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# Succession Problems in the Appointment of Imam of Ibadanland

L.O. Abbas

## Introduction

Imamship is an important post among the Muslims that deserves constant reexamination to ensure its compliance with the *Shari'ah* provisions. The focus on Ibadan is hinged on some considerations like its heterogeneity, being predominantly populated by Muslims and as the political headquarters of Yorubaland.

It is discovered that extraneous traditions often determine the appointment of the Chief Imam in Yoruba towns and cities. While a generally accepted norm among the Yoruba Muslims is that the Oba ratifies such appointments, it implies therefore that where a town or city is bereft of Oba and there is vacancy for the post of Imam, such appointment cannot hold.

For Ibadan known for its high level of Islamic scholarship (in quality and quantity) to subscribe to hereditary system of producing its Imam is puzzling. There is a need therefore to examine the position of *Shari'ah* in the appointment of an Imam in comparison with the practice of some by the Ibadan Muslim leaders.

## Imamship in Islam

Imam is an Arabic word having three meanings. First, it means 'to go', 'betake oneself' and also 'go to see someone'. Second, it means 'to lead the way', 'lead someone else by one's example', 'to lead someone in prayer'. Third, 'to be or become a mother' (Cowan, 1966:25). This paper is concerned with the second meaning i.e. to 'lead by example or 'to lead others in prayer' (*salat*).

Originally, 'leader' particularly of caravan, means anyone who guides a column of camels which is synonymous to *hadi*, a guide. Imam is therefore a person or thing that serves as a guide or a pattern. The Imam in this context serves as a guide in prayers. He guides other worshipers in all activities of prayers (*salawat*).

## Types of Imam

There are two types of Imam viz. *Imam Akbar* (Great Imam) and *Imam Saghir* (small Imam). The first one could be the leader of the Muslim community while the second is he who conducts prayers (*salawat*) *Imam Saghir* is further divided into *Imam Jami'* and *Imam Ratib*. *Imam Jami'* is the one who leads the Jumu'ah and Id prayers that are performed in a central mosque or praying ground in a city, town or village (Huart, 1934:473). *Imam Ratib* (local) leads the *salat* performed in a compound mosque. There is at least an appointed Imam in every mosque. Principal mosques could have many depending on size and the need as obtained in *Masjid al-Haram* – Holy Mosque in Makkah and *Masjidun-Nabawi* (The Prophet's Mosque) in Madinah.

The Holy Prophet Muhammad (SAW) was the first to assume the position of Imam of the Muslim community at the inception of Islam. He therefore performed the dual roles of the religious and mundane head of the *Ummah*. He was succeeded in both capacities by the four rightly guided caliphs. They are Abubakr, Umar, Uthman and Ali. The founders of the four orthodox schools of law are called Imams, therefore, we have Imams Abu Hanifah, Malik, Shafi and Hambali.

## Qualities of an Imam

For a person to be eligible for the post of Imam, he must possess certain qualifications and qualities that could make him fit for this important religious job. They are adequate knowledge of Islam ('*ilm*) and justice ('*adalah*). (Qur'an 38:2). These two are essential to the office of the Imam. Others as agreed upon by the four sunni schools of thought are: the Imam must be a Muslim, he must be sane, he must be mature, he must be noble, he must be the most knowledgeable in the Qur'an and sunnah, he must be best in character and in appearance (Oloso, 2000:26).

## The System Adopted in Ibadan

### The Mogaji line

At the introduction of Islam to Ibadan around 1829 (El-Masri, 1967:250), no serious effort was made in the direction of quality and qualification of candidates. This was so because there was no competition of any sort for the post since the early clerics came one after the other. Shaykh Abdullah Igun Olorun or Gunnugun was the most learned person in Islam at that time. He thus easily became the first Imam. His contemporaries; Uthman Abubakr Basunu I and Ahmad Qifu, became second and third Chief Imams of Ibadan

respectively. Thereafter, Chief Imams were appointed from among the sons of the departed ones. This had to be so since most of the children of these Imams had no other professions than Arabic learning and Islamic evangelization. That was why the position was usually occupied and rotated in turns by the sons of the departed Imams who became Mogajis of their fathers after their death (Abbas, 2004:144).

