

**Islamization and the Representation of Islam in Yorubaland of
Southwestern Nigeria: An Exploratory Study with Special Reference
to Jalabi Phenomenon**

**Pengislaman Dan Perwakilan Islam Di Yorubaland Di Bar-
atdaya Nigeria: Satu Kajian Eksploratori Dengan Rujukan Khas
Terhadap Fenomena Jalabi**

Afiz Oladimeji Musa*, & Hassan Ahmad Ibrahim**

Abstract

Jalabi is an extant historical phenomenon with strong socio-religious impacts in Yorubaland, south-western part of Nigeria. It was a strategy devised by the Yoruba 'Ulamā' as one of the many effective ways to represent Islam among the indigenous people for the purpose of spreading and consolidating Islam. This strategy is reflected in certain spiritual services rendered to the people, which include, but not limited to, spiritual consultation and healing, such as petitionary Du'ā (prayer), divination through sand-cutting, rosary selection, charm-making, etc. This paper represents an effort to study and investigate both positive and adverse effects of this long-standing phenomenon on the socio-religious life of the Yoruba people of Nigeria.

Keywords: Jalabi, healing, Islam, Da'wah, syncretism.

Abstrak

Jalabi adalah satu fenomena sejarah yang masih memberi kesan sosio-agama yang kuat di Yorubaland, baratdaya Nigeria. Ia adalah satu strategi yang direka oleh 'Ulamā' Yoruba sebagai salah satu cara yang berkesan untuk mewakili Islam di kalangan Orang Asli bagi tujuan menyebarkan dan menyatukan Islam. Strategi ini dapat dilihat dalam pelbagai perkhidmatan rohani yang diberikan kepada rakyat, termasuk

* Obtained His PhD in History and Civilization at IIUM.

** Professor of history in the Department of History and Civilization, IIUM

tetapi tidak terhad kepada, nasihat kerohanian dan penyembuhan, seperti permohonan Du'ā (doa), ramalan melalui pasir, pemilihan tasbih, membuat tangkal, dan lain-lain . Kajian ini adalah satu usaha untuk mengkaji dan menyiasat kesan-kesan positif dan negatif yang berhasil dari fenomena berlarutan ini terhadap kehidupan sosio-agama rakyat Yoruba di Nigeria.

Kata Kunci: Jalabi, penyembuhan, Islam, Da'wah, sinkretisme.

Introduction

The pattern which the process of Islamization had taken in Yorubaland¹ was quite distinctive, and characterized by pragmatism and dynamism. In some ways it follows the West African mainstream. However, in most cases it is more typical of Yoruba than of any other ethnic groups in West Africa. It may not be surprising given the flexibility of the Islamic *Da'wah* approach.² Based on some classified documents containing

¹ Yoruba is one of the major ethnic groups, and second most populous, in Nigeria. The people occupy the south-western part of the country, stretching from the upland area to the hinterland of the Lagoon. They speak Yoruba and constitute over 35 million people in total, the majority of whom is from Nigeria, while others spread across West Africa including Togo, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. For more details on Yoruba, see: Suzanne Preston Blier. (2015). *Art and Risk in Ancient Yoruba: Ife History, Power and Identity, c. 1300*. U.S.A: Cambridge University Press., Stephen A. Akintoye. (2010). *A History of the Yoruba People*. Dakar Senegal: Amalion Publishing., T.G.O. Gbadamosi. (1978). *The Growth of Islam Among The Yoruba 1841-1908*. Lagos: Longman Press., Saburi Oladeni Biobaku. (1973) *Sources of Yoruba History*. Clarendon Press., Samuel Johnson. (1921). *The History of the Yorubas from the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the British Protectorate*. U.S.A: Cambridge Press.

¹ Bello Mustapha A., "Between Jalb Practitioners and Traditional Healers of South West Nigeria: A Synthesis of Method and Approaches", *Anyigba Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies*. Vol. 5, no.1 (2011): 66.

² Part of the Islamic Dawah approach is simplicity and dynamism as exemplified by the Prophet (S.A.W) in both his Makkan and Modinan phases of life. The simplicity of Dawah approach is derived from his saying as narrated by al-Bukhari and Muslim on the authority of Anas bn. Malik (May Allah be pleased with him) that: "make things simple and easy and do not make it hard and complicated." See: al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* Vol. 1. Book 4, No. 219, Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* book 23, No. 4961. The dynamism of the Dawah approach is inferred from the Prophet's acquaintance with his environs as well as with the outside of Makkah, making possible the absorption of

information about different use of Qur'anic verses, names of Allah and those of the angels and the jins for healing method, this present paper endeavors to shed lights on an extant socio-religious phenomenon called Jalabi in this part of the world, and how it came to be associated with the spread of Islam as well as some socio-religious impacts it has got on the Yoruba society at large.

