Review

The contributions of Ilorin scholars to Islam in West Africa: A study of Alfa Salaudeen (a.k.a. Alfa Parakoyi) in Ijesha land

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Despite the fact that, the actual date of the introduction of Islam to the Yoruba speaking people of south western Nigeria is not known, it is believed that the Muslim empires in West Africa knew of Yoruba land long before its introduction to Islam. The spread of Islam to other areas is very important in Islam and this serves as a challenge to all Islamic scholars to champion the course of evangelizing the non-believers or idol worshippers as the case may be. Ilorin scholars cannot be exempted from this role. Even though there were many systems in which Islam was introduced to many areas but the emergence of Islam in Yoruba land and Ijesha land to be specific is a unique one. In this case, this article discussed one Ilorin Islamic scholar called Alfa Salaudeen (aka. Alfa Parakoyi) as one of the indispensable dramatic personae in the spread of Islam in Ijesha land. Even though, the land was dominated by pagans but Alfa Salaudeen has done fantastic Jihad diplomatically without any chaos to Islamise the people of Ijesha land. And his legacies can be felt through his mosque and Madrasat (school) that he built couple with his role in converting Ijesha people to Muslim. Apart from that, to show the extent of his role and the appreciation from Ijesha people, Alfa Salaudeen (aka Alfa Parakoyi) were conferred a title by their traditional ruler despite the fact that he was not from the area.

Key words: Alfa Salaudeen, Islam, Ilorin, Yoruba land, Ijesa-Land, West Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Although the actual date of the introduction of Islam to the Yoruba speaking people of south western Nigeria is not known, it is believed that the Muslim empires in West Africa knew of Yorubaland long before its introduction to Islam. The scholars Balogun, Nasiru and Al-Iluri have asserted that Islam had spread in the land long before the jihad of Shaykh Uthman Dan Fodiyo in 1804 C.E. Al-Iluri in his book Al-Islam fi Naijiriyah, traces the emergence of Islam in Yorubaland to the time of Mansa Musa of Mali Empire in the 13th century (Adebayo, 2006). With this, the advent of Islam differs from one place to another likewise its spread and its
consolidation. In some places it entered with war and violence while in some others it came through peace and conviction (http://www.egodiuchendu.com/index.php: 2014). The latter is the case in Ijeshaland. This article discusses the personality involved which is an itinerant Ilorin Islamic scholar called Alfa Salaudeen (a.k.a. Alfa Parakoyi) in the spread of Islam in Ijeshaland.

Ijeshaland is located in the forest zone of Nigeria but adjacent to the Savannah; it lies in an area with a rich history of ancient human settlement. Most of Ijeshaland today is bounded by Ife and Osogbo to the West, Ondo area to the South, Ekiti to the East and the Igbomina area to the North. Much of Ijeshaland lies around the upper reaches of the Rivers Oni, Shasha and Osun. Ijesha country sits on land rising from about 800 ft in the forests along the Oni valley to about 1700ft in the hills around Imesi Ile to the North and close to about 2000 ft in the Eastern boundaries with Ekiti State. The typical soil is largely red laterite with heavy rainfall during the rainy season which lasts from late March to early November. Underneath the laterite soil is the precambrian basement complex largely of folded pelitic schists, older granites, quartzites, gneisses, and sporadic amphibolites bodies. Occurrence of gold is found in the Ilesha schist and amphibolite belt (http://www.nigerianwiki.com/Ijesha_land:2013).

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF IJESHA LAND

Ilesha which was founded in the sixteenth century emerged as the modern center of power in Ijeshaland outstripping ancient centers at Ibokun, Ipole and Ijebu-Ijesha. Ilesha is located in the deciduous rain forest zone of Nigeria.

Interestingly, to locate the origin of African societies have always result in controversy due to heavy dependence on oral tradition, the study of Ijesha's history is indeed no exception. According to Rev. Samuel Johnson, the account on the origin of Ijesha is premised on two distinct account, both may practically be regarded as in the main correct, so far as they are not really contradictory; for it would appear that the Ijeshas of the present day are not the same people or, rather, not the descendants of the aboriginal inhabitants of that province (Johnson, 1921).

The first account relates to the earliest period when the Yorubas have just entered into and subdued, the country, and the Alafiains then resided at Ile-Ife, i.e., prior to the reign of Sango. Human sacrifices were common in those days, and in order to have victims ready to hand, it is said that a number of slaves were purchased and located in the district of Ibokun; there they were tendered as cattle, under the care of Owaju, and from them selections were made from time to time in sacrificial purposes; hence the term Ijesha from IjeOrisa (the food of the gods) (Johnson, 1921). They are described as stumpy, muscular and sheepish looking, with a marked want of intelligence; they never offered any resistance to this system, hence the saying:

"Ijesa Omo Owajuifeopoiya" (Ijesas children of Owaju, subject to much sufferings) (Johnson, 1921).