At the initial stage, the Mogajis as described above did satisfy the required qualifications for Imamship for they were erudite scholars, later came a time when consideration for Islamic scholarship became irrelevant. That was when being Mogaji became the yardstick for becoming a member of Imam in council and possibly the Chief Imam. At that time, anybody could aspire to Mogaji not withstanding his deficiency in Islamic knowledge.

### The Alfa Line

The more people learnt Arabic and Islamic Studies, the more availability of Qur'anic and even modern Arabic schools (*Marakiz*) and the more Islamic scholars were available in the city. There were scholars whose fathers were never Imams and were qualified for Imamship. They were naturally unhappy at their exclusion. They therefore collaborated to seize any opportunity that could elevate them into the position. The first test case was when they sponsored Shaykh Abubakr Alaga, a very brilliant and famous scholar, to break the perceived jinx. Unfortunately, the plan could not materialize because of his (Alaga's) sudden death on his way to Makkah for Hajj exercise at Ibariba (El-Masri, 1967:252).

The death of Shaykh Abubakr Alaga was a setback to the circle of the Mallams in Ibadan in that he had laid a good foundation for modern Islamic learning. His school was attended by students from all parts of Yorubaland. He was the first to introduce different subjects like Arabic grammar (*Nahw*), theology (*tawhid*) Qur'an and hadith etc. He had produced many distinguished scholars like Aminullah, Malik bn Husayn and Harun, son of Motanmi, the Ataoja of Osogbo who later became a Chief Imam of Ibadan. It was these qualities that made the scholars to select him as their candidate. (Abbas, 2004:146).

The efforts of the scholars however became fruitful when in 1922 the post of Imam became vacant as a result of the death of Imam Qifu II. Shaykh Harun Motanmi was sponsored by scholars against the Mogajis. Harun Motanmi was carefully and strategically selected to intimidate the Mogajis and whoever their nominee would be for he was respected by all for his

scholarship and fame. For obvious reasons, the Mogajis did not present any candidate and Shaykh Harun Motanmi therefore won unopposed.

Surprisingly however, Shaykh Motanmi declined the offer. He was quoted to be satisfied with his being Alfa (Islamic Scholar). He was nonetheless prevailed upon by other scholars considering the depth of his knowledge and ostensibly the need to break the monopoly of the Mogajis. In reality, Shaykh Motanmi was the only surviving scholar of his generation, others had departed to the great beyond. When the pressure on him became too enormous, he accepted the offer only to satisfy his Alfa colleagues. He then delegated Alfa Ali Muhammad Ajagbe, a willing person, to act for him as Chief Imam. His fear in taking up the job centred on the enormity of its responsibilities coupled with great consequence of its abuse. With this feat accomplished, the Alfa line was created (Abbas, 2004: 147).

Alfa Ali Ajagbe from then acted as the Chief Imam till the death of Alfa Harun Motanmi in 1935 (AbdulRahman, 1989:30). Having acted creditably for thirteen years, and considering the experience he had so far acquired, he was appointed the substantive Chief Imam in the same year. With his appointment, the intention of the scholars was fulfilled (AbdulRahman, 1989: 35).

### Succession by Rotation

With the creation of Alfa line in 1920, succession to the Imamship of Ibadan Central Mosque became rotational and officially recognized the Mogaji and Alfa lines. The arrangement provides for Mogajis with Mogaji Agba (Chief Mogaji or the Most Senior Mogaji) as next to the Chief Imam in one line, and Alfas with the Alfa Agba (grand Mufti) as also next to the Chief Imam in the other line. At the existence of vacancy for the post of Imam, the chief of the next line to produce the Chief Imam would automatically be selected and appointed (El-Masri, 1967: 258).

This arrangement subsisted until the period of Imam Sadiq Folorunso. After he had become the Chief Imam, the position of Mogaji Agba (Chief Mogaji) became vacant with the death of Alhaj Abdulwahab Alagunfon in 1983. The Chief Imam appointed Alhaj Muhammad Hadi Inakoju to succeed him as the Mogaji Agba instead of Alhaj Baosari Suara who was Senior to Inakoju in the hierarchy. The action of the Imam though provoked anger of some members of the council, who considered it an injustice to a fellow colleague, none could question the Imam (Abbas, 2004:148).

Inakoju's appointment as the Mogaji Agba implied that he was the deputy Imam who could act whenever the Imam is not around or is indisposed.

