

# RETHINKING THE PROLIFERATION OF MUSLIM CHIEFTAINCY TITLES IN CONTEMPORARY YORUBALAND (SOUTHWESTERN NIGERIA) FOR AN EFFECTIVE ADMINISTRATION OF MUSLIM AFFAIRS

(Pemikiran Semula mengenai Pangkat Jawatan Ketua Muslim  
di Yorubaland (Selatan Nigeria) pada Masa Kini untuk  
Pentadbiran Hal Ehwal Islam yang Berkesan)

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## ABSTRAK

*Amalan menganugerahkan pangkat ketua agama kini menjadi semakin meluas di kalangan kaum Yoruba yang menjadi penduduk bahagian Barat Daya Nigeria. Akibatnya, masjid, organisasi orang Islam, dan individu berpengaruh terlibat dengan aktif dalam amalan ini. Pangkat sedemikian bertujuan menghargai sumbangan penerimanya di kalangan orang Islam; pangkat juga bertujuan menggalakkan penerima untuk memberi lebih banyak sumbangan memandangkan kedudukan tinggi mereka di kalangan orang Islam; bahawa pangkat juga merupakan satu cara untuk mengekalkan penerima dalam agama Islam kerana anugerah itu mewujudkan perasaan kekitaan. Bagaimanapun, kriteria pemilihan tidak dihuraikan dengan jelas bagi memperoleh anugerah itu dan tanggungjawabnya tidak dikenal pasti bagi penerimanya. Pada zahirnya ia merupakan satu sistem yang bercelaru kerana tidak ada piawai tertentu hinggan sesiapa saja boleh dianugerahkan pangkat ketua agama Islam di kalangan penduduk Barat Daya Nigeria. Kertas ini menggunakan falsafah analitik dalam menghuraikan sari pangkat-pangkat itu dan membezakannya antara ideal dengan realiti. Sumbangan khusus kertas ini ialah ia mengenal pasti kualiti yang ideal, keperluan, peranan dan juga status seorang ketua orang Islam dalam konteks Nigeria, dan sumbangan terbesar kertas ialah dalam analisisnya mengenai kedudukan ketua orang Islam dalam menghadapi cabaran permodenan dan mengkonsepsi dan mengkonstruksi pangkat untuk tujuan pentadbiran orang Islam.*

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**Kata Kunci:** Islam, pangkat ketua, Yoruba, Muslim Nigeria

### **ABSTRACT**

*The practice of conferring religious chieftaincy titles has become prevalent among the Yorubas who are the inhabitants of the Southwestern part of Nigeria. Accordingly, mosques, Muslim organizations, and even influential individuals are actively involved in the growing practice. They argue that such titles are aimed at recognizing and appreciating the significant contributions of their recipients among Muslim; that the titles are intended to encourage their recipients to do more, in view of their exalted chieftaincy position among Muslim; that the titles also constitute a way of retaining their recipients in the fold of Islam as such an ennobling recognition as accorded them gives them a good sense of belonging. However, the selection criteria are not clearly stipulated for such titles and responsibilities and not clearly identified for the title holders or recipients. It seems to be a confused system with no standard as anybody can be considered for the titles. The purpose of this paper is to trace the origin of the practice of conferring Muslim chieftaincy titles among Southwestern Nigerian Muslims. The paper employs analytic philosophy in articulating the essence of such titles and distinguishing the ideal from the reality. The paper's specific contribution lies in its identification of the ideal qualities, requirements, role, as well as status of a Muslim chief in the Nigerian context, and the paper's most significant contribution is its analysis of the place of the Muslim chief in the face of the challenge of modernity and its reconceptualization and reconstruction of the titles for a purposeful administration of Muslims.*

**Keywords:** Islam, chieftaincy titles, Yorubas, Nigerian Muslims

### **INTRODUCTION**

The evolution of Muslim chieftaincy titles in Nigeria, especially the Southwestern part of the country, was neither an accidental nor a haphazard development with no historical justification. For instance, the introduction of the *Baba Adinni* title into this geographical area was not unconnected with the consideration that even the holy Prophet Muhammad had thought it wise to fashion out ennobling titles and appellations in honouring some of his outstanding companions. Abubakr Siddiq who turned out to be the first orthodox and rightly guided caliph of the prophet was said to practically be a chieftain among the companions. That he deserved to be honoured and rewarded was demonstrated in various ways. One, he was the first man to embrace Islam. Two, he was personally a close associate of the holy Prophet of Islam. Three, he devoted all his possessions to the propagation of Islam. Four, he took a life risk by offering to accompany the holy prophet in his migration to Medina. Five, he proved to be a useful tool in the spread of Islam. Six, he was not only morally enviable and economically buoyant but also spiritually upright. Seven, and above all, his contributions to

Islam were second to none and were acknowledged by even Allah, in the holy Qur'an. All these considerations among others ranked Abubakr next to the holy Prophet and first among the companions (Khalid 1998).