In consonance with the above, Johnson also further said that, there was legend that the Royal Family were appointed kings and rulers in divers places, a young and brave scion of the house was appointed the first Owa or King over the Ijeshas, but that he returned to the Alafiain and complained that his territory was too small, and his subjects few, the sire thereupon ordered a large bundle of sticks to be brought to him, and these sticks he converted into human beings for the Owa, in order to increase the number of his subjects (Johnson, 1921). Hence, to this day the Ijeshas are often termed by their neighbours OmoIgig (offspring of sticks!) (Johnson: 1921).

This of course, is a pure myth invented by their more wily neighbours to account for the notorious characteristics of the Ijeshas generally, who are as proverbially deficient in wit as they are remarkably distinguished for brute strength (Johnson, 1921).

According to Johnson, but one fact holds good down even to our days, viz., that up to the recent total abolition of human sacrifice by the British Government (1893) the Ifes, who, far more than any other, were addicted to the practice, always preferred for the purpose to have an Ijesa victim to any other; such sacrifices were considered more acceptable, the victims being the “food of the gods” (Johnson, 1921).

The second account relates chiefly to the present day Ijesa of Ilesa (the home of the gods) the chief town. According to this account, they hailed from Ekitis; or as some would more correctly have it, they were the Ijesas from the neighbourhood of Ibokun who first migrated to Ipole near Ondo, and thence back to Ilesa. It appears that a custom then prevailed of going out hunting for their king three months in the year, and on one such occasion they found game so plentiful in the neighbourhood of Ilesa, the climate very agreeable, the country well-watered, and the Ijesas there extremely simple, peaceful, and unwarlike (probably the remnants and descendants of the old sacrificial victims) whilst at home they endured much oppression from their Owa, that they there and then conceived and carried out the idea of settling on the spoils of sticks to be brought to him, and these sticks he converted into human beings for the Owa, in order to increase the number of his subjects (Johnson, 1921). Hence, to this day the Ijesas are often termed by their neighbours OmoIgig (offspring of sticks!) (Johnson: 1921).

These objects were easily enough accomplished; but they spared the principal chief, a kindly old gentleman who had an extensive garden plantation. He was called Oba Ila i.e. Okra king, from his Okra plantation, and he was placed the next rank to the chief of the marauders (Johnson, 1921). That nickname continues to the present time as a title Oba’la or Obanla and is conferred on the most distinguished chief after the Owa of Ilesha. It would appear then that although the term Ijesha is retained by the people of that district, and those who are ignorant of
the origin of the term take some pride in it, yet it is evident that the present inhabitants are not all of them the descendants of the aboriginal settlers, the “food of the gods”, but are largely from the Ekitis by admixture; the pure type Ijesas are now and again met with at Ilesa and neighbourhood (Johnson, 1921).

According to Peel J.D.Y. the foundation traditions of the Ijesa, just like other Yoruba kingdoms, take the form of a dynastic migration from Ile-Ife, the sacred centre of Yoruba mythology. The progenitor of the Ijesa was Owa Ajibogun, aka Obokun, the son of Oduduwa. According to Ijesa traditions, when Oduduwa became blind as a result of old age, it was Ajibogun, one of his children, who succeeded in fetching the sea water which was used to cure their father’s blindness. This earned him the appellation “Obokun” i.e. “He who fetched the sea water” (Mike, 2011).

But according to Michael Oke, he postulated that Yoruba historian regarded Ijesaland as a single kingdom under the OwaObokun; this is because by the 17th century, the OwaObokun who is resident in the capital city of Ilesa had become the paramount ruler in Ijesaland (Michael, 1948). Although the Owa was not the only Oba in the area, he was ‘Emperor per Excellence’ hence the title ‘OloriAlade’ i.e. the leader of the crowned heads. There are other rulers and leaders of communities in Ijesaland apart from the OwaObokun.

From the foregoing, we have seen that historically, Ijesaland is made up of different communities that are fused together by the hegemony of the various OwaObokun of Ijesaland. Consequently, upon the fact that the historical background of a settlement is often presented as an accounts of rulers and notable, who to a great extent influence the destiny of the community for good or evil. It is paramount to trace the historical background of Ijeshaland to its first ruler of notable (Michael, 1948).

