

Halal And Gendered Sacred Authority: Female Islamic Clerics In Yorubaland And Beyond

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Abstract

The presence of female Islamic clerics in Yorubaland represents a significant shift in the religious landscape of Southwestern Nigeria, emerging despite entrenched cultural resistance and the historical dominance of masculine clerical authority. While Islam has historically provided precedents for female religious leadership—most notably through Aisha bint Abi Bakr, whose scholarly contributions to Hadith remain foundational to Islamic jurisprudence—the clerical roles within the Yoruba Muslim community were long perceived as exclusively male domains. This study undertakes a comprehensive historical survey of Islamic clerical leadership in the region, tracing the evolution from rigid masculinization to a more gender-sensitive framework that gained momentum in the 1990s. This transition was catalyzed by shifting socio-cultural realities and the influence of global advocacy for gender inclusion, such as the 1995 Beijing Declaration. By examining the attitudes of clerical selectors, the broader Muslim Ummah, and general society, the research analyzes the diverse patterns of acceptance and the complex negotiation of religious authority. Methodologically, the study explores the behavioral responses of the community toward these women, highlighting how they navigate traditional expectations while asserting their scholarly expertise. The findings reveal that female Islamic clerics and honorary titleholders are not merely symbolic figures; they exercise significant entrepreneurial agency within religious spaces. Through the establishment of madrasas, counseling services, and media engagement, these women are redefining the boundaries of religious leadership. Ultimately, the study underscores that the rise of female clerics in Yorubaland is a dynamic synthesis of Islamic tradition and contemporary social change, challenging the monopoly of male authority in the African Islamic context.

Keywords: Female Clerics, Islam, Hegemonic Masculinity, Global South, Nigeria; Power.

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Introduction

This research was inspired by the increasing visibility of female Islamic clerics in Europe and parts of Northern Nigeria who now occupy spiritual leadership roles, particularly on social media, where they lead *Salat* and engage in religious ministration. This contemporary development justifies a focused scholarly examination of notable female Islamic clerics in Yorubaland. Drawing from Raewyn Connell's global knowledge economy perspective, this study aligns with the argument that scholarly attention has disproportionately favoured the global North at the expense of the global South, thereby necessitating the recovery and documentation of neglected indigenous knowledge systems (Connell, 2014).

Connell further observes that most religious institutions historically prioritise men in leadership roles. In Christianity, for instance, Catholic and Protestant denominations have largely excluded women from ecclesiastical leadership, despite occasional resistance to this norm. Similar patterns are evident in Buddhism, where religious authority remains male-dominated, and in Islam, where the prominence of *Ulama* reflects entrenched male supremacy, particularly within Sunni traditions (Connell, 2020). Consequently, male domination in religious history is not accidental but is sustained through the fusion of religious authority with masculinity, often legitimised through sacred texts and traditions (Connell, 2020; Isaiah 47:1–15; 1 Corinthians 14:34; 1 Timothy 2:11–13).

Historically, Aisha, the wife of the Holy Prophet Muhammad, stands as a foundational reference in the history of female Islamic clerics. She is credited with numerous Hadith narrations that constitute part of *Sahih Bukhari*, a core source of Islamic jurisprudence worldwide. Her scholarly authority establishes an early precedent for female religious leadership within Islam.

Among Yoruba Muslims, the emergence of female Islamic clerics can be traced to the late nineteenth century, largely due to the scarcity of earlier records. Evidence suggests that female clerical presence in Yorubaland became visible in the late 1890s. A notable example is Ummu Rumanah Muhammad Bello, a prominent female Islamic cleric from Ibadan, who trained Sheikh Ahmad Rufai, later turbaned as the 16th Chief Imam of Ibadanland (1993–1995) (Premium Times, 2015). Given that Rufai was born in 1917, it is likely that Ummu Rumanah was already an established Qur'anic teacher by the early twentieth century, underscoring her significance as an early female religious authority.

This period coincided with the emergence of female Islamic societies (*Egbe*) in Yorubaland between 1891 and 1910, as documented by Tajudeen Gbadamosi (1978). Subsequently, the number of female Islamic clerics increased alongside the rising enrolment of girls in Qur'anic and Muslim schools. This development was driven by early Muslim elites who advocated for the establishment of Muslim schools under colonial administration, particularly in Lagos and Epe, before spreading to other Yoruba towns and villages (Gbadamosi, 1978). By the late twentieth century, numerous female Islamic organisations had emerged, serving as

platforms for leadership training and the religious education of the Muslim girl-child in Yorubaland.