Islamization of Yorubaland and vice versa

The term Islamization may be used generally to explain the process of a society's conversion to Islam and the impacts which Islam has left on people, culture, language and their lifestyles in general. This term was coined and popularized by prominent Muslim educational philosophers such as Syed Ali Ashraf, Syed Hussein Nasr, Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, and Ismail Rājī al-Fārūqī, with a focus to direct it towards changing the destiny of Muslim education for the better.³

However, the term as used in the context of the present work implies solely the historical process of religious change from animism to Islam. Kings and tribal leaders of Yorubaland had facilitated the Islamization process by granting the *'Ulamā carte blanche* to preach their faith when and how they deemed it fit. The majority of the people were eventually receptive to Islam following the attitude of their leaders. Therefore the popular saying "*al-nnās 'alā dīni mulūkihim*," (the people are naturally inclined towards the religious orientation of their rulers) is well applicable to this context, as the rulers themselves had converted to Islam.

If the kings and tribal rulers had won kudos for their efforts to propagate Islam, the exploits of the *'Ulamā* to champion the cause is tremendous. Their heroic endeavors at various levels were instrumental in setting the stage for the *Islamization* of the region, and, more im-

certain cultures that are peculiar to Muslims which do not run counter to the Islamic fundamentals.

³ Adebayo, Rafiu Ibrahim, (2004), "Islamization of Knowledge: its Inevitability and Problems of Practicability in Nigeria," *Muslim Education Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 1 pg. 4.

portantly, in setting Islam on an even keel for many generations in Yorubaland. The diversity of their approach could best be appraised from socio-religious perspectives.

The *futūḥāt* (expansion of Islamic empire) had played a decisive role in blending these different elements together in terms of blood, customs, traditions and systems, a process which set the stage for a strong interplay of cultures under the Islamic civilization. Considering this situation, al-Tuwaijirī sees the Islamic civilization as “a fusion of diverse cultures of the people, who embraced Islam whether as a system of faith and belief or as a political force with which they are affiliated and to which they are loyal.”⁴ Interestingly, this Islamic cultural experience was given a new touch in West Africa that is completely different from its past experiences.

Stages of the Islamization process

From the advent of Islam to its subsequent spread, Yorubaland had undergone stages of Islamization process similar to what had been experienced in other West African countries, whereby the minds of the people were conditioned for the acceptance of Islam. To explain this process of gradual Islamization, the theory of religious change propounded by Trimingham is very much applicable, as it accurately portrays the actual historical experience of the people in Yorubaland. The theory suggests three different stages of this process.

In the first stage, the barriers between the African Muslims and the traditionalist/animists had been broken down which, in effect, had facilitated the adoption of Islam, not as a religion but rather as a culture with unique characteristics.⁵ At this point no noteworthy conversion had been carried out. This stage is not more than preparation of mind. It is called

⁴ Al-Tuwaijirī ‘Abdul ‘Azīz bin ‘Uthmān, *Khaṣā’iṣ al-Ḥadārah al-Islāmiyyah wa Ā’fāq al-Mustaqbal*, (ISESCO: 2002), 6.

⁵ Trimingham, J. Spencer, *Islam in West Africa*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 34.

germination stage. Some instances from the Yorubaland will help illustrate this stage.

Arabic loanwords: The first instance is the Yoruba language which, according to some learned Yoruba Arabist, has so much been influenced by Arabic through heavy linguistic borrowings.⁶ Details about the lists of these borrowed words are beyond the scope of the present study, yet we shall make a passing reference to some hereunder:

The word “abere” in Yoruba language means needle. This word was domesticated from an Arabic word *ibrah* which means needle. Also the word “adura”, translated as prayer in English, was derived from the Arabic word *du‘ā’*, effectively meaning prayer. Likewise, they have employed the word “aniyan” to connote intention as expressed in a similar Arabic word *niyyah*. The Arabic word *al-Jinn* was naturalized into “alijonnu” and used for spirits of all kinds. Their familiarity with Arabic words and expressions relating to Islamic rituals naturally became increasingly popular as a result of exposure they have with Islam. It is interesting to note that some experts trace all Yoruba words to Arabic roots, while others had concentrated on studying the Arabic roots of some words in the Yoruba language.⁷

Odu Ifa: The second instance, which illustrates the way the Islamic element was adopted without necessarily upsetting the traditional belief, could be found in certain Yoruba religious poetry, such as *Odu Ifa* (verses of Ifa).

Odu Ifa refers to a very complex system of divination, which is believed to have been given to the *babalawo* (ifa priest) by Orunmila, a god

⁶ Abubakre, Razak D., *The Interplay of Arabic and Yoruba Culture in South-Western Nigeria*, (Iwo Nigeria: Dar al-Ilm Publisher, 2004),22.

⁷ Prominent among these scholars is professor Razak D. Abubakre in his “The learning of Arabic by Yoruba speaking people”, published in journal of the linguistic association of Nigeria, vol. 2, 1983-4 p. 143-152, and “The Impact of Arabic on the Linguistic and Cultural Life of Yoruba People” in *Language in Nigeria: Essays in Honour of Ayo Bamgbose* edited by Kola Owolabi (Group Publisher, Ibadan), 424-439.

in the Yoruba mythology.⁸ There are sixteen major Odu Ifa literary corpuses, each of which has sixteen alternatives, and are believed to have reference to all situations, circumstances, actions and consequences in life. One of the Odus of Ifa reveals an Islamic element in a poem where alkaadi (al-Qādī) was portrayed as an antagonist of *Orunmila*. Translation of few verses will prove that:

The two-elbows-cannot –lift-up- a load to the ceiling
Cast Ifa for Alukaadi
The son of Allah

Here the name of Allah is mentioned in a naturalized way to refer to the Muslims' God, though misrepresented as having begotten a child named Alukaadi (al-Qādī). Apart from their adoption of an Arabic word, it is obvious that the Yoruba, judging from the way the word was used, had nothing, or at least very little, to do with Islam.

