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Historical Development of Mosques in Ilorin Emirate, 1823–1992

Yahaya Eliasu*

Abstract: The word, mosque or *Masjid*, occupies a significant place in the spiritual minds of the generality of Muslims. It has been stated that prayers are uniquely and strongly recommended to be offered in a Mosque as part of *Ibadah* for the Muslims. Mosques are places where Muslims congregate to know each other better and to form a solid community through religious interaction. In addition, praying at mosques in congregation promotes and teaches unity among the people as well as serves as meeting places where various problems are identified with a view to finding solutions to them. It is against this background that this paper chronicles the historical evolution of mosques in Ilorin, investigates their structural developments and examines their functions and challenges within the context of socio-economic, political and religious perspectives. The paper finds, among others, that appointment of imam has become hereditary rather than eligibility on the basis of merit. In view of this, the paper suggests consideration of merit in the appointment of Imam of mosques. This will ensure Islamic activities in the Ilorin Emirate are commensurate with modern Islamic trends.

Keywords: Afonja; Chief Imams of Ilorin; Emirs of Ilorin; Ilorin Emirate; Shaykh Alimi

Introduction

Mosques occupy a significant place in the spiritual minds of the generality of Muslims. It has been stated clearly that prayers must be uniquely offered in mosque as part of *Ibadah* (act of worship) for the

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Muslims. Mosques are place where Muslim congregate to know each other better and to form a solid community through religious interaction. It is against this background that this paper intends to look into the historical development of mosques in Ilorin Emirate.

Therefore, following the Sunnah of the Prophet, one of the first acts of Muslims upon arrival in a new land is to establish a *Masjid* Mosque (Zafar 40). The Mosque has always been the central meeting place for Muslims. The first Mosque built by Prophet Muhammed (peace be upon him) in Medinah served as the first school, community hall and court of law. Mosques therefore play social and political roles as well as serves as the medium of spiritual obligation in the Islamic societies wherever they are sited (Zarahdeen 57). It should be noted that the first mosques on the earth is *Masjid al Haram* (the Mosque in Makkah) which was constructed by Prophet Abraham.

Geographical Local of Ilorin

Ilorin is located on latitude 8^0 35^1 East. Ilorin is the capital of Kwara State, about 400 kilometres from Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory of Nigeria. The city has tropical climate of wet and dry seasons. Generally, the elevation of the land in the western part ranges from 273m to 333m (900ft to 1,100ft) above the sea level (Oyebanji 11–13). According to the 1991 census, the population of the city stood at 804,334 (Oyegun 3–5). Likewise, before 1967 when Kwara State was created, Ilorin was the headquarters of the defunct Ilorin province. The city is a cosmopolitan centre comprising different ethnic groups. The city has often been described as a miniature Nigeria because of its homogenous characteristics. The dominant language is Yoruba but there are many groups such as the Hausa, Fulani, Nupe, Gobirawa, Baruba and so on. The complexity of the city is reflected in the spatial arrangement of wards prevalent in the area. In addition, wards are occupied by different language groups in the city. Thus, the Yoruba are found mainly around *Idi-Ape* area, *Balogun Alanamu* area, *Balogun Ajikobi, Okelele, Oloje* and *Adeta* areas of the city. The Hausa are found mainly in *Balogun Gambari* ward, and the Fulani in *Balogun Fulani* ward.

Brief History of the Establishment of Ilorin Emirate

There are lots of works done on the history of the establishment of Ilorin Emirate (Hermon-Hodge 10–17). As such, only a brief account is given here for the purpose of this work. In 1796, the *Alafin* or Emperor of

the Old Oyo Empire appointed a man named Afonja as the *Are Ona Kakanfo* (that is commander-in-chief) of the army of the empire, so as to ward off attacks from the northern section. By the opening decades of the 19th century however, the internal problems of the empire became serious. *Afonja*, like some of the other provincial governors in the empire, seized that opportunity to carve Ilorin and its environ out of the empire as his own independent domain. To ensure his success in that venture, *Afonja* sought and got spiritual and material assistance from an itinerant Fulani Muslim preacher then based in Ilorin called Alimi al-Salih (Alfa Alimi). Afonja's venture seemed to have succeeded at least temporarily, because the latter was assisted by the former in warding off attacks from his overlord, the *Alafin of Oyo*, who was now regarded as an enemy as a result of *Afonja's* wish to become independent of the Old Oyo Empire.

Table 1 shows the list of Emirs of Ilorin from 1831 to the present.