Scholarship on female Islamic clerics in Nigeria remains limited, largely due to dogmatic interpretations of religion and the patriarchal orientation of religious historiography. These perspectives have constrained scholarly engagement with women's religious authority, rendering their leadership roles marginal within academic discourse. Nevertheless, emerging studies particularly those drawing from Global South perspectives have begun to interrogate this imbalance by engaging with female clerics and documenting their lived experiences. The present study contributes to this evolving literature by examining female Islamic clerics in Yorubaland through conceptual, historical, leadership, economic, and biographical perspectives.

Central to this discussion is the concept of hegemonic masculinity. Mike Donaldson (Donaldson, 1993), drawing on the works of Carrigan, Connell, Lee, Chapman, Cockburn, Messner, and Rutherford, conceptualises hegemonic masculinity as a dominant gender strategy that sustains male authority through the subordination of women and the marginalisation of alternative gender expressions (Donaldson, 1993). This framework illuminates the resistance to women's leadership in religious contexts, where femininity is often perceived as incompatible with authority. Donaldson further argues that challenges to hegemonic masculinity such as the visibility of homosexual and lesbian identities undermine the hierarchical structure of heterosexual male dominance. Similarly, the emergence of alternative domestic arrangements, including househusbands prompted by economic hardship and unemployment, signals shifts that threaten traditional male supremacy. (Donaldson, 1993)

Raewyn Connell extends hegemonic masculinity beyond interpersonal relations to the global political economy, likening it to imperialism as a masculinised system of domination (Connell, 2005). She argues that neither capitalism nor industrialisation alone explains global inequality; rather, imperialism functions as a gendered structure that enables dominant societies to subordinate others. This perspective challenges the binary division of the world into "modern" and "pre-modern" cultures and exposes the power relations embedded in dominant narratives of modernity. (Connell, 2005)

Gurminder Bhambra similarly critiques Eurocentric constructions of modernity, rejecting the assumption that European historical experiences constitute a universal model (Bhambra, 2009). She advances the concept of "connected histories," emphasising that European modernity emerged through sustained interactions with non-European societies. By re-examining landmark events such as the Renaissance, the French Revolution, and the Industrial Revolution (Bhambra, 2009), Bhambra demonstrates that modernity is a shared global process rather than an exclusively European achievement. This position aligns with Syed Farid Alatas' (Alatas, 2006) critique of Eurocentrism, which he describes as the systematic

privileging of European knowledge systems while rendering non-European cultures insignificant (Alatas, 2006). Alatas advocates the development of alternative discourses to challenge this intellectual imbalance and promote epistemic diversity (Alatas, 2006).

While masculinity often manifests as male dominance, Per-Åke Rosvall and colleagues highlight its contradictions in liberal societies such as Sweden. Despite progressive gender policies, they observe persistent discrimination against non-heterosexual individuals, particularly in employment contexts. This illustrates the resilience of hegemonic gender structures even within societies committed to formal equality (Rosvall, 2020).

Within Nigeria, Fatai Olasupo examines the historical evolution of women's roles in political, social, and religious spheres from the pre-colonial to post-colonial periods (Olasupo, 2016). He argues that African religious institutions have been predominantly patriarchal, a tendency reinforced by state policies. Olasupo cites the Nigerian National Advisory Council on Religious Affairs as an example of institutionalised exclusion, noting that women were entirely omitted from its membership and leadership despite its professed commitment to religious balance. He questions the rationale for such exclusion, particularly given religion's ethical emphasis on service to humanity (Olasupo, 2016).

David Ogungbile complements this analysis by examining Muslim women's leadership in Yorubaland, particularly through the Egbe Alasalatu movement. This organisation provides religious space for widows, divorcees, and married women to participate actively in Islamic worship and administration (Ogungbile, 2011). Ogungbile identifies female leaders such as Iya Suna, Iya Adini, and Olori Oniwaka, who played significant roles in organisation, communication, and devotional music (Waka). Their leadership demonstrates women's capacity to sustain religious communities despite patriarchal limitations (Ogungbile, 2011).

Economic interpretations of women's leadership are offered by Ganiyat Adesina-Uthman and I. O. Uthman, who argue that Muslim women's religious authority is closely linked to their economic roles as household managers and breadwinners. Rising poverty and economic instability among Nigerian Muslim women have compelled many to engage in informal economic activities, enhancing their visibility and influence within religious spaces. This economic agency, they argue, provides a foundation for women's participation in religious leadership (Adesina-Uthman & Uthman, 2012).