Incidentally that was not to be. It happened that whenever the Imam was indisposed, he delegated Alfa Mudaththir Abdul Salam from Alfa line to act for him as Imam in place of Alhaj Inakoju, the Mogaji Agba. That situation occurred for about three times before the death of the Imam.

When in 1988 Imam Sadiq Folorunso died, Shaykh Mudaththir Abdul Salam took over as the Chief Imam. The decision to appoint him was based on his excellent performance during the period he acted. It was the general belief, particularly among the clerics, that the former Imam had tacitly nominated him for the post. With the appointment of Imam Mudaththir, there were two successive Imams from the Alfa line.

Meanwhile, Alhaji Inakoju retained his position as Mogaji Agba while Shaykh Abdul Kareem Rufai Bello from Alfa line was elevated to the post of Alfa Agba (grand Mufti). After the death of Imam Mudaththir in 1991, the grand Mufti contested against Alhaj Inakoju, the Mogaji Agba and lost. He was however not satisfied and therefore went to court on the ground that Inakoju was not qualified, based on the *Shari'ah* provisions. His action angered the elders of the community who prevailed on him to withdraw the case from the court. Thereafter, he was compensated with the post of deputy Imam (*Naibul Imam*) specially created for him to settle the rift. Imam Inakoju died after about a year in office and his deputy, Rufai Bello took over peacefully with nobody contesting against him while the position of *Naib* was scrapped.

### Problem of Succession

The death of Imam Abdul Kareem Rufai Bello in 1995 brought some crises into the Imamate in Ibadan. Succession to Imamship became more problematic than ever. Three members of the Imam in council openly contested for the post. They were Shaykh Abdul Rauf Motanmi (son of the 9th Imam), the grand Mufti, Alhaj Abdullah Titilayo Basunu (son of the 12th Imam) from Mogaji line and Alhaj Abdul Salam Daniyan, the Mogaji Agba and who, going by the agreed procedure, should be the next Imam since it was the Mogaji line that should produce the next candidate. For weeks, no consensus candidate emerged.

Another dimension was introduced into the matter by the Muslim youths. They insisted that *Shariah* provisions should be applied henceforth in the appointment of the Chief Imam. They rejected the system of heredity and rotation amongst the two identified groups. They posited that since the post, by the law of Islam (*Shari'ah*), is open to all Muslims in the locality,

there should be a test to select the most suitable candidate. While one of the three contestants, Alhaj Abdullah Basunu agreed to the *Shari'ah* provisions as proposed by the youths, Alhaj Daniyan, the Mogaji Agba was opposed to it because according to him, it had not been in practice and that it was perhaps a ploy to edge him out of the race. He pleaded that he be allowed to take his turn and thereafter start to adopt the new system. It is important to note that Alhaj Domiyani was actually not a scholar of Islam, he was in fact said to be a tailor by profession. He only became Mogaji of his family when his father died and got promoted until he got to the post of Mogaji Agba (Abbas, 2004:151).

While still grappling with the problem of succession, a competent scholar was selected to lead the congregation in acting capacity, pending the resolution of the matter at hand. He was Shaykh Adiamoh (popularly known as Baba Saki). He acted for 22 days that the crisis lasted. Several meetings were held at the residence of Baba Isale Musulumi of Ibadan, Alhaj Muibi Akanbi, to resolve the issue. Invited to the meetings were Muslim title holders of Ibadan origin, representatives of the youths and of course, the proprietor of the Arabic Institute, Ibadan, Shaykh Murtada Abdus-Salam. At a time, the meeting agreed to conduct a qualifying test for the contestants and Shaykh Abdus-salam was charged with the responsibility. The Shaykh later reported to the meeting that none of the three was found suitable for the post.

The result of the test further complicated the matter and therefore became more difficult. While the disqualification of the three candidates seemed to have validated the position of the youths, it dampened the hope of other members of the meeting, particularly those who belong to different groups supporting the three candidates. The youths insisted on re-conduct of test and even called for more candidates. The situation became more worrisome with the allegation that all the three contestants had started to lobby members of the meeting with large sums of money as inducement for support.