Rom Kalilu also points to a metaphorical allusion an *odu Ifa* called *Otura-Meji* made to the early Muslims in Yorubaland:

The egret is the Muslim priest to the birds
Whenever he wakes up he calls ilaafi ilaafi
He slides his sandals unto his feet
And trek away
It was divined for Amodu
That goes to Arabia⁹

⁸ Abimbola, Wande, *Ijinle Ohun Enu Ifa*, (Ibadan: University Press, 2006)9., Salami Ayo, *Ifa a Complete Divination* (Oyo: IFARCITY, 2002) xi.

⁹ Kalilu R.O. Rom, (July 1999)“ Islam and Artistic Response among the Yoruba of Nigeria” *International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM NEWSLETTER)* 3/99. P.4.

The appearance of a certain Odu Ifa for a new born baby meant that the child should be raised as a Muslim regardless of the religious orientation of his parents. Examples abound about this particular issue. A number of key figures, mostly the *obas* (kings) accepted Islam as a result of Ifa forecast and recommendation. In about 1860 in the city of Iwo, for instance, a king named Momodu Lamuye reportedly adhered to Islam.¹⁰ Similarly, in the nearby cities of Ede and Ikirun, their kings had embraced Islam because they had been declared by Ifa predestined Muslim before their accession to the throne in the second half of the nineteenth century.¹¹

Ijala: Another example that instantiates the Yoruba animists adoption of an element of Islam in their culture could be observed in the hunter's poem traditionally referred to as *Ijala*. This *Ijala* is believed to have been inspired by *Ogun*, the god of iron and war. Its wording, according to Abubakr, owes some linguistic and semantic debts to the Arabic language and Islam.¹² An example is this *Ijala* verse "An extraordinarily short devil"

The word *bilisi* in the original verse is an adaptation of the Arabic *Iblis* (devil), which, from a linguistic point of view, has been regarded by the Yorubas as one of the attributive names of the *esu* (devil) in their language. However, it is disparaging if used to qualify a person or his behavior, given the malevolent nature of *Iblis*, as the source of all evil. Sur-

¹⁰ Gbadamosi, T.G.O., *The Growth of Islam Among the Yoruba, 1841-1908*, (London: Longman group Limited, 1978) P.68.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Op. cit. Abubakre, 216.

prisingly, as *Esu* was held by its worshippers as a malevolent divinity, so it is considered benevolent)¹³.

Contextualization of Islam: One most glaring aspect of the Yoruba culture assimilated by the Muslims at this stage to their advantage is the Yoruba practice of forming associations and social grouping to promote various interests. It seems this newly acquired talent had made Islam stronger because of its ability to express itself in native Yoruba idiom. Eventually, this social grouping had become the precursor of more important Muslim societies that had later come into being, such as *Ansār al-Dīn* and *Nawā'ir al-Dīn* societies.¹⁴

The second stage of religious change experienced in Yorubaland is what Trimingham termed as assimilation.¹⁵ According to him, though no break with the old order had yet taken place, a stage characterized by a strong Islam and a weak local religious structure has been reached.¹⁶ What best illustrates this point is the growing recognition which the Muslims have gained throughout Yorubaland, save a few places where Islam could not make its way. One great example here is the close association between the local court and Islam. By 1881, there was a resident mallam (Muallim) in the palace, who acted as the king's priest and the chamberlain by the name Noo.¹⁷

It was an established custom for the Muslim community to call upon the kings at their palaces during Muslim festivals, or on Fridays in order to offer prayer for king and his chiefs. Some kings had even report-

¹³ Aiyejina Funso, *Esu Elegbara: A source of an Alter/Native Theory of African Literature and Criticism, being an inaugural lecture delivered at the Center for Black and African Arts and Civilization, Nigeria.*

¹⁴ Gbadamosi, p. 55.

¹⁵ Trimingham, p. 36.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Gbadamosi, p.67.

edly joined the Muslims in fasting.¹⁸ Muslims had been favored by the military personnel, and were courted by the royalty, for their knowledge, experience and advice, as well as their ability to make powerful Islamic charms.¹⁹

The third stage which completes this process is the gradual orientation when the new religion replaced the old one. This stage, as a matter of fact, has not yet been reached in Yorubaland.

This process of religious change marks a sharp difference between Christianity and Islam. While the psychological shock of conversion into the Christianity seems to have been profoundly great, its counterpart Islam is reduced apparently to the minimum. The reason is that Islam and its culture were presumably not presented to the Africans in a way that seems too sophisticated for them, which, as a result, may render mutual understanding impossible. The “Africanness” of the Yoruba Muslims was not thrown into disorder. This could be well perceived in the organization of the Muslim community, their sense of belongingness to their society, their traditional dress, the use of their language alongside the Arabic in any religious functions. Notwithstanding his conversion to Islam, a Yoruba Muslim remained an active member of his own society,²⁰ and his conversion would not necessarily lead him to become what Trimingham termed as a “marginal man”.²¹

Origin of Jalabi

Jalabi, designates certain socio-religious services rendered by the Yoruba ‘*Ulamā* to their clientele, which include, but not limited to,

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 71.