S / No	Name	Number of years spent on the throne	Period
1.	Emir AbdulSalami	11 years	1831 – 1842
2.	Emir Shitta	18 years	1842 – 1860
3.	Emir Zubair	8 years	1860 – 1868
4.	Emir Aliyu	23 years	1868 – 1891
5.	Emir Momo	5 years	1891 – 1896
6.	Emir Suleiman	19 years	1896 – 1915
7.	Emir Bawa Shuaib	4 years	1915 – 1919
8.	Emir AbdulQadir Shuaib Bawa	40 years	1919 – 1959
9.	Emir Muhammed Sulu Qarnain Gambari	33 years	1959 – 1992
10.	Emir AbudlKadir (Baba)	3 years	1992 – 1995
11.	Emir Ibrahim Sulu Gambari	The present Emir of Ilorin C. 1995	1995 –

However, a tussle, after al-Salih's death, between Afonja and al-Salih's eldest son, Abdulsalami, over who should be the ruler of the independent Ilorin led to *Afonja's* death. This favoured Abdulsalami as it makes Ilorin

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the nucleus of an Ilorin Emirate (within the Sokoto caliphate) over which he successfully became the first Emir in about 1823.

Following the death of Shaykh Alimi, his first son, Abdulsalami, had the opportunity of getting a flag from Sokoto which culminated into his appointment as the first Emir of Ilorin. It must be stated at this point that power seemed to have been shifted from the Yoruba to the Fulani oligarchy and by implication the emergence of Ilorin in the caliphate system and history remains sacrosanct. The emergence of AbdulSalami as the first Emir of Ilorin in 1831 contributed to the consolidation of the Ilorin emirate system which had started earlier in 1823. After he had spent eleven years on the throne, as the Emir of Ilorin, a total of ten Emirs followed him in quick succession as shown in Table 1. The present Emir, Ibrahim Sulu Gambari, was appointed the eleventh Emir in the year 1995.

Ilorin Emirate, like any emirate in Nigeria, had a disquieted history of being called an Islamic city in which Islamic teaching and learning are properly entrenched. This qualified the city for the title, the local Mecca of Yorubaland.

Organisational Structure of Ilorin Emirate

Ilorin Emirate operates a centralized system of administration. At the apex of the political affairs is the Emir, who doubles as the spiritual head of the city, sometimes referred to as the *Amir – Al – Miminin* (commander of the believers). The overall head wears turban with special regalia and insignia of administrative office. However, the term Emir can be traced to the period of the *Khulafahur Rashidun*, the orthodox caliphs of Islam. They were referred to as the *Amir(s)*. This word was later Anglicized to Emir. This nomenclature has continued to be applied to the political structure of the entire emirate of the Northern Nigeria, Ilorin Emirate is not an exception.

The Emir is ably assisted by four Baloguns (ward lords). They are *Balogun Ajikobi, Gambari, Alanamu* and *Fulani* from different quarters. There are office sub-wards controlled by the *Mogajis*. Two of the *Mogajis* are noticeable and they are *Mogajis Aare* and *Magajin Geri*. Likewise, there are two notable Imams, namely Imam Fulani and Imam Imale. The two are seen as the true custodians of Islamic teaching, learning virtues and acquisition of knowledge as they discharge different religious matters and issues. However, only Imam Fulani, perhaps, may be mentioned as a member of kingmakers of Ilorin Emirate council (Magoban 11).

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In addition, there is ethnic balancing in the political arrangement of Ilorin Emirate. For instance, different ethnic groups coalesced into the Ilorin Emirate system. Thus, both the Yoruba Fulani and other noticeable groups are adequately accommodated in the emirate. The terms or words referred to as *Ajikobi* and *Alanamu* are Yoruba words. Linguistically, *Ajikobi* can be explained as "*Ajiko-ebi*" one who wakes up early in the morning to visit or pay homage to his brethren. While *Alanamu* or "*Alana-mu*" means the one who bears and then catches. Whereas "*Gambari*" or "*Fulani*" is a pointer and factor in the development of Ilorin Emirate system. Thus, Ilorin culture has been dynamic and take care of every stakeholder in the development of the city of Ilorin. Therefore, the place of mosques on the history of Ilorin Emirate cannot be overemphasized.