The Southwestern Nigerian Muslims, like the rest of the Muslims the world over believe strongly in the act of rewarding the good-doing and beneficial. This explains why they introduced into the Mosque honorary chieftaincy titles with a view to honouring with them important personalities who have contributed enormously in keeping the flag of Islam aloft and its candle aflame. The people so honoured are regarded as fulfilling in their community the same role as that fulfilled by Abubakr in the ummah of the holy prophet. Only committed muslims of substance who are not only affluent and influential but also reputable, charismatic and spiritually upright are deemed fit for this title the holder of which is like a Muslim-Monarch or General surrounded with and supported by such lieutenants as *Balogun Adinni, Aare Adinni, Seliki Adinni, Giwa Adinni* and others together with their female counterparts such as *Iya Adinni, Iya Sunna; Iyalode Adinni, Olori Alasalatu* and others (Biobaku 1957).

### **THE QUALITIES AND PERSONALITY OF A MUSLIM CHIEFTAIN IN NIGERIA**

A cursory glance through Nigerian History reveals that the *Baba Adinni* title can only be held by a mail of imposing personality and impressive bearing; wealthy and properous, scrupulous in his acquisition of wealth through duct of handwork, devout and generous in his contribution to Islam and beneficial by lending a helping hand to the under privileged in the society.

The present *Baba Adinni* of Nigeria, Alhaji Chief Dr. Abdul Wahab Iyanda Folawiyo (OFR), for instance, is a model of success and great entrepreneur himself the Chairman/Chief Executive of the Folawiyo Group, a conglomerate with over a dozen subsidiaries at home and abroad. He is also a Vice President of the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) and a recipient of three honorary doctorate degrees from three Nigerian Universities (Adejare et al. 1998).

Former *Baba Adinni* of Yorubaland and undeclared winner of the June 12, 1993 presidential elections, Late Alhaji Chief Moshood Kashimawo Olawale Abiola kept the nation and even the international community mouths - agape, flabbergasted and overwhelmed with his numerous philanthropic activities in sports, educational institutions, health sector, charitable organizations, road construction, mosque and Church building, poverty alleviation, human rehabilitation and general reparation for the African Continent. The heart of the matter here is that he was known for dazzling people with his generosity and this he demonstrated impressively on many occasions (Seriki 1998). All these, according to late Shaykh Adam Al-Ildri, earned Chief M. K. O. Abiola the title

of Abu Bakr Siddi his community i.e. *Baba Adinni* of Yorubaland with the consensus of leading Yoruba scholars (al-Iluriyy 1992).

However, the title came into existence in Egbaland as a leader and most honourific title in Egba Muslim Community in replacement of *Oba Imale* (King of the Muslims) of Egbaland which had once existed. Sule (Sulaiman) of Erunwon was the first and the last Muslim leader to be in that capacity as the post was abolished by the Egba Native Administration. It should be added here that the maternal grandfather of Dr. Abdul-Lateef Adegbite, *Alfa Bisiriyu Giwa* of Igbore was popular choice for succession to the title. *Giwa* was a very colourful civic leader and a formidable force to reckon with in Egbaland (Biobaku 1992).

It would be recalled that the post of *Oba Imale* which was said to have been introduced during the reign of *Oba Gbadebo I* (1898-1920) existed side-by-side with that of Chief Imam and that of Alake and other sectional obas in Abeokuta. It is the duty of the holder of the office to maintain good relationship with the secular authority of the town and was said to have a seat in the Egba Council of Obas and Chiefs. The title was specifically created at the instance of some Abeokuta Muslims who supported Sule of Erunwon in his bid to introduce into the Egba Muslim Community a title similar to those known in Bida from where the Egbas had just returned as visitors (Biobaku 1992). Sule, who was consequently enthroned as the *Oba Imale* of Egbaland and wielded power among the Muslims and non-Muslims alike, was a signatory to a number of treaties concluded by Egbaland and had in common with other sectional Obas. The use of trumpets (*Kakaki*), whisk (*Irukere*), colourful umbrella, dignified dresses and riding on well decorated horses to important occasions accompanied by professional drummers. The wearing of a big turban on his head as a symbol of Islam distinguished the *Oba Imale* from the other obas who used beaded crowns (Biobaku 1992).