²⁰ Gbadamosi, T.G.O. & Ade Ajayi, J.F “ Islam and Christianity in Nigeria ” in *Groundwork of Nigerian History*, edited by Obaro Ikime, (Ibadan Nigeria: Heinemann Educational Books Plc, 1999), 359.

²¹ Trimingham, J. Spencer, *Islam in West Africa*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 42.

religio-social consultation,²² charm-making, spiritual healing and an act of officiating at various religious functions.

Originally, it is said to have been among the preparatory strategies devised by the Yoruba '*Ulamā*' in the past, following the general pattern of the West African '*Ulamā*', to condition the people for the acceptance of Islam. From this perspective, it could summarily be described as a means whereby the '*Ulamā*' try to win over the hearts of the Yoruba people to Islam. The strategies adopted included, besides the previously mentioned, petitionary *Du'ā*', divination through sand cutting, or rosary selection, *Hantu*,²³ *Turare*,²⁴ *Tira*,²⁵ and *Gbere*.²⁶ Although, this strategy does not necessarily guarantee a break from the old traditional religion, it, nevertheless, prepared the minds for the assimilation of significant elements of Islamic cultures.

²² The '*Ulamā*' in Yorubaland are always consulted on different occasions for different reasons, and this consultation has become an important part of the '*Ulamā*'s self-imposed duties to their society. They are often consulted on religious issues, such as an intention to marry, seeking more knowledge about the *Dīn* etc. Likewise, they are also referred to for dispute resolution or for a piece of advice. Although, typically, this form of consultation should not be regarded as *Jalabi*, however, since, in many occasions, their decision is arrived at through sand-cutting or any other divinations for which they are often compensated in cash or kind, it is appropriate to consider this predominant attitude as *Jalabi*.

²³ *Hantu* in the Yoruba language refers to coded prayer formula written with the ink specially prepared from herbs on a wooden or iron slate or plain sheets of paper and then washed off with water for the consumption of the afflicted or patient. *Ibid.* in colloquial Sudanese Arabic, it is called "mihāyah."

²⁴ *Turare* is an incense or spice produced from various herbs, roots and other sundry materials which is believed to have the potency to drive away malevolent spirits and demons when burnt and inhaled by the bewitched and afflicted. *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Tira* is the binding of extracts from the Qur'ān, names and attributes of Allah or specific prayer formula extracted from different sources, in leather as charms/amulets to be worn around the neck and arm by the afflicted person. *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Gbere* is a Medicinal incision through which certain prepared powder substance (made of various herbs and some other materials) are transferred into the blood stream of the patient to effect prevention or cure of metaphysical affliction. *Ibid.*

Jalabi is a domesticated Arabic word having its origin stemmed from the tri-consonantal Arabic root of *j-l-b* which has got various meanings and connotations. According to the classic Arabic lexicographers²⁷, *al-jalb* is synonymous with *al-Jazb*, meaning to draw or attract. It could also mean to drag something from one place to another if one considers its grammatical inflexion and transitivity as in *jalabahū*, *yajlibuhū* or *yajlubuhū jalaban* or *jalban*. Likewise, it is synonymous with *al-Kasb*, meaning to earn a living or to obtain something as in *jalaba li nafsihī*, or to bring about benefit, good luck or fortune as in *jalaba naf'an*. These meanings are particularly relevant, as they not only depict the material end of some 'Ulamā's activities, but also the type of spiritual assistance commonly rendered to their clientele to repel evil and bring about fortune. With regard to this meaning, the general statement: *jalb al-manfa'ah wa daf'u al-madarrah* (bringing about the benefit and warding off the evil) is very well applicable.

The singular hyperbolic participle (*al-Ṣīghah al-Mubālaghah*) for the tri-literal *j-l-b* is *Jallāb* on the *fa'āl* measure. Nonetheless, the usage of such word in Yoruba language as referring to the practitioner of *Jalabi* is not known. On the contrary, the term *Jallāb* (also spelled *Jellab*), though in a rather different context, has gained currency in some places in Africa, having different connotations. In Sudanese context, for instance, *Jallab* refers to "Afro-Arabian", a social group which has developed in the Sudan since the 15th century from element of foreign and local traders, including slave traders, in places like Dueim, Omdurman and

²⁷ Al-Jawharī, Isma'īl bin Ḥammād, *al-Ṣiḥā' Tāj al-Lughah wa Ṣiḥāḥ al-'Arabiyyah*, (Dār al-'ilm li al-Malāyīn, 1990), Al-Mut-ṭarizī, Nāsir bin 'Abdul al-Seyyid, *al-Mughrib fī Tartīb al-Mu'rib*, (Ḥalab: Maktabah Usāmah bin Zaid, 1979), Al-zabīdī, Muḥammad bin Muḥammad bin 'Abdul Razāq, *Taj al-'Ārūs min Jawāir al-Qamūs*, (Kuwait: Dār al-Hidāyah, 2008), Al-Farāhidī, al-Khalīl bin Aḥmad, *Kitāb al-'Ain Murattaban 'alā Hurūf al-Mu'jam*, (Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2003), Ibn Manẓhūr, Muḥammad bin Mukrim, *Lisān al-'Arab*, (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir), Abu al-Ḥusein Aḥmad bin Fāris, *Maqāyīs al-Lughah* (Ittiḥād al-Kuttāb al-'Arab, 2002), Al-Ṭāliqānī, Isma'īl bin Abbād bin al-'Abbās, *Al-Muḥīṭ fī al-lughah*, (Beirut: 'Ālam al-Kutub, 1994).