British Conquest and the Establishment of British Rule in Ilorin

Out of enlightened self-interest, the British government of the colony of Lagos had intervened in the fratricidal wars in Yoruba hinterland. It has therefore forced the warring Ibadan and Ilorin to sign the peace treaty in 1893 which delineated their respective territories. The Emir of Ilorin and his four *Baloguns* (that is, warlords) however refused to sign the treaty because they contented that Ikirun should be included in the Ilorin territory. While that issue was still dragging on, an external development complicated the situation further. That was the increasing commercial and imperialist competition between the British and French in the area of the Lower Niger. The British government therefore decided to implement the principle of "effective occupation" as stipulated by the Berlin Conference of 1884 – 1885 in order to safeguard its interest vis-à-vis those of the French Government. Consequently, the British government took some measures which culminated in the successful bombardment of Ilorin by the Royal Niger Company on the 15th of January, 1897. Having being defeated, the Emir and *Baloguns* signed the treaty on the 18th February, 1897, by and place the emirate under the British administration (Adeleye 185–187). Finally, on the 1st of January 1900, the British government revoked the charter of the Royal Niger Company and declared that the territories which had hitherto been under the company had passed under its protection and that include Ilorin Emirate (Danmole 4).

The Position of Ilorin and Islam in the Early 19th Century

It has been established that Shaykh Alimi bn Salih came to meet a good number of itinerant Muslim scholars from various parts of the "world"

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and of different stocks, including the Fulanis, the Gobiris, the Kanuris, the Hausas, the Nupes and the Malians. Hence, Ilorin became a melting pot of Muslims and their culture. That could explain why a quarter in Ilorin was specifically called *Ribwat al-Sunnah (Oke-Sunna)*, named after the observation of the tradition of the Prophet which was common to the inhabitants of that quarter (Jimoh 421). The war between the Muslims of Ilorin and the Yoruba warriors of Oyo and Ibadan perhaps which first culminated into the death of Afonja, the *Aare Kakanfo* (the command-in-chief of the Oyo Army) and the subjugation of part of Southwest of Yorubaland like Ikirun by the Jihadists were more of religion than imperialism. Be that as it may, in the early nineteenth century, Ilorin witnessed a well-established Muslim community. This situation can explain further the position of mosque and its functions in Ilorin and its environ.

Historical Background of Mosque in Ilorin

Following the introduction of Islam in West Africa, the first designated areas were walled for the observers of Islamic devotions. It may be difficult to mention when the first mosque was established in whole of West Africa sub-region. But a scholar popularly referred to as Al-Muhallabi (c. 985) reported that a structure was developed for the observation of congregational prayer in Kawkaw. According to information gathered from the Arabs and indigenous historians in West Africa, the earliest mosque was in Ghana, probably erected by the Berber Muslims, who were known as the first harbingers of Islam n West Africa. In Timbuktu, a big Friday mosque was reported to have been put in place by the Tuaregs in 1096. A similar mosque was founded in Salaga in 1890. The building of this mosque was associated with one Mallam referred to as Chediya, an eighteenth century Hausa Muslim scholar and a native of Kastina who was reported to have left Katsina as a result of the job he secured there. He reported to have found himself in Salaga, where he erected a mosque for the observation of Friday prayer. The place was referred to as *Unguwar Mallam* (Doi 187–188).

The Sankore Mosque of Timbuktu has been reported to be the oldest mosque in West Africa and by inferences, the patronage of the mosque by notable Muslim scholars made it the first University in West Africa (Doi 188). In a similar manner, in Yorubaland, the first Jumat mosque was built by Shitta Bey in Lagos in 1894 (Clark 170). However, AbdulRahaman Doi has commented on the development

of the mosques in Nigeria. He identified and perceived mosques with particular reference to their functions. He specifically mentioned two kinds of mosques. He stated the Ratibi mosque (daily prayers) in which the five daily prayers are offered and of course the Jumat mosques where Friday prayers are equally offered (188).

The first major development in the history of mosques in Ilorin was toward the end of the nineteenth century for that was the period when Islam continued to make remarkable progress in the town in terms of an increase in the number of mosques and place of prayer in the city. Hence, apart from the Central Mosque (Mosalasi Jimoh) which was traced back to al-Salih's (popularly known in history as Alfa Alimi) period, other mosques were reported to have been built in four wards of the town, namely, Fulani, Gambari, *Ajikobi* and *Alanamu* wards, H. O. Danmole has mentioned that by 1983, mosques and praying sites in Ilorin stood to be perhaps around three thousand. The number of mosques given might be doubtful. However, since Muslims were said to be many, their areas were used as mosques and for the observation of prayers. After all, there is a saying of the Prophet (peace be upon him) which says, "The earth has been made for me a place for praying and a thing to perform tayammum" (Al-Bukhari 256).