Even *Alfa Bisiriyu Giwa* of Igbore who was the popular choice to the post of *Oba Imale* after the demise of Sule was an Arabic Scholar who was conscious of the significance of acquiring Western education and therefore enrolled his children especially the males, in the Western School in what was then known as the elite circles of the day in Abeokuta and Lagos. He had continued steadily, gaining more fame and glory as a charismatic Arabic scholar and improving appreciably his knowledge of the Qur'an and its teachings. On numerous occasions he invited to Abeokuta from Ilorin Muslim scholars who preached and led prayers at his family Mosque in Igbore especially during Ramadan. He creditably maintained this practice throughout his life. Notwithstanding the enviable qualities, impressive records and impeccable credentials possessed by *Alfa Bisiriyu Giwa* he was unjustly denied ascendancy unto the apex Muslim throne (Biobaku 1992).

## **THE ROLE AND STATUS OF A MUSLIM CHIEFTAIN IN NIGERIA**

The purpose of this section of the present paper is to highlight the desirable personality of the *Baba Adinni* and any worthy Muslim chief for that matter in the same thing. It has been observed that *Giwa's* stiff opposition to tyranny and oppression from all quarters was a major factor instrumental to his denial. It was also observed that the fear by the ruling Monarch of his time that if the Muslims continued to have their own independent King, the Egba Muslim Community would be divided and there would be more people on the side of the Muslims owing largely to the charisma and naturally improving character of *Giwa* whose personality already won great respect and admiration in Egbaland even as a Muslim leader let alone as Muslim King (Biobaku 1992).

The emphasis placed on the *Baba Adinni* title in the foregoing is only informed by its historical precedence in Yorubaland and certainly unconnected with any contemporary organizational hierarchy. It is only treated as a prototype of Islamic chieftaincy titles in the area under discussion with a view to tracing the origin of such practice among Muslims.

### **THE MUSLIM CHIEFTAIN AND THE CHALLENGE OF MODERNITY**

It may not be out of place therefore to see the *Baba Adinni* ranking first among Muslim chiefs in some communities as is the case in Lagos and in Abeokuta, as indicated earlier. In some other Muslim communities, it is the *Asiwaju Adinni* that ranks first, and yet in others, it is the *Aare Adinni* that takes precedence on the others; it is even the *Balogun Adinni* that ranks first in some other settings. What this suggests is the need for every Muslim community to formulate its own hierarchical structure for Muslim chiefs, in order to facilitate easy identification of duties and distribution of powers and responsibilities.

To formulate such a structure, studies or contributions are needed (i) to define the more specific requirements of each title and develop some Guiding Principles which may serve as the main directional goals for the whole system, including mosque administration; and (ii) to determine the implications of the Guiding Principles, in the light of the actual needs and problems of each Muslim community and its local conditions, so that a sound and beneficial Muslim Management programme can be developed. It should be noted here that it is the responsibilities of every title that determine the requirements that will be stipulated for its holder. This consideration is intended to ensure from the outset that the holder withstands the challenges posed by the office occupied by him.

All the above stated considerations and arrangements have always been part of Islam till the advent of colonialists. Colonization, it is common knowledge, came with the rise of the industrial power in the West, and led to the subjugation of the Muslim world and other countries in Asia, Africa and America. One of the effects of political and military domination was that it deprived the Muslim world of free growth and independent life as required by Islam. Khaldun Kinnany, a professor of educational administration and Director of Higher Education with UNESCO, graphically captures the essence of the issue when he says that the colonizer had no interest in religion (whether Islamic or Christian) except to manipulate it cunningly to further dominate over conquered territories. The Colonizer, Kinnany, adds, "did all in his power to distort Islam in the eyes of Muslims and non-Muslims alike, and endeavoured to shake the Muslim's belief in their religion and to persuade them that their backwardness originated in the Islamic faith because it was rigid, uncompromising, and incompatible with modern civilization that their salvation lay in adopting other religions, or in organizing their society on a rational and secular basis".

This argument, supported by subtle psychological pressures and strengthened by the colonial system of education, had devastating effects on the Muslim community in Asia and Africa. As time progressed, many among the rising generations of Muslims fell victim to alien ideologies, and several Muslim countries adopted secular form of government and separated religion from politics and administration. Some of them even became confused that no systematic arrangement could have originated from Islam and therefore became, unconsciously though, advocates and protagonists of Christianity and somewhat oblivious of where really lie the beauty and strength of Islam. "If the purpose of civilization is to raise a sense of pride, dignity, honour in individuals so that they improve their state and consequently the state of society, Islamic civilization," according to Ezzati "then has proved to have done this well" (Kinnani 1980).