Sennar.”²⁸ They are hybrid of different races and nationalities, including black Africans, immigrant Arabs, Turks, Greeks and Armenians, that first evolved during the 15th century and have since always chosen to identify themselves as Arabs, even though many of them are black.²⁹

Ise Alfa (vocation of the clerics) is also common in use among the Yorubas to designate the ritual practices of the *Alfa* (*Ūlamā*). This terminology needs to be clarified to avoid any confusion that may arise thereafter. *Ise Alfa* has a generic connotation in its literal form. Anyone who has specialized in Islamic studies would normally be referred to as *Alfa*, and his work be called *ise Alfa*. The nature of the *ise Alfa* is noticeably diverse, for there are, for example, among the *Alfa* who have committed themselves to teaching, while others are known as preachers. In most cases, one *Alfa* may combine two or more *ise Alfa*. At this junction, reference should be made to Sheikh Adam al-Ilori, who, in his *Nasīm al-Ṣaba’ fī Akhbār al-Islām wa ‘Ulamā Bilād Yoruba*, aptly arranged them into four categories: (1) *Al-Wu‘āz* (the preachers) both settled and itinerants; (2) *Al-Mu‘allimūn* (the teachers), who teach Qur’ān at their homes, shops, and mosques free of charge, as they possess other source of income, such as tailoring, weaving and farming, etc.; (3) *Al-‘Ubbād* and *al-Zuhhād* (devout worshippers and ascetics); and (4) The physical and spiritual healers, who are further divided into three sub-categories: conversant with the prophetic medicine, expert in traditional herbs and

²⁸ John Garang de Mabior, Pan-Africanism and African Nationalism: Putting the African Nation in Context- The Case of the Sudan” in *Pan-Africanism and African Nationalism: Strengthening the Unity of Africa and its Diaspora*, edited by B.F Bankie & K. Mchombu (Eritrea: First Africa World Press, 2008) p. 211.

²⁹ Ibid., see also: B.F.Bankie, Windhoek, (Namibia 2011) “The 2011 Referendum and the future of Southern Sudan” being a presentation prepared for *the Regional Workshop in South Sudan, of the African Research and Resource Forum (ARRF)*, Nairobi, Kenya, *Foreign policy options for the Government of Southern Sudan post Referendum*, Davidson Andrew Park, In *the Shadow of History: The Passing of Lineage Society* (New Jersey: Transaction Publisher, 1996) p. 88.

their use to cure ailments, and the well versed in *Khatt al-Raml* (sand cutting) and *al-Takahhun* (divination).³⁰

The above classification seems to narrow the phenomenon of *Jalabi* down to involve only the last sub-category. This is contrary to the general stand maintained by some '*Ulamā*', who proudly consider *Jalabi* as their job. It also does not put the phenomenon into its proper historical context either. Although, the acts of sand-cutting and divination prevail over the practice of *Jalabi* nowadays, it, nevertheless, does not embody what *Jalabi* is all about.

The Yoruba '*Ulamā*' engaged in the practice of *Jalabi* could be divided into the following categories:

- a. Those who are consulted by people for special prayer using, among others, the Qur'an, *Dalā'l al-Khayrāt*,³¹ and other supplications inherited from their fathers, or pre-

³⁰ Ilori, Adam Abdullah, *Nasīm al-Ṣabā' fī Akhbār al-Islām wa 'Ulamā Bilād Yoruba*, (Cairo: al-Maṭb'ah al-Namūdhajiyah, 1987) p. 43.

³¹ The full title is *Dalā'l al-Khayrāt Wa Shawāriq al-Anwār fī dhikr al-Ṣolāt ala al-Nabi al-Mukhtār* (rendered in English as the Waymarks of Benefits and the Brilliant Burst of Sunshine in the Remembrance of Blessings on the Chosen Prophet). It is a famous collection of prayers for the Prophet Muhammad, which was written by the Moroccan Sufi and Islamic scholar Muhammad al-Jazuli (died 1465). It is popular in many parts of the Islamic world, most especially West Africa, and is divided into sections for daily recitation. The *Dalā'il al-Khayrat* is one of the most popular and universally acclaimed collection of *Salawāt*. Among some Sunni religious orders, most notably the Shadhili-Jazuli order, its recitation is a daily practice. In others, however, its recitation is a purely voluntary daily practice. The work begins with the ninety nine names of God, and then a collection of over one hundred names of Muhammad.

