

CONFORMITY VERSUS SYNCRETISM IN MAQBARAH (CEMETERY) AMONG YORUBA MUSLIMS: A CASE STUDY OF OKUTALA TOWN, MORO LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA, KWARA STATE

By

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Abstract

Death cemetery at home and in the Mosque premises is one phenomenon among Yoruba Muslims in Southwestern Nigeria. It has generated unwholesome controversy among *Ummah*. While some people opined that a Muslim can be buried beside his home as the Prophet Muhammad (*SAW*) was buried in his wife apartment. Others denounce it, as it is the prerogative of Prophets of Allah. The Yoruba Muslims with regards to belief in both living and dead form one communion are divided into two, a section among them believed in the phenomenon, another section however opposes it and denies its occurrence. This study is both library and field-based method. The paper contextualizing the phenomenon within the framework of Islamic orthodoxy, attempts reconciliation between the two opposing views. Coupled with the fact that, having cemetery beside the home had been grossly abused among Yoruba Muslims in which is against the tenet of Islam. It is discovered that the prevalence of social ritualist in our modern day Yoruba land is one of the contributing factors to burial of Muslim corpse at home. Hence, the study therefore recommends that religious leaders to proffer adequate safety and security at the Muslims graveyard in order to reduce the threat of burying Muslim corpse at the graveyard. The study concludes that the best place to bury a Muslim corpse should be the Muslim's graveyard as it has been stipulated in the early history of Islam.

Keywords: *Maqbarah*, The Yorubas, Muslims, Conformity and Syncretism.

Introduction

Death, like life is a natural phenomenon divinely programmed