The first ruler of Ijesaland in this case was Owa Ajibogun who led a group of warriors from Ile-Ife and established his kingdom in Ijesaland. It was these powerful immigrants led by Ajibogun from Ile-Ife that gradually brought the aborigines of Ijesaland under their own military and political administration; and they came together to form Ijesaland (Michael, 1948). To some extent, the historical background of Ijesheland is related to Ile but they are not Ile indigenes. Rather, they were brought together by some Ife warriors under Ajibogun. Thus, the historical background of Ijeseland is unique in that it is a combination of aborigines and immigrants from Ile and Ekiti. Therefore, Ijesa is a distinct dialectical group related to Ekiti and Ile in particular (Michael, 1948).

ISLAM IN IJESHA LAND AND ALFA SALAUADEEN

The early religion in Ijesa land as applicable to all African society is African Traditional Religion (ATR). The Ijesa people worship god and goddesses but the most popular one is Ogun (god of Iron) (Jimoh: 2013). Initially, they use human being as sacrifices for Ogun during Ogun Festival where Owa will go to the shrine pray even up till today. But later on they change it as civilization is trying to key-in into their environment (Jimoh, 2013). Coupled with this, the spread of Islam and Christianity so to say had hindered such an act. The incursion of Islam into Ijesha land can say to meet various challenges because it was not easy in any Africa society to change their philosophy of religion and what they believe in. Interestingly, the unrelented, courage and commitment of Alfa Salaudeen (aka Alfa Parakoyi) cannot be exempted as one of the major straw that broke the carmel back in re-orientating and reforming the people of Ijesha land religiously (Jimoh, 2013).

Alfa Salaudeen was born around early 19th Century to a family of Abdullahi Agunbiade and Saffiati (Sofiat) Agunbiade. He has only a brother called Baba Moro. The emergences of his parent in Ibolin were obscured because the information was subjected to many reports. Be that as it may, his parents found their way to Ilobin during the interwar period in Yoruba land (Jimoh, 2013). According to a source, it was noted that they found their way to their present abode due to succession dispute at Oyo Ile because they were also part of the royal family. As a result the Agunbiade family departed the place and founded another place which is Iwo and from there to Offa, subsequently, they later settled in Ilobin. Even though their emergence in Ilobin surrounded with different information, put differently, what is matter is that they settled in Ilobin as other settlers in Ilobin (Jimoh, 2013).

As an itinerant Islamic scholar, Alfa Salaudeen (a.k.a. Alfa Parakoyi) married too many wives, not because of his greediness for women but it showcase the appreciation from the people he visited because they gave out their daughter as a gift for the cleric to take away. Surprisingly, it was noted that he got married to ninety nine wives. Coincidentally, not all of them were able to bear a child for him because he also faced challenges of still birth “Abiku” (Jimoh, 2013).

In order to appraise the indispensable role of Alfa Salaudeen (a.k.a. Parakoyi), it is imperative to discuss his educational background and this will provide a surgical explanation to his great effort in Islamising Ijesha people. He started his education background at Ile Alalubosa (around Popo Igbonna area) with Alfa Alalubosa, who was referred as a disciplainer and must know Islamic cleric to his students. It is from this mallam that he finished all his Quranic School (Jimoh: 2013).

The impact and status of Alfa Salaudeen in Ijesa land

Interestingly, the emergence of Alfa Salaudeen into Ijesa land was invitational in nature but later metamorphoses to inspirational. Meanwhile, he was invited to Ijesa land by Seedu Ogun who was said to have embraced Islam while sojourning to Ilobin (Monsuru,
2011). He invited Alfa Salaudeen, a native of Ilorin to Ilesha for the purpose of preaching Islam in the area (Adebayo: 2006). However, after the death of Seedu Ogun it was Alfa Salaudeen that championed the overhaul course of upholding Islam in the area. Interestingly, the emergence of the man coincided with the issue of drought in the territory and so many attempts have been made by notable traditional priests especially Daro in the area but all their efforts were futile (Agunbiade, 2013).

When Alfa Salaudeen reached the place, he was obliged to surpass their problem. Hence, he prayed for them and there was heavy rain. According to a source, at the spot of that praying ground the rain has started to the extent that the rain lasted for seven days (Agunbiade, 2013). Though, this was not the first and the last of miraculous activities by Ilorin Islamic cleric in Yorubaland, for instance, there was a case of Alfa Ahmed in Ikire a town near Osogbo. Alfa Ahmed was a muslim spiritualist, he was asked to use his effective and powerful charms to solve the problem of marauders who had besieged the town and the problem was solved (Adebayo: 2006). In addition, there was also the case of Alfa Buraimoh (Ibraheem) in Ede. Alfa Buraimoh was said to have saved the people of Ede from Ibadan invasion by providing them concoction buried it in the ground. Thus, miraculously, Ede was saved without a single shot being fired (Adebayo, 2006). Indeed, the miraculous action of Alfa Salaudeen (a.k.a. Alfa Parakoyi) in Ijesha land was not an exception. But what is obscure is that, was it coincidental or accidental? Nevertheless, it was a unique event in the History of Ijesha people and obviously it showcases the commitment of Ilorin scholars in spreading Islam to other areas because at the long run so many Ijesha people embrace Islam due to that miraculous event.