Giulia Liberatore provides a broader analytical framework by examining how Muslim women seek to liberalise religious authority to create leadership spaces for themselves (Liberatore, 2019). Her work resonates with Joseph Hill's argument that women's leadership aspirations stem not from rebellion but from their perceived capacities for care, empathy, and moral guidance. Hill further contends that respect within Islamic communities is often grounded in knowledge rather than gender (Hill, 2018). Consequently, women who acquire religious knowledge challenge patriarchal authority by asserting leadership based on scholarship. He also highlights the

importance of socio-cultural context, noting that female religious authorities in the United Kingdom combine spiritual guidance with practical support, adapting Islamic teachings to contemporary social realities (Liberatore, 2019).

The acceptability of female religious leadership, therefore, depends not solely on ritual performance but also on discourse, reasoning, and intellectual engagement (Liberatore, 2019). Masooda Bano supports this view by showing how women operate within Islamic frameworks to guide younger generations toward ethically grounded ways of life (Bano, 2017). These women contribute positively to wider society while remaining critical of certain cultural practices, demonstrating the adaptability of Islamic ethics.

Liberatore further argues that women position themselves as natural guides by selectively engaging with Islamic traditions, thereby transcending rigid gender roles (Liberatore, 2019). This argument is reinforced by Jeanette Jouili (Jouili, 2015), Mayanthi Fernando (Fernando, 2014), and Christine Jacobson (Jacobson, 2011), who caution against reducing Muslim women's experiences to binaries such as liberal versus orthodox or empowered versus constrained. Instead, they emphasise the diverse ways Muslim women imagine and enact their roles as publicly engaged religious actors.

In Yorubaland, female Islamic clerics play critical roles in addressing the spiritual and social challenges faced by their congregations through regular ministration, counselling, and prayer sessions. Ogungbile provides detailed insight into the leadership of Alhaja Sheidat Mujidat Adéoyè, founder of the Fadhilullahi Forum in Osogbo. By examining her biological, educational, and religious background, Ogungbile situates her within the broader context of female Islamic leadership. Her style of ministration, characterised by healing and spiritual intercession, reflects interactions with Christian Pentecostal practices while remaining rooted in Islamic spirituality.

Although Gbadamosi identifies women's leadership roles within the Alasalatu movement, his analysis provides limited depth beyond naming prominent figures (Gbadamosi, 1978). Olasupo, however, notes that in pre-colonial Yoruba societies, certain women occupied both political and religious leadership positions as traditional authorities (Olasupo, 2016). Despite this historical precedent, contemporary Nigerian women continue to face significant barriers to attaining and exercising religio-political authority.

While Gbadamosi's work traces the evolution of women's leadership in Islam, it remains constrained by a patriarchal analytical framework. Ogungbile's approach aligns more closely with the objectives of the present study, although his focus on a single cleric necessitates broader generalisation. Together with Liberatore's work, these studies offer comparative insights into Muslim women's leadership across different socio-cultural contexts, highlighting innovation and gender liberalisation as recurring themes.

The present study further advances the literature by localising the concept of “Sheha” as a feminine adaptation of “Sheikh,” thereby enriching religious lexicons and foregrounding African philosophical traditions. Spencer Trimingham’s seminal work on the Sheikh provides the conceptual foundation for this adaptation. Trimingham traces the origin, development, and functions of the Sheikh within Islamic societies, emphasising the role’s spiritual, social, economic, and political dimensions (Trimingham, 1998). He highlights the Sheikh’s authority as rooted in knowledge, experience, and mentorship, exercised through structured hierarchies such as the Muqaddamas.

Liberatore similarly examines authority, liberality, and patriarchy in the context of women’s Islamic leadership in the United Kingdom, arguing that women negotiate these concepts by selectively liberalising their roles without abandoning religious authenticity. R. Jewkes and colleagues conceptualise hegemonic masculinity as adaptable rather than static, noting variations in gender dynamics between contexts such as South Africa and Sweden. They caution, however, that as long as gender differentiation persists, male hegemony will remain dominant, necessitating incremental rather than revolutionary change (Jewkes et al., 2015).

Persistent gender discrimination in Nigeria is further documented by Enyiukwu (Enyiukwu, 2020), who highlights structural barriers confronting women in political and professional spaces. The experience of Rt. Hon. Folake Eteh exemplifies how cultural bias undermines women’s leadership. Adewale and Potokri extend this analysis to academia, demonstrating how patriarchal norms impede women’s advancement in Nigerian universities (Olatunji, 2025).

Rao and Jamil’s (Rao & Jamil, 2023) work on shifting masculinities in Islam highlights the fluidity of gender identities in contemporary contexts, while Britton’s (Britton, 2019) examination of Muslim men’s private lives reveals changing familial dynamics. Samuel’s analysis of the Tabligh-i Jama’at further illustrates how religious movements can cultivate alternative masculinities characterised by humility and domestic responsibility.