There is ample evidence to the effect that Islam has succeeded in doing this in the past to various peoples of various regions. Mungo Park, educated as he was from the Scottish Church and cruelly persecuted as he was throughout his travels by Moorish bandits, Ezzati observes, would not likely be a friend to Islam, as many of his remarks show a bias against it. This explains why his testimony is all the more valuable. His travels lay most exclusively among Muslims or semi-Muslim tribes, and he later found that Negroes everywhere were summoned to prayer by blasts blown through elephants' tusks. On reaching the Niger, the main object of his wandering, he found, to his surprise, that Segu, the Capital of Bambarra, was a walled town, containing some 30,000 inhabitants, that the houses were square and very often white-washed, and that there were Moorish Mosques in every quarter. The view of this expensive city, he writes "the numerous canoes upon the river, the crowded population and

the cultivated state of the surrounding country, formed altogether a prospect of civilization and magnificence which I little expected to find among Muslims” (Ezzati 2006). However the thinking still holds sway among Muslims that refinement, civilization and sophistication are least expected of adherents of Islam. And such Muslims, one not hasten to say, have much to learn from the experience of Mungo Park.

The present civilized world and Europe have benefited enormously from the culture, knowledge and civilization of these (Muslims) who were at one time the masters of the world. That accounts for the prevalent thinking among Muslim elites that Europe ought to look upon the Muslims as its cultural and civilization ancestors in various areas of human endeavours.

### **A RECONSTRUCTION OF MUSLIM CHIEFTAINCY TITLES**

All the Muslims need do today to proffer lasting solutions to their administrative challenges is to think creatively and critically in a manner that is consistent with Islamic principles. It is however regrettable that most Muslims today are not accustomed to such result-oriented thinking and therefore resort to the sheepish embrace of the status quo. And this is one attitude that certainly cannot yield a favourable outcome. There is therefore a creative reconceptualization of the various Muslim Chieftaincy titles as well as a critical rethinking of the responsibilities of their holders for both religious and administrative purposes.

Some of those needs that call for urgent attention in the contemporary Muslim community of Yorubaland, as is the case in any sub-urban Muslim setting, are among others *aqiqah* (naming of a new arrival into the community), *tarbiyah* (upbringing of that new member of the community), *Nikah* (conducting a union between that member and his or her chosen partner), *Jinazah* (funeral to bid that member a bye when he or she departs this world). Other key areas of interest are *masjid* (the Mosque where canonical acts of worship are observed), *musallah* (where congregational eid prayers are observed), *mahafil* (occasional Islamic ceremonies).

It cannot be gained that the above enumerated areas are in dire need of such respective arrangements as standardization of the format of many ceremonies, founding and administration of schools, systematization of marriages, as well as proper documentation and management of births and deaths. Of similar nature are such issues as *Zakat* collection, and administration, hajj operations and mosque standardization for improved performance.

The various challenges itemized earlier and other related ones in connection with Yorubaland may form the bedrock for the formulation of activities and experiences that will ultimately constitute various responsibilities meant for

systematic distribution among the Muslim chiefs of the land. Such 'division of labour' or distribution of assignment may advisedly take the posture of portfolios distributed among ministers thereby charging a chief with the steering of internal affairs and mosque administration, another with special duties and yet another identified to take charge of finances or information. Such an arrangement will enable the community know whom to ask what question, and will also make every chief proactive and prepared to give progress reports on his own 'chieftaincy territory'. As a consequence, there will always be something new and worthwhile to discuss at every meet of the Muslim chiefs thereby enhancing the growth rate and increasing the tempo of development in the community. Some of the titles and duties or portfolios of the Muslim chiefs in the contemporary Southwestern Nigerian setting, formulated and suggested in this paper, may be itemized in sum, as follows:

1. *Aare Adinni* (Leader of the Muslims) - President
2. *Asiwaju Adinni* (Head of the Muslim Community) - External Affairs
3. *Baba Adinni* (The Elderly Muslim Chief) - Internal Affairs
4. *Balogun Adinni* (Commander-in-Chief) - Emergent Issues of Emergency
5. *Jogun Adinni* (Preserver of the Islamic Legacy) - Head of Burial Committee
6. *Arowosadinni* (Financial Pillar of Islam) - Finance
7. *Alakoso Adinni* (Coordinator) - Special Duties
8. *Osupa Adinni* (The Light of Islam) - Information
9. *Agbesinga Adinni* (Propagator of Islam) - Da'wah
10. *Alatunse Adinni* (Arbitar) - Crisis Management and Dispute Settlement

## CONCLUSION

This paper has traced the origin of Muslim chieftaincy titles among Southwestern Nigerian Muslims and articulated the rationale, purpose and essence of such titles alongside the qualities, requirements, role as well as status of an ideal recipient of a title of that nature. The paper elucidated the challenge of Modernity to holders of such presumably ennobling and prestigious titles and attempted a reconstruction of the titles for effective administration of Muslims. The paper concludes with a formulation of an ideal structure for the title holders.

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