Consequently, this effort has made Alfa Salaudeen to be famous in the area and he had a great relationship with the then Owa of Ilesha, Oba Ataiyero (1901-1920). According to oral source, through the relationship he had with the Owa, Alaafin Lawani Agogoija (1905-1911) got to know him and the Alaafin commanded Owa to confer on his great friend a title (Agunbiade, 2013). It thus explains why the Oba Ataiyero created a title known as ‘Parakoyi of Ilesha’ (Agunbiade, 2013). But death cheated on Oba Ataiyero not to carry out the conferment. Then, it was the reign of Oba Aromalaran I (1920-1942) that the conferment was later carried out (Agunbiade, 2013). Interestingly, this was an attempt to adhere to the command of Alaafin Lawani Agogoija and to consolidate fantastic role Alfa Salaudeen have played in the development of Ijeshaland and couple with the spread of Islam in West Africa. Even though, he was called some sort of names by Ilorin people like:

“Salautibaraigbo lo ooo” (Jimoh, 2013)
“Salau has followed the people of forest go”

But due to his commitment and dedication, he stands tall to maintain the status quo in spreading Islam and consolidate it in Ijesha land.

Interestingly, Alfa Salaudeen was popularly referred to as Alfa Parakoyi by some Islamic scholars after he was conferred a title in order to have a sense of respect for him. No wonder, when T.G.A. Gbadamosi in his book “The Growth of Islam Among the Yoruba (1891-1908)’ through his reference, it indicated that Late Sheikh Abdulazeez Ajagbemakeferi (a well known Ijesha Islamic cleric) referred to Alfa Salaudeen as Alfa Parakoyi (Monsuru, 2011) as a sign of respect or it may be memory lose and obviously it is necessary to mention his name. Be that as it may, he was popularly called Alfa Parakoyi even after his death.

Following the above, Alfa Salaudeen (aka Alfa Parakoyi) was able to build a mosque and Madrasat (Islamic school) at Isinkin and Itagun area respectively. This showcase that is not only the Mujizah (miracle) of Alfa Salaudeen that make him to be famous but also the teaching and preaching of Islam in the area via his mosque and his Madrasat (Islamic school) (Jimoh, 2014). In the same vein, through him many Ijesha people highly educated and indoctrinated to Islamic jurisprudence.

At this juncture, it is imperative to examine the fact that Alfa Salaudeen not only played religious role but also political role. Hence, it is important to examine the uniqueness of the title “Parakoyi of Ilesha”. As a matter of fact, he is the only chief in Ilesha who has the right to wear turban and Alkimba (a thick gallery worn on top of a dress) in the Owa’s palace. Occasionally, he is eligible to wear the Chiiefaincy bead and all other decorations (Agunbiade, 2013). To a large extent, whenever there is congress Owa will call upon Alfa Salaudeen alongside other chiefs to deliberate on the issues concerning Ijesha people and this shows that Owa recognize the indispensible role of Alfa Salaudeen in his land. Put differently, Alfa Salaudeen also plays a pivotal role between Owa (Ijesha traditional ruler) and other groups in Ilesha. In the sense that, whenever the leader of any particular groups be it Hausa, Nupe or any group they have to contact Alfa Salaudeen and vice versa. Thus, Alfa Salaudeen was the only Mallam, chief and non-indigene of the area that collect monthly salary like other chiefs in Ijesha land and Ilesha in particular (Jimoh: 2014).

After the death of Alfa Salaudeen (aka Alfa Parakoyi) in 1959, there was the need for a successor. And in an attempt to make sure that the family of Alfa Salaudeen nominate a credible successor not only to uphold his title but to champion the course of spreading Islam in the area there was delay. At the course of the nomination, an interim Parakoyi was nominated. And after the death of interim Parakoyi, the biological son of the first Parakoyi, Alhaji Jimoh Adio Salaudeen Agunbiade ascended the throne of his father (Agunbiade, 2013).
Conclusion

In conclusion, it is obvious that the spread of Islam in Yoruba land cannot be disconnected from the activities of Ilorin Islamic scholars in which Alfa Salaudeen was part and parcel of them. And till today among the Yoruba land that cannot breakaway their connection in the spread of Islam to their area through Ilorin is Ijesha land. Obviously, the ends justify the means, and this explains while there was sporadic increase in the population of Ijesha Muslim in Nigeria in which Alfa Salaudeen cannot be exempted among the founding father in introduction of Islam in to Ilesha and Ijesha land in general.

Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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