There are five ways to read *Dalā'l al-Khayrāt*: 1- all together in one sitting, 2- in two halves divided over two days, 3- in three third over three days, 4- in four quarters over four days, 5- in eight sections (called *hizb*) over one week. It is traditional to begin the recitation of *Dalā'l al-Khayrāt* with the *Asmā' al-Husnā* and the name of the Prophet (S.A.W). See: al-Jazūlī, Muḥammad b. Sulaymān, *Dalā'l al-Khayrāt Wa Shawāriq al-Anwār fī dhikr al-Ṣolāt Ala al-Nabi al-Mukhtār*, edited by Sheikh Abdul Kerim al-Kibrisi. Trans. S. Ahmad Darwish. p. 18. www.naksibendi.org (retrieved 20 January, 2014).

scribed to them by colleagues and superiors or are from their own inventions. This category may best be designated as Qur'an-oriented '*Ulamā*', as they do not mix this practice with other method of healing, whether traditional or prophetic.

- b. Those who combine the traditional method of healing with the Islamic, and perform different types of divinations, such as *Khat al-Raml* (sand-cutting), Jin companionship, etc.
- c. Those who have received special training in traditional but not Islamic healing method, are referred to as *onisegun* (herbalist). There is no difference, whatsoever, between this category and the traditional herbalists.
- d. The *gbajue* type (fraudsters), who lead their lives on deceptions and lies. This category is replete with youth and emerging *Alfas*, who are desperate to become wealthy overnight and do not have the mastery of the *ise Alfa per se*.

Of these categories, only those who fall in the category 'C' may be excluded from the general reference to the *Jalabi* practitioners. It may well be realized that this category is also consulted for Islamic spiritual treatment. Even though some of them may not want *Jalabi* to be associated with them and try their best to avoid it,³² this would not change the general assumption in the Yorubaland that all *Alfa* are by definition *Jalabi* practitioners.

In some places, particularly in Ibadan and Ilorin, a *Jalabi* practitioner is sometimes referred to as *Alfa Onitira* (the possessor of *tira*) or *Alfa Alasiri* (the possessor of *asiri*). *Asiri* is a Yoruba adaptation of the Arabic word *al-Sir* (pl. *al-Asrar*) meaning secret, while *tira* is said to have also been a domesticated Arabic word from *tiyarah*. So, Alfa Oniti-

³² Interview conducted with Dr. Muhalli Abdul Aziz, a Muslim herbalist in Iyana ilogbo ogun state Nigeria, on 12 June, 2013.

ra or Alasiri is a Muslim, who is known for his knowledge to make amulet, charm and special petitionary prayer.

The phenomenon of *Jalabi*, as previously defined, seems to have been widely practiced across Africa under different names, the most common of which is *Mganga* or *Mwalimu*, the terms used to designate a person who practices a healing job in East Africa.³³ *Mganga* is a Swahili word derived from the root *ganga*, which means ‘to bind up’, or mend what is broken. By extension, *ganga* has become a generic term for healing.³⁴ While *Mganga* is used for both Muslim and unlettered traditional medicine men, *Mwalimu* is a reserved term for a Muslim, who had studied and learned his skills, and does not treat his client without following procedures described in a written text.³⁵

Also, in West Africa, *marabout* is so common a term that is identified with Muslim holy men, whose job looks similar to that of the practitioners of *Jalabi* in the Yorubaland. *Marabout* is an Anglicized Arabic word, *al-Murābiṭ* (the one who is garrisoned in a monastery-like place called *ribāṭ* serving both religious and military functions). Interestingly, the fame of these *marabouts* has gone further afield to such an extent that a Canadian singer, Celine Dion, in her 1995 song “*pour que tu m’aimes encore*” (meaning: so that you would love me again) made a reference to them as her last resort, if need be, in order to win her lover back.³⁶ The reference made here to *marabout* shows us what they are known for by outsiders, i.e. their charm-making ability for any purpose, and the love charm being the most sought-after.

³³ Swantz Lloyd W., *The Medicine Man Among the Zaramo of Dar es Salam* (Sweden: Bohuslaningen, Uddevalla 1990) P. 11-14. Sperling David, *The Frontiers of Prophecy: Healing, the Cosmos, and Islam on the East African Coast in the Nineteenth Century*, In *Revealing Prophets: Prophecy in Eastern African History*, edited by David Anderson and Douglas L. Johnson, (London: James Currey Ltd, 1995) P. 89.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid. 91.

³⁶ Dion, Celin "pour que tu m'aimes encore." *D'eux*. 1995.

The origin of Jalabi has been associated with the coming of Islam into Yorubaland, but since one cannot say in precision when this infiltration of Islam actually began in this part of the world, one may not equally know with exactitude the beginning of Jalabi practice in the Yorubaland. This strategy began the moment the Muslim clerics emerged from quarantine, as Ryan puts it, in the wake of the growth of Muslim communities in many parts of West Africa. Initially, they performed variety of clerical functions for these budding communities to which they later added petitionary prayer, healing, divining, and making and selling charms and amulets.³⁷

The earliest Jalabi-related practice was referred to by al-Bakrī (1094 C.E) in his monumental work on the History of Africa. He mentioned a chiefdom of Malal, beyond the upper Senegal, that underwent an unending period of drought. Despite efforts exerted by the priests, the situation even took a turn for the worse. Thereupon, the king appealed to his Muslim guest, who promised to help on condition that he accepted Islam. When the king agreed, the Muslim taught him some easy verses in the Qur'an and instructed him on fundamental religious obligations. On the following Friday night, after the king had purified himself, the two set out to a nearby hill. All that night the Muslim prayed and was emulated by the king. The dawn only started to break when Allah brought down abundant rain. The king then ordered the idols be broken, expelled the sorcerers and became Muslim together with his family and the nobility save the common people.³⁸

³⁷ El Fasi, op.cit. p. 72.

