes. It serves a meeting point for the umbrella body. It is also a place of gathering where the Muslims can exchange ideas and educate themselves. It also serves as accommodation, especially for the executive of the body

### **Sighting of the crescent of moon for Ramadan fasting**

The body is making frantic effort for the starting and ending of Ramadan fasting by the Muslims of Yorubaland at the same time. The organization however needs to purchase modern equipment for moon sighting so that its effort could be fruitful. Sighting of new crescent of moon with the naked eyes is more difficult today, especially if there is cloud in the sky.

### **Education of the Muslims**

In order to orientate the Muslims, the organization has embarked on the organization of conferences in many parts of Yorubaland. One of such is a 3-Day conference organized at the Central Mosque, Ijebu-Ode, between October 7 and 9, 2024. The most important part of the conference is delivering of lecture on the unity of Yorubaland by Prof. Is-haq Olarewaju Oloyede who was the Chancellor of the University of Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria, between 2007 and 2012, and the Registrar and chief executive of Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB) in Nigeria since 2016 (Fahm and Ajimotokun 2025: 90). Oloyede asserts that the League is a vital coordinating body, bringing together Imams, scholars, and community leaders to address common challenges and promote Islamic values across the length and breadth of the study area. He states that unity is an indispensable aspect of the works of the League of Imams and Alfas in the Southwest, Edo and Delta States. Without unity, the organization's voice will be fragmented and this would make it very difficult to address different issues that affect the organization in particular and the Muslims in the study area.

Disunity retards the progress of the League in Yorubaland, Edo and Delta States. It causes factionalism, disputes over leadership and political affiliations. One of the causes of disunity is differences in the interpretation of Islamic Jurisprudence. He urged the organization to collaborate with all the Muslims and Muslim organizations in the study area to provide religious and moral guidance, and encourage collaboration with all the different ethnic groups within the Muslim Community in the study area (Muslim News Nigeria). He supports his admonition with the Qur'ān 3:103 which exhorts the Muslims to hold fast together with the rope of Allah and that they should not be divided. He supports the Qur'anic verse with the Ḥadīth of Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) which says that the believers are like a single body, when one of the limbs suffers, the whole body responds to it with wakefulness and fever (Riyad as-Salihin 224). He suggests the opening of a platform where they can discuss important and pressing issues without necessarily call a physical meeting. He advocates the using of dialogue to diffuse tensions and prevent conflicts from escalating (Muslim News Nigeria).



### **Holding of meetings**

*The organization continues to hold executive and general meetings across the length and breadth of the study area to take important decisions regarding issues affecting the Muslims (Akanni, Ajani, Busari and Dawodu 2024: 395).*

### **Resolution of disputes**

*The body has been able to resolve many disputes that would have torn the body and the Muslims in the study area apart. One of such cases is the occupation of President General Stool between the former Imam of Ibadan land, Shaykh Shuarau Busari Haruna and the Grand Imam of Ekiti State, Alhaji Muhammad Jamiu Kewulere Bello. After all said, the latter stepped down for the former. This made the latter to succeed the former after his death in April, 2015.*

### **Maintenance of cordial relationship with other Muslim bodies**

*The organization has been able to maintain cordial relationship with other Muslim Societies and organizations in the study area. Examples are the Muslim umbrella bodies such as the Nigeria Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) which cuts across the length and breadth of Nigeria and the Muslim Community of Southwest Nigeria (MUSWEN). Some other societies are the Ansar-Ud-Deen Society of Nigeria and Oversea, and Nawair-Ud-deen. Society of Nigeria.*

### **Challenges**

#### **Encroachment on the authority of Imam**

*This is more common in different communities in Yorubaland. Some chairmen and influential members of the Muslim Communities are more powerful than the Imams. The Imams have to take instructions from them. This has reduced the power of many Imams to almost zero level. Even in the last concluded 2024 conference of the League of Imams and Alfas in Ijebu-Ode, the President General of the League of Imams and Alfas could not assert his power.*

#### **Tribalism, partisanship and politics**

*These are great challenges to the body. As far as Islam is concern, there is no racism. The saying that a person is from a remote area is out of Islam. The belief that a person is superior to another person is out of Islam (Qur'ān 49: 13). The fact that a person is in the position of political authority does not make him greater than another person.*

#### **Difference of opinion on Jurisprudence**

*The essence of the different opinions of early Imams in Islam such as Imams Abū Ḥanīfah, Mālik b. Anas, al-Shāfi, Aḥmad bin Ḥanbal is to make the injunctions of Islam easy for the Muslims. The unguided interpretations of the Sharī'ah by the knowledgeable and those who have no adequate knowledge of Islam is a great problem for the Muslims in the study area. The problem is greater during Ramadan fasting when everybody wants to preach in the radios, televisions and other mass media.*

#### **Attack on Sharī'ah**

*A lot of non Muslims in the study area have little or no knowledge of Islam. Any attempt to introduce Islamic principle that they have no knowledge of, is met with steep opposition. Example is the*





opposition of many Christian leaders and ignorant Muslims to the introduction and existence the Sharī'ah panel in Yorubaland. The Yoruba nation activists and agitators vehemently rejected it in Yoruba States (Jimoh 2025).

## 5. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Imam is the leader of the Muslim Community. The encroachment on his position should be disallowed. No chairman, members of the executive or influential person in the mosque or among the League of Imams and Alfas should be allowed to usurp his position.
- The Imam should be a principal signatory to the account of the mosque or organization.
- Tribalism, partisanship and politics should be erased in the administration of the Muslim Community and mosques.
- There should be proper education of non Muslims and ignorant Muslims on what the Sharī'ah stands for among the Muslims.
- The League of Imams and Alfas and any other body or Muslim Community in Yorubaland should continue to use dialogue to resolve differences among the Muslims and non Muslims. This will prevent or reduce conflict and confrontation in Yorubaland
- Islamic Studies should be made compulsory for all Muslims from primary to the tertiary institution. It should be part and parcel of general studies courses. Likewise more Qur'anic Schools should be established in all towns and villages in Yorubaland to prevent the indoctrination of the Muslim children in schools.
- There should be check and balances on the type of programmes to be air on our different radio, television stations and other means of dissemination of information to avoid religious crises.

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