Finally, Galloway’s (Galloway, 2014) phenomenological study demonstrates how Muslim women actively deploy Islamic theology to promote gender justice, challenging patriarchal interpretations from within the faith. Rao and Jamil further show that women’s leadership challenges persist in corporate environments despite educational gains, exacerbated during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Collectively, these studies underscore the structural, cultural, and ideological barriers confronting women while highlighting the growing presence and significance of female Islamic clerics in religious leadership.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design, integrating both primary and secondary data sources to explore the complex intersections of gender, religious authority, and cultural power structures within Islamic communities in Yorubaland. Primary data were collected through unstructured interviews, which provided in-

depth, flexible conversations that allowed participants to articulate their lived experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of gender roles within Islamic religious leadership.

A purposive sampling technique was used to identify and select stakeholders who possess significant insight and experiential knowledge relevant to the subject matter. The interviewees comprised: Three (3) female Islamic clerics, whose experiences as women navigating traditionally male-dominated religious spaces offered critical perspectives on the negotiation of gender and authority; Four (4) Muslim Islamic chieftains, representing institutional and communal dimensions of religious leadership; Two (2) traditional rulers, who provided contextual understanding of the interplay between cultural traditions and religious authority; and Four (4) notable Islamic scholars, whose academic and theological reflections contributed to the conceptual framing of gendered authority within Islam.

In addition to these primary sources, secondary data were obtained from relevant books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and credible internet-based materials, including reports and commentaries on contemporary Islamic leadership and gender discourse in Nigeria.

For the data analysis, the study adopted a synthesis of sociological and phenomenological approaches. The sociological perspective was employed to examine the structural and institutional dynamics shaping gendered religious authority, while the phenomenological approach focused on the subjective experiences and meanings attributed by the participants themselves.

To deepen contextual understanding and historical continuity, a historical analytical method was also applied. This enabled the researcher to interpret present realities within a broader socio-historical framework, tracing how traditional and religious norms have evolved and intersected over time in ways that impact female religious leadership today.

Through this multi-method and interpretive framework, the study sought to present a nuanced, grounded, and historically informed understanding of gendered religious authority within contemporary Islamic communities in Yorubaland.

Evolution of Female Islamic Cleric-A Brief Historical Background

Within Islamic doctrine, religious leadership responsibilities are generally accorded to men, particularly in congregational prayers involving both male and female adherents. However, Islamic jurisprudence permits women to lead prayers in female-only congregations, provided they possess the requisite religious knowledge, especially of the Qur'an. Additionally, a woman may lead prayers within her household when a male guardian (mahram) is absent. These provisions illustrate that Islamic religious authority is not entirely exclusive to men, even though public religious leadership remains male-dominated in practice (Newhill & Lagilia, 1986).

In Africa, and particularly in patriarchal societies such as those of Yorubaland, men traditionally occupy dominant positions in political, social, and economic life. Fathers are typically regarded as heads of households, exercising

authority over family members. In the absence of a male head due to death or incapacitation, the wife assumes responsibility for the daily administration of family affairs. This arrangement, however, does not usually translate into formal recognition of women as heads at broader communal levels.

At the compound level among the Yoruba, leadership does not automatically devolve to women when the male head is absent. Instead, another male member is often appointed as Baale (compound head). Nevertheless, there exists a female-specific leadership position known as Iyale, reserved for women validly married into the compound (Atanda, 1984). The Iyale oversees women's affairs within the compound. In some Yoruba communities, the institution of Beere allows a woman to function as head of a family in the absence of a Daodu (heir apparent). Thus, in Yoruba tradition, both Iyale and Beere supervise women's activities and, in some instances, the affairs of both male and female lineage members.

Neither the Baale nor the Iyale position is hereditary. Succession is generally determined by seniority, particularly age. In the case of the Iyale, however, seniority is measured by the length of marriage into the compound rather than biological age. While the position of Iyale does not extend to the district level, succession to the stool of Baale (district head) follows similar principles as that of the compound head. By contrast, succession to the title of Iyalode lacks uniformity, as non-indigenes have been conferred the title in several Yoruba communities. The Iyalode and Iya Oba are notable female chieftaincy titleholders who, alongside male chiefs, assist the Oba in governance in Yoruba speaking communities.¹

Royal succession in Yorubaland overwhelmingly favors male heirs, with princes typically nominated to ascend the throne as Oba (Ilesanmi, 2004). However, historical exceptions exist. In the pre-colonial period, women such as Lobun of Ondo served as both political and religious leaders (Oladosu, 2012). Additionally, the institution of regency permits female members of royal families to rule temporarily as acting Oba until a suitable male candidate emerges (Oladosu, 2012). Furthermore, the dual-sex political system where legitimacy is accorded to both male and female rulers has been observed among the Ekiti, Anioma, Ondo, and Iuleha peoples, as well as in parts of the Igbo-speaking areas of Delta State (Oladosu, 2012).