The first congregational prayer was led by Alfa Alimi (al-Salih) and was held at *Ori-Oke* (literally top hill) during that time. This implies that he was the first Chief Imam of Ilorin. The congregational prayer was first moved to the Munabbai Mosque at *Oke-Kura*. This was further shifted to *Makana* before it was finally shifted to *Idi-Ape* in 1970. This mosque remained in *Idi-Ape* up till 1981 when the ultra-modern Jumat mosque in front of the Emir's palace became functional. It must be noted that the shifting of the Jumat mosque established in Alfa Alimi's life time was reconstructed by Emir Zubair (1860–1868) and was subsequently enlarged by Emir Aliyu (1868–1891) (Jimoh 468). The 1986 census conducted in Ilorin revealed that there was about six hundred (600) mosques and more than a thousand smaller ones found within Ilorin township. Also by 1992, there were over ten Jumat mosques in the city of Ilorin.

Thus, the congregational Jumat in the central mosque is headed by the Chief Imam of Ilorin, assisted by two others namely, Imam Imale of Ilorin and Imam Gambari (Jimoh 467). The other Jumat mosques include the two mosques in the two campuses of the University of Ilorin. The Yahaya Muritadah Mosque located at *Oke-Agodi*, the

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Ansar-ud-deen mosque at Ibrahim Taiwo Road, the Government Secondary School Mosque located at Jebba Road and Alkali Tamimu's Mosque at Amilegbe. Others include the Sobi Army Barracks Mosque, Tajul-Adabi Mosque, *Abata-Abayawo* and Jumatul Sheriff-deen Islam Central Mosque Gambari. Presently, Shaykh Bashir Saliu is the Chief Imam who was turbaned as the twelfth Imam Fulani by the then Emir Zulqurnain Gambari Muhammad in October 1983. The Imam Imale and Imam Gambari of Ilorin are next to the Chief Imam in hierarchy respectively.

Structural Development of Mosques in Ilorin

Mosques in Ilorin started as *Gigi* Mosques from simple to complex, the sense that Muslims decide to choose clean places where such materials as animal skins and mats are made available for prayers. With time, these mosques culminated into skins and mats are made available structure otherwise known as the *Masjid*. This kind of mosques has been typified with specific structure and a few facilities. In addition, there was mosque innovation and renovation in form of thatched roof hinged on simple stake sticks resulting in one raised with mud walls. At this stage, mosques had genuine building with open windows and doors (Akanni 41–68).

This was the situation before the development of the new ultra-modern Juma't Central Mosque in Ilorin city, accommodating twenty thousand Muslims. But mosque history in Ilorin dated back to the period of Shaykh Al-Salih popularly called *Alfa* Alimi of Ilorin. It must be noted that mosques in Ilorin have gone through many unique changes and innovations. Accordingly, Islam has witnessed tremendous progress and expansion and these situations perhaps can explain better the remarkable development in the establishment of mosques in Ilorin Emirate.

Function of the Mosques in Ilorin

The major function of any mosque is to perpetuate the institution of the five daily prayers. However, mosques also serve as schools for the larger society that built it. *Tafsir* (exegesis) lectures are held during and after the fasting of Ramadan in many of these mosque. Apart from the five daily prayers, mosques are also used for the observance of the Jumat prayers (Zarahdeen 63).

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Religious Functions of Mosques

The term "religious" may not be restricted to rituals alone. This is because the word religion in the western sense is quite different from that of the Islamic perspective. The alternative word in Islam is *Ibadah* (service to God). By implication, every act in Islam is considered to be religious *Ibadah*, that is, service to God depending on the intention *Niyyah* of the performer. But rituals in Islam are with specific rules and regulations like Prayers, *Zakat, Siyam* and *Hajj*. It has been mentioned that the major function of the mosque in Ilorin is the service to the institution of five daily prayers *(al-Salawat al-Khams)* as well as Jumat prayer. In addition to that, the mosque serves as a place of *I'tikaf* (seclusion) especially during the last ten (10) days of the month of Ramadan. It also serves as *Zawiyah* (literally: corner) for *Sufi tariqah* performance of the *dhikh* litanies. The mosque functions as a *Zakat* collection centre since the earlier period of Islam with particular reference to the time of Umar Ibn Al-Khattab up till the time Islam gained wider coverage all over the world. Obligatory tax (*Zakat*) is third in rank among the pillars of Islam which mandates Muslims to give out a proportion of their wealth in accordance with the charitable deeds.