### **The Emergence of Shaykh Baosari**

For three weeks, the meeting could not produce a candidate and the stalemate caused by the position of the youths could not be resolved. However, a suggestion that the matter be suspended till the arrival of the leader of all the Muslim title holders, Alhaj AbdulAzeez Arisekola Alao was taken and adopted. The Aare Musulumi had left for Europe a few hours before the death of Imam Rufai. On arrival, he was briefed of the situation; hence, he made consultations with Islamic scholars on the position of the *Shari'ah* on

the matter. When he confirmed that all the aspirants had lobbied, he ordered that they be disqualified in accordance with the *Shari'ah* provisions (Az-zabidi, 893:751). He then called for the next person in the council who did not lobby to be appointed and installed. Thus, Shaykh Baosari Suara Haruna was selected. He is a grandson of the fourth Imam.

The selection of Shaykh Haruna helped to a large extent in dousing the already charged situation in the community. Some of those who disagreed with the verdict could not voice out their displeasure because of the personality of Arisekola in the entire Muslim community of Yorubaland. Though the youths approved the way lobbyist contestants were edged out of the race, they still disagreed with the manner adopted in the selection of Shaykh Baosari as not being *Shari'ah* compliant. They organized a press conference at the press center, Ibadan which was addressed by their leader Alhaj Ishaq Kunle Sanni. Three points were mentioned in the address, as follows:

- (i) that Islam is opposed to lineage and heredity in the appointment of Imam. They therefore called for the scrapping of Alfa and Mogaji lines forthwith.
- (ii) that the modality of selecting Imam bequeathed to the Muslims by Prophet Muhammad (SAW) in which knowledge of the Qur'an, Hadith and Fiqh be tested among the contestants be adopted and
- (iii) that lobbying to the position of Imam be discouraged and outlawed.

The press conference notwithstanding, the leadership of the community went ahead to instal Shaykh Baosari Suara Haruna as the 17th Chief Imam of Ibadan. This development aggravated the anger of the youths who vowed to go to any length in getting their views accepted. They therefore filled a suit at the High Court, Ibadan, challenging the appointment. Joined in the suit were Alhaj Abdul Azeez Arisekola Alao, the Aare Musulumi of Yorubaland, Alhaj Muibi Akanbi, the Baba Isale Musulumi of Ibadan and Alhaj Lamidi Adedibu, the Balogun Adini of Ibadan.

The legal action was an embarrassment to the leadership of the Muslim community and therefore called for dialogue with the aggrieved youths. At a meeting held at Arisekola's Bodija residence, it was resolved that the appointment be allowed to stay and supported. Also that the suit filled be withdrawn, while the meeting noted the position of the youths and also that two representatives of the youths be incorporated into the Imam in council for proper administration and understanding (Abbas, 2004: 154).

## Conclusion

In Islam, Imam is made the leader of the Muslims in his community. He serves as the guide, not only on spiritual matters but also on mundane as well, since Islam is a way of life. To be appointed Imam however, one has to satisfy certain conditions by way of qualification and quality. They are: adequate knowledge, being a Muslim, good manners and being an adult among others.

In Ibadan, Imamship was initially hereditary among the sons of the departed Imams who assumed the position of Mogaji of the family immediately after the death of the father. Others whose fathers had not been Imams but who were equally Islamic scholars felt cheated and therefore fought to be included. They later succeeded in creating two lines of succession i.e. Alfa and Mogaji lines.

In spite of the agreed terms of rotation between the two groups, there had been disruptions which caused disaffections amongst members of the Imam-in-council. It seems however that most members of the council prefer the current system though very unislamic, perhaps because of their deficiency as far as qualifications are concerned. The situation calls for serious amendment to conform with strict Islamic principles.

## Suggestions

Ibadan is known to be the head and the nucleus of Yoruba race politically and religiously. Therefore, for it to play its roles adequately particularly in the area of religion, it has to:

- (a) ensure that it complies with the *Shari'ah* provisions in the appointment of Imams. Since Ibadan is blessed with many erudite Islamic scholars, qualified candidates need to be selected for the post of the Chief Imam and other principal-officers of the council.
- (b) reorganize the administration of the mosque in such a way that its effects could be felt by all Muslim members of community.
- (c) ensure that officers of the mosque are updated on Islamic knowledge through seminars and symposia to enable them initiate or react to issues of national interest as they affect the Muslims.
- (d) give younger scholars, with brilliant ideas, chances of contributing their wealth of knowledge and experience to move the community forward.

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