Within the Islamic context of Yorubaland, female religious organizations have historically coexisted with male-dominated groups. A prominent example is Egbe Binukonu Alasalatu, which existed alongside other Islamic societies (Gbadamosi, 1978). Although its exact date of formation is unclear, Gbadamosi suggests that it was active during the reigns of Ataoja Fabode and Bamgbóla (1891–1893) (Gbadamosi, 1978). Some Islamic societies were predominantly female and

¹ This was noticed in Ile-Ife in the appointment of Iyalode Safuratu Awolola, a non-indigene of Ile-Ife that was believed to have witnessed the installation of about five Ooni of Ife as claimed by palace source.

collectively known as Alasalatu. These groups were led by women referred to as Iya Suna, Olori Alasalatu, or Iya Egbe Alasalatu.

Subsequent developments included the formation of Egbe Ifelodun and the Issabatudeen Society at Mapo, Ibadan, founded by Alhaja Humani Alaga in 1925 and 1958 respectively. These organizations later established the Issabatudeen Girls' Grammar Schools in Ibadan (Uthman & Uthman, 2009), underscoring their commitment to female education. Such societies commanded significant respect among Muslim women and focused primarily on religious education and communal activities (Gbadamosi, 1978).

Islamic societies (Egbe) in Yorubaland generally aim to promote cooperation among members, foster mutual assistance, and propagate Islam (Gbadamosi, 1978). These objectives are pursued through collective participation in social events such as funerals, marriages, and naming ceremonies, as well as attendance at Islamic festivals like Mawlid al-Nabiy and 'Id celebrations (Gbadamosi, 1978). Members often appear in elaborate attire, emphasising solidarity, visibility, and communal identity. This form of female religious organization contrasts sharply with Christian contexts, where chieftaincy-like titles such as Iyalode (deaconess) are often regarded as inappropriate.

To conceptualise female spiritual leadership within this study, the term "Sheha" is adopted. Derived from the Arabic "Shehu," "Sheikh," or "Sheik," the term traditionally denotes a spiritual leader, particularly within Sufi orders. "Sheha" or "Sheidat" represents a gendered adaptation used to describe female heads of Islamic groups. Although relatively recent in Islamic leadership lexicon, the term aptly captures contemporary demands for women's spiritual headship in Yorubaland.

Trimingham traces the origin of the title "Sheikh" to Sunni scholars who adopted it from medieval guilds during the Ayyubid and Seljuq periods (Trimingham, 1998). The Sheikh wields considerable religious authority, recognized by Muqaddams (coordinators) as a spiritual master and serving as head of a Sufi branch (ta'ifa), often acting as an intermediary between religious orders and the state. In academic contexts, the title is sometimes likened to a professorship in Arabian universities (Adeniyi, 2022; Trimingham, 1998).

The application of "Sheha" emerged during fieldwork conducted at a unisex Islamic center in the Moniya area of Ibadan, where a woman functioned as the spiritual head. In this role, the Sheha provides both spiritual and administrative leadership, offering guidance on issues such as marriage, divorce, mental health, faith, and Islamic practice. She is supported by a council of elders comprising both men and women, who serve in advisory capacities and pledge loyalty to her leadership. This structure aligns with Giulia Liberatore's observation that such leaders pluralise roles and render gender less relevant in religious practice (Liberatore, 2019).

The theoretical framework of hegemonic masculinity is employed to examine gender relations in Islamic leadership within Yorubaland (Jewkes et al., 2015). Developed by Raewyn Connell and rooted in Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony, the theory analyses how dominance is sustained through social institutions and cultural norms rather than coercion. In this context, hegemonic masculinity explains the entrenched dominance of men in spiritual leadership roles. Connell conceptualises masculinity as a pattern of social relations that subordinates women and other gender identities perceived as feminine (Connell, 2005; Kupers, 2005). While Mike Donaldson advocates a more inclusive application of hegemonic masculinity that accommodates gender diversity (Donaldson, 1993), Connell, alongside scholars such as Bhambra and Alatas (Alatas, 2006), critiques its role in reinforcing imperial and patriarchal domination (Connell, 2005). These scholars emphasise the need for connected histories and gender tolerance to challenge systemic discrimination. Hegemonic masculinity, as Connell argues, operates through persuasion and cultural consent rather than force, legitimising male dominance within religious institutions (Connell, 2005). This framework helps explain resistance to female Islamic clerics in Yorubaland, where patriarchal norms remain deeply embedded in Yoruba culture. Despite historical and contemporary examples of women in political and traditional leadership, the acceptance of women as spiritual leaders addressing mixed-gender congregations remains limited. Additionally, customary property and inheritance laws continue to disadvantage women relative to men.