Therefore, Muslims give and collect from the mosque because of its singular role as the centre of Muslim communities. Since the time of the Prophet Muhammad, the affluent brought animals and cereals to the *Masjid Nabawi* as *Zakat* for the benefit of the impoverished. As the volume of *Zakat* increases, the frontier of Islamic states expanded, particularly during the reign of Umar Ibn Al-Khattab. And this brought about the issue of *Diwan* since the period of the Byzantine Empire (Isa 23). But in Ilorin, functions of mosque include accommodating large number of Muslim listeners to open lectures like that of the Ansarul Islam which always takes place every Saturday of the week at the central mosque. In the same mosque, there are apartments that serve as classrooms for Quranic school (Adebiyi 23).

Socio-Economic and Political Functions of Mosques

Muslims generally are used to socio-religious collective responsibility which is sanctioned by Islam. This responsibility is always being carried out through individual charity. Whenever a prayer is offered in a mosque, *Sadaqa* is given out. In Ilorin, one of the methods used or applied to get resources in constructing and maintaining the mosque is this collective

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responsibility. Besides the charity given out by individuals in the central mòsque, mosques in each quarter in Ilorin have to contribute to the purse of the central mosque. They get the resources through charities collected in every socio-religious gathering. As a matter of policy, there is a stipulated percentage to be deducted from the proceeds of such gathering by the individual mosque that goes to the central mosque and the mosque concerned respectively. In the highlight, it should be mentioned that other social activities like the marriages are contracted among parents of the betrothed parties. Furthermore, the launching of Islamic books, *Shahadah* or graduation are conducted in the mosque.

Politics has been noted to be part and parcel of human life and activity and no society can flourish actively without its involvement in politics. Politics has to do with collective public issue which centres on state affairs. For example, when a state was established on the platform of Islam, the mosque performed a major political role. Thus, the mosque served as a very efficient centre for both the political mobilization and political education of the Muslim community. More importantly, all issues relating to diplomacy are adequately discussed in the mosque. Thus, the mosque has been perceived as the *Majlisush Shura*, consultative assembly. (Issa 166).

Appointment of Imams in Ilorin Emirate

Without exception, the Chief Imam, Imam Imale (Mali) and Imam Gambari were (and still) being appointed by the Emir directly after due consultation with his council of *Ulama'* on the educational qualifications of the prospective Imam and his eligibility. All other Imams of the mosques are selected by the members of their respective communities and sanctioned by the Emir.

The appointment of Imams, as shown in Table 2, as well as their succession to the throne was not hereditary and is still not hereditary. But it must be pointed out that in the past, the position of Chief Imam of Ilorin was contested for but in the present time it is not. The reason for this is that there have always been enough qualified candidates for the Imamship from the concerned families that normally produce it. As such, that settled any unnecessary competition and rivalry in and outside the families. Although oral evidence states that the position of Imamship is not inherited, eligibility to such a position is based on merit (Olohunoyin 2017).

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Table 2: *The list of Chief Imams of Ilorin from 1831 – 2018*

S / No	Name of Imam	Clan Affiliation
1.	Sheikh Ahmad Sanni	Fulani Qurters
2.	Sheikh Tamim Bello	Ile Badiko
3.	Sheikh Haliru Yero	Ile-Badiko
4.	Imam Saliu	Ori-Oke
5.	Imam Abubakar	Ori-Oke
6.	Imam Aliyu Abdulkadir	Ori-Oke
7.	Imam Saliu Onida	Ile-Alfa Omo
8.	Alfa Dasuki	Agaka Area
9.	Alfa Ahmada	Agaka Area
10.	Imam AbdulMaliki	Agaka Area
11.	Alfa Musa Ahmada	Baboko Area
12.	Shaykh Bashir Saliu (the present Chief Imam of Ilorin)	Agaka Area

Conclusion

This article has examined the history of mosques in Ilorin Emirate. It has also discussed the various challenges of mosques from the ancient time to the period of modernization which mosques in the city of Ilorin went through. We have also examined various functions of the mosques in the Ilorin Emirate. Significantly, the religious, socio-economic and political functions as well as the place of the mosques in equity in terms of distribution of wealth among the Muslim *Ummah* have been highlighted. It has been stressed in this article that the importance of mosques in Islam cannot be over-emphasised. It has multifarious functions in the immediate Muslim Community that built it in particular and the Muslim world in general. This has been the case since the time of the Prophet (peace be upon him) up to date. Ilorin mosques are seen as an off shoot of the tradition of the Prophet and the subsequent Caliphs. It is in the light of this submission that this article traces the historical development of mosques in Ilorin. This study has investigated different functions and roles played by the mosques which commensurate with modern Islamic trend in Ilorin Emirate.

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