³⁸ Al-Bakrī, Abū 'Ubayd 'Abdullah b. 'Abdul 'Azīz, *al-Masālik wa al-Mamālik* (Tunis: al-Dār al-'Arabiyyah li al-Kitāb, 1992)875., Levtzion Nehemia, *Pattern of Islamization in West Africa* in Conversion to Islam, ed. N. Levtzion (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1979)209-210.

Jalabi as a representation of Islam

In Yorubaland, the genesis of the phenomenon of *Jalabi* is ascribed to the effort exerted by the itinerants, who are seen as the possessors of spiritual power to solve many enigmatic problems and to offer special prayers for protection against witchcraft and help cure the people's physical and spiritual maladies. This reminds us of the initiative of prince Ol-uaji, *inter alia*, who is said to have invited some Fulani Muslims to the town during the reign of Oba Alawusa (1739-1774).

A similar but distant incident occurred in other places in Yorubaland, where an Alfa is expected to demonstrate his supernatural ability to make the impossible possible, thereby staking his reputation on his success in performing such miracle. Sheikh Adam al-Ilori reported one such incident in a Yoruba city where the 'Ulamā' were forced into a fierce competition with the traditional herbalists to see whether they would come out of it triumphant and thus establish the genuineness of their mission.³⁹

Almost all the Yoruba 'Ulamā' know how to perform different medicinal concoction, amulet, charm and special prayers for whatever purpose. The effectiveness of such activity added to the people's respect for them, hence helped to consolidate Islam. This is not surprising given the fact that the majority of these 'Ulamā' in the past were either traditional herbalists themselves before they embraced Islam or had had in the line of their ancestry who are renowned for their supernatural power, and its knowledge came to them by way of inheritance. Therefore, the acceptance of Islam, to some, does not mean a complete abandonment of their traditional legacy. In fact, it could be argued that their new religion is believed to have provided them with an additional power and strength. It is even asserted that many of the Yoruba traditionalists, who accepted Islam, did so, not out of absolute conviction but rather for the spiritual power inherent in Islam. If they have renounced their father's religion, it is because of its polytheistic nature with its accompanying rituals and practices, which are condemned in Islam. However, these renounced rit-

³⁹ al-Ilori, *op. cit.* p. 42.

uals and practices have become once again incorporated in Islam without any apparently possible conflict, most probably in defense of Islam.

Obviously, this way of defending Islam is completely unorthodox but yet is reasonable and understandable given the manner in which they embraced Islam. The Islamic teachings they were introduced to were mainly confined to the learning how to recite and understand the Qur'an, the Arabic language, and a little portion of Malikī fiqh. So little did they know about the Islamic law, which does not reach the level that could enable them to measure all that is un-Islamic, until the advent of Sheikh Alim Junta and the subsequent establishment of the Ilorin emirate, through which many cities in Yorubaland witnessed the unprecedented influx of the 'Ulamā'.

These scholars, with sincere and intense conviction preached Islam with the little knowledge they had and put their lives on the line to defend its cause. It is not recorded that they ever practiced Jalabi for a living or to preserve their personal interest, as many of them had what they could call career. On the contrary, it was more of humanitarian and preventive.

Several examples of the 'Ulamā's tendency to promote Islam through their mystic and spiritual power have been collected from different sources, most of which are the first-hand experiences of those interviewed on the subject.

- In Ondo state, it was narrated that a renowned chief in one of its towns had the habit of punishing his Muslim slave whenever he went to the *imām*. Despite all the appeals of the imam to the chief in order to desist from maltreating him, the habit of the chief did not change. Thereupon, the *imām* wrote on a slate some Qur'anic texts, drew a diagram of some geometry squares and arranged within them some magical letters. He then put the slate besides a fire spot. Not quite long after that, news reached the *imām* that some Jinn had flogged the chief. The chief was said to have known the source of his torture. He sent appeals to the *imām* with

a promise to allow the slave to come to him as the slave may wish. This incident encouraged many people to embrace Islam.⁴⁰

- In Ibadan, it was reported that the animosity between the traditionalists and the 'Ulamā' reached its apex and the situation became so tense that the tiny Muslim community in Ibadan then were forbidden to make *adhān*, and anyone who attempted in defiance of the order would die instantly. The situation was beginning to take a turn for the worse when sheikh Uthman Basunu performed some special prayers then instructed the Muadhin to resume his duty. Upon hearing the sound of *adhān*, all the shrines immediately caught fire. This incident helped the Muslims gain more freedom, respect and caused many people to accept Islam.⁴¹
- In Lagos, it was narrated that sheikh Abubakr bin Abdullah al-Sunni, a prominent preacher had an encounter with one of the leaders of idol worshippers in 1890 C.E., who threatened to kill him if he did not desist from insulting their gods. He then challenged him to demonstrate how powerful Islam was and in turn he himself would prove to the sheikh the efficacy of his magic. On the appointed day, the magician put up his show and cast a spell on one person among those present, who, in a matter of seconds, fell down wallowing in the mud. Nothing could get him back on his feet except the magician's antidote. When the man wanted to cast the same spell on the sheikh, the sheikh recited some verses of the Qur'an and spit or blew it on the magician, who, instantaneously fell down in a swoon. Having observed this, the people hastily embraced Islam.⁴²

⁴⁰ Interview conducted with Alhaja Moriamo Lawal by Adebowale Shittu Agbetola. see: Agbetola, Adebowale Shittu, "Islam in Ondo State of Nigeria, 1850-1960" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Ibadan, 1983),289.

⁴¹ Interview with Alhaji Haruna suara Baosar, Chief imam of Ibadan oyo state on 1st June 2013 at his home residence.

⁴² Ibid.

- In Ikere -Ekiti, there was a local preacher, Alhaj Abdul Ganiy Isinkaye, who was humiliated for not removing his turban while entering the customary court, and, as a result, was then walked out forcibly. Another preacher, Alhaj Mudasir Elewure from Ilorin, who was also present, considered the incident as an insult not on his colleague but also on Islam. He therefore threatened to teach the court-panel a lesson by sending storm to destroy their houses. When he arrived home, he asked for a toad to be killed for him, then dissected it and put an amulet, which he had prepared beforehand, in its bowel and burry the toad at a fire spot in his house. After some days, a great storm attacked and rendered to ruin the houses of the court-members, who ridiculed his colleague and ordered that he be walked out of the court. The incident threw awe into the minds of the non-Muslims in Ikere and warned others to be careful in their dealings with the men in turban. On that basis, Muslims in Ikere adopted the tradition of turban wearing in order to add to the people's respect for them.⁴³
- In Ido-Ekiti, in the late 60s there was a sharp decrease in the number of women attending the mosque for *Jumu'ah* service despite the fact that their articles of trade were displayed in a market close to the mosque. In order to bring them back into the mosque, some incentives were provided for them. The *imām* prepared some charms with the verses of the Qur'an to help them attract more customers and increase their profits. However, they were made to believe that this charm would be rendered ineffective if they miss two *Jumu'ah* consecutively without a genuine excuse. The effectiveness of the charm made these women committed, who later formed the *egbe alasalatu* that met every Friday morning to receive religious lesson from the *imām*.⁴⁴

⁴³ Interview conducted with Alhaji Yisa Bello, the imam Ratibi for Oke-Ikere mosque. see Agbetola, op. cit. p. 290.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

- In Ijaiye-Abeokuta, there is a prominent Sheikh Salih Sheye, who always preaches against the masquerade tradition of the Ijaiye people. He had been doing that for quite sometime and the idol-worshippers had held him in contempt for it. One day he was told that the masquerade would be brought to his house in order to disgrace him. It is believed that a masquerade can neither enter the compound of an Alfa nor can he pass by his house. On hearing the threat the sheikh warned them of its dreadful consequence. When they insisted, the sheikh performed some special prayer and concocted some charm and sprayed it around his house. When the masquerade arrived with its companies, the sheikh commanded the earth to swallow the masquerade and it disappeared with immediate effect. The researcher was shown the spot where the masquerade disappeared right in front of the sheikh's house. The incident caused a feeling of surprise and dismay to all those present and threw the fear of the sheikh, his disciples and households in their heart.⁴⁵

Conclusion

Early Yoruba 'Ulamā' initiated the practice of *Jalabi* as a strategy to propagate Islam among the indigenous traditional Yoruba. It could not be considered as something unprecedented, as the practice follows the mainstream African strategy in promoting Islam. The origin of *Jalabi* remains shrouded with mystery, as no specific date could be assigned to its inception. All we may say, based on the available resources, is not more than its companionship with Islam during the latter's infiltration into Yorubaland. Its impacts on the lives of the Yoruba are immeasurable, as the phenomenon has become an important fabric of their society that could neither be abolished nor possibly forsaken. In the practice of *Jalabi* today, the 'Ulamā' do virtually everything that the traditionalist (pagan Yoruba) does, to such an extent that one may hardly find any difference between the un-Islamic local tradition and Islam. However, to them, this is

⁴⁵ Ibid.

justified, as they see it as a means to not only gain the confidence and patronage of their clientele, but a way to prove to the Muslims that every problem can be managed within the fold of Islam. If ‘Ulamā’ forsake practising *Jalabi*, it would create a vacuum that might be filled with *babalawo* and evangelists of salvation. In Yorubaland today there is hardly a Muslim who has never experienced *Jalabi* in one way or the other. It has become a popular industry offering services which people from every walk of life are willing to pay for. This suffices to endear *Jalabi* practice to many ‘Ulamā’, who do not have sufficient and regular income. Regrettably, due to its alluring prospect, many unprofessional and amateur young *Alfas* (and even sometimes non-*Alfa*), having stumbled on some records detailing the use of herbs with verses of the Qur’an, greedily forced themselves into the system. The majority of the ‘Ulamā’ still live below the poverty line, regardless of their involvement in *Jalabi*.