Finally, the study reveals that many female Islamic clerics oversee structured systems of apprenticeship. These apprentices (prospective spiritual leaders) undergo training under renowned female clerics. In the course of fieldwork for this present research, it was observed that there were trainees who completed their programmes and were designated as Sheida and inducted into the cream of qualified practitioners. The Whalimah (graduation ceremony) is reportedly held annually, further institutionalising female spiritual authority within Islamic communities.

Notable Female Islamic Clerics and Their Place in Society

The means and ways by which female Islamic clerics evolve are far from being recognised by the Muslim communities' leadership in Yorubaland but findings revealed that many of them have had to have undergone training for some time under certain male Islamic clerics at a certain time in the past. Some were trained by their fathers in preparation for the task they eventually accepted in life. Instance abide in which some of them acquired the prerequisite skills from their spouses who were active male Islamic clerics in their lifetime, at the time of the spouses demise, they were left with no alternatives than to take up the mantle of leadership therefrom. For instance, Alhaja Khafilah Ahmad Rufai was trained by her biological father, a prominent Islamic scholar who eventually became the sixteenth Chief Imam of Ibadanland. Alhaja Seyidat Misturat at Moniya was believed to have worked closely with her late husband in his lifetime and assumed a position of

leadership at his death. Thus, in the words of Liberatore they attend to a broad range of different topics within their groups “or other Islamic organisations, from tajweed (Quranic recitation) to tasawuuf (spirituality) and fiqh (jurisprudence)” (Liberatore, 2019)

Interestingly many of them after rising into prominence often attracted the recognition of the League of Imam and Alfas at their respective local and state basis for an award of honorary Islamic chieftaincy titles. Such titles include *Ummu-l-Mumeenat* (National Council of Muslim Youth Organisations [NACOMYO], 2022) and *Alaranse Adini* of Oyo State with which the duo of Alhaja Khafilah and Alhaja Misturat were honoured respectively in colourful turbanning ceremonies. Although one may not be sure of the honorary chieftaincy title awarded to Alhaja Sheidat Mujidat Adéoyè of Osogbo the fact remains that she commands considerable recognition among Muslims in Yorubaland, especially as a founder of Fadilullah Muslim Mission, Osogbo (Ogungbile, 2011). However, there is something unique in her advance into the league of female Islamic clerics. She was born into an Islamic home and grew up as a Muslim but lacks the skills to recite the Holy Qur’an. However, on a fateful day, while attending to her customers as a seasoned trader in bagged rice and beans, she was possessed in what is similar to the experience of the Holy Prophet Muhammad when Angel Jibril (Gabriel) appeared to him as narrated in Surah *Muazzammil* (The Folded in Garments) (Qur’an, 1946, 1632-1640). This experience is what Ogungbile relates to the biblical Moses and Jeremiah who were feeling reluctant to accept what they considered a strange experience (Ogungbile, 2011, 91). She was relatively unconscious of her surroundings and ordered all co-traders around to cover their head saying among other things *Laila ila Allahu* (There is no God except Allah). The people around considered her as loosing her mind, and her attempt to find an explanation for her sudden display from her husband when she got home yielded no fruit (Ogungbile, 2011).

Modus Operandi of Female-led Islamic Centres and Their Place in Islam

Attaining spiritual status in Islam requires rigorous training and practices (Ogungbile, 2011) as the religion of Islam tasks its adherents to travel far and wide in search of knowledge even if it were to involve in getting to acquire knowledge in China. China in ancient times is presumed to be the farthest part of the then world (Hadith 224; Ogungbile, 2011). Though the hadith is considered a weak one however, Muslims are generally enjoined to seek knowledge as exemplified in the encounter of Prophet Muhammed with Angel Jibril in Surah *Iqrah* (Qur’an 96, 1-5). They imbibed the act of praying and fasting as the basic methods of ministrations in their respective outfits (Ogungbile, 2011). Distinctions became noticeable in their methods of ministrations. Some of them still encourage the concept of patriarchy in which they invite male Islamic scholars to lead in obligatory prayers at prayer time while they fully take charge in other areas. Recitation of the Holy Qur’an was done by female members of the congregation in their regular *Asalatu* forum, this was evident at the *Alasalatu* Tawakalit in Iwo Road, Ibadan. Direct leadership control

was evident within some of the groups where founders of the groups led congregational prayers involving both men and women. In the Bashorun area of Ibadan, a female Islamic cleric, *Sheha* Awawu was known for leading both sexes in prayers. Another account has it that she used to stand beside a male Imam during prayers. The situation was similar in Moniya where the “*Sheha*” led in ministration involving both male and female members.

Many of the members of their congregation are female, this may be unconnected to what Ogungbile observed in various social milieu that seems to be more visible among women and their desire to seek a solution to the myriad of social problems which are associated with infertility, childbearing, and women’s health and the increased in number of female singles in the society (Ogungbile, 2011). This social milieu is given economic interpretation by Adesina-Uthman, as she observes a geometric increase in the number of female-family-head (G. A. Adesina-Uthman, 2022). The ability to proffer needed solutions normally turned the cream of female congregants into mobilisers by spreading the news of efficacious services available at such centres. At the various centres public prayers were held for members and non-members on special days, fortnightly, and special Islamic festive days while consultations were encouraged daily (Ogungbile, 2011).

The ministration is typical of the *Alasalatu* style in which the “*Sheha*” gets the environment electrified with her mastery display of *Asalatu* songs and her good depth of understanding of non-“Islamic” songs usually put to use which is similar to Sheikh Buhari omo Musa’s style. It was noticed that she is firmly in control as she once called out an elderly man to join her on the podium to be ministered to in prostration. A couple of them combined both “physical” and social media platforms to reach out to their audience. For instance, Alhaja Kafilah Kaola maintains a social media account and equally anchors a radio weekly programme with a popular radio station in Ibadan at which she touches on all facets of Islamic etiquette. The radio programme projects her as probably the most popular among female Islamic clerics. It equally earned her controversial status as the content and message of her programme travel far into the homes of non-conformist patriarchal scholars that see her packaging as outrageous and unwelcoming. Shortcomings that men were ordinarily pardoned of went haywire into the social media archives because of her gut to call off the bluff of celebrated male Islamic clerics (National Council of Muslim Youth Organisations (NACOMYO, 2022). In line with the observation of Ogungbile of the element of *Aladura* Christian denominations in the conduct of worship at the Osogbo centre of Alhaja Mujidat there are elements of sensationalism that are noted with Pentecostal Christian outfits in which the Minister of God touches the forehead of their congregants that produce a trace of hypnotism with the congregants falling and standing during ministration was noticed in some other centers. More so, one of the female Islamic clerics was seen in a dramatic sitting posture on the image of a client of one of her congregants to hypnotise the client to submission for her congregant business success.

Contributions of Female Islamic Clerics to Socio-Economic Development of Yorubaland

The Muslim communities in Yorubaland have accepted to cohabit with the presence of female Islamic clerics even though the religion of Islam's acceptability of female spiritual leadership is relative for several reasons. It is observed that most of the Islamic groups founded by female Islamic clerics have their activities mostly on Sundays (Ogunbile, 2011). Thus, their ability to keep a good number of miracle-seeking female Muslims busy at their various *Asalatu* considerably helps in keeping them within the fold of Islam. In essence, just like the various contemporary Islamic organisations in Yorubaland, those that would have simply sought answers to their various spiritual challenges remain glued to Islam as a response to competition posed by the other two religions in Yorubaland.

Figure 1: Female Islamic Spiritual Leadership



An unidentified female Islamic cleric casting demons and in sickness in Christian -style Muslim ministration out of the body of a “victim”.¹

This was within the context of “*Okun inu la fi n gbe t'ita*” which contextually translates as “inner strength is needed to function well”. Interestingly, though at the initial stage Alhaja Mujidat was losing grip of her business as she was a bit reluctant to accept a new spiritual life, many other female Islamic authorities

¹ It unIslamic and a Sign of end time Nigerian Muslims React to Video of Female Muslim Preacher Imitating Pastors in Casting out Demons and Sickness, <https://www.lindaikejisblog.com/2021/9/it-unislamic-and-a-sign-of-end-time-nigerian-muslims-react-to-video-of-female-muslim-preacher-immitating-pastors-in-casting-out-demons-and-sickness.html.html>, sourced online, 14th July, 2023.

like her are successful businesswomen of substance. Even after they had accepted the spiritual responsibilities thrust on them they still sustained their business ingenuity. For instance, at the Moniya centre of Alhaja Misturat the presence of a water factory was noticed. The product of the factory was being used to sustain the group financially and positioned the founder ably enough to reach out financially to indigent members. It needs to be added that out of her business innovativeness, the product was fortified as spiritual water with which members and visitors were encouraged to administer solutions to varieties of spiritual challenges. Members were often encouraged to buy as many as five bags at once, the water sachets are utilised by every member of the household of spiritually seeking congregants and visitors to bathe and drink from (Misturat, 2022). The same situation was observed on the part of Alhaja Kafilah Kaola, who not only established a religious group but also ran flourishing business outfits such as Kaola Schools and Travel and Tours (Kaola, 2022).

Challenges Faced by Female Islamic Clerics in Yorubaland

African Cultural practices among other factors greatly inhibit the growth and development of female Islamic cleric leadership in Yorubaland. The conventional traditional perspective in African society is tailored towards patriarchy and domination of every other gender that is considered feminine. Consequently, the reception within the society seems considerably in favour of patriarchy. Thus, the patriarchal society in Africa has a way of influencing their operation as a society as female Islamic clerics are not being encouraged as their presence is considered awkward by conservative male scholars. It poses a serious threat to the continued production of upcoming female Islamic clerics and the presence of some overzealous female clerics is not helping matters as well (G. A. Adesina-Uthman, 2022).

Orthodox Islamic doctrine towards female leadership is alien to an average African but interestingly the bulk of hostility towards the growth and development of female Islamic clerics comes mostly from their male counterparts who refused to exhibit a degree of understanding but tenaciously held on to the orthodox doctrine on female restriction on worship, appearance and vision. Interestingly, in typical practice by female-led religious groups in Yorubaland to extend invitations to clerics from sisters' organisations or communities, the Alhaja Misturat attempt in this regard ended up with a bitter pile in her mouth. She was said to have invited celebrated Islamic clerics: Sheikh Muhyideen Salman Hussein, the Chief Imam of Offa, Sheikh Faruq Onikijipa, and Sheikh Buhari Omo Musa on different occasions (Misturat, 2022). The scholars did not mince words in expressing their consternation having noticed the presence of a huge crowd that was hardly commanded at male Islamic clerics' organised public lectures. They wondered what, why, and how the "Sheha" was able to achieve such a rare feat and sermonised the gathering of what awaits them in the hereafter. Surprisingly, such dispositions from male Islamic clerics have not been able to deter members and visitors that daily storm the centres from desisting from such acts (Ogungbile, 2011). Thus, it is on record that Alhaja

Kafila Ahmad extended an invitation to various male Islamic scholars such as Sheikh Muhydeen Ajani Bello, Sheikh Liadi Ajisafe, and Sheikh Buhari Omo Musa as Guest Lecturers to *Whalimat Qur'an* for her pupils and Awards ceremonies at both Liberty Stadium and Adamasingba Stadium Ibadan in 2007 and 2008 respectively (Kaola, 2022).

Limitations

This current study was inhibited by the coordinated non-corporating attitude of some of the proprietress of the female-led Islamic centres who initially felt uncomfortable at the effort to subject their organisations to the subject of academic studies. Thus, a series of non-fulfilled appointments were recorded. More so, the cold war between the female Islamic clerics and their male counterparts did not help matters as it has left a permanent public phobia in their conducts towards an attempt to investigate their *modus operadis*. Consequently, a kind of wall was already formed to frustrate researchers and other information seekers. Ironically, attempts to beat off the impenetrable walls with the influence of notable Islamic leaders did not help matters as they closely monitored phone calls made to such leaders in such a way that made them timid. With doggedness and perseverance, the proprietors opened up and encouraged interactions with the researcher and his team.

Conclusion

Despite the increase in the influence and presence of prominent female Islamic clerics in Yorubaland, it is observed that pockets of them indulge in innovative acts that are the subject of another research. Having been able to deal with the initial problem of reluctance in accepting their new calls of religious leadership, the grace with which they carried out their new duties is often misinterpreted as arrogance and undue publicity-seeking drives that women are not noted with both in Islam and African cultural contexts. In the same African context, the presence of a female in regular educational institutions has been accepted as a routine that society lived with. Schools in Yorubaland are flooded with many female teachers irrespective of their religious learnings, be it elementary, secondary, or tertiary institutions with or without any severe rejection by the general society.

Some of these female Islamic scholars even taught Arabic Language and Islamic Religious Studies and acted as Head of Departments in Colleges of Education and beyond in Yorubaland. Thus, active Muslims of professorial status abound in many of the Nigerian Universities even in the core Northern part of the country where women's seclusion is a more popular practice. However, seclusion in those areas has been observed to have been propelled at the onset as an instrument of social security against the colonial masters and their policy of exploitative taxation which did not exempt women. It was discovered that the operations of the female Islamic clerics unlike their contemporaries captured within the educational institutions of learning were not regulated or subjected to any rules and regulations

other than their whim and caprices as they deem fit to interpret and apply provisions of the Holy Qur'an on their individual lives within the context of fundamental human rights.

In the same clime, there exists a meeting point for all Muslim female Islamic scholars within the coverage of educational institutions under the auspices of Muslim Female Academic Scholars and the Association of Female Islamic Scholars. The absence of such a platform within the female Islamic clerics failed to promote better understanding between the female Islamic clerics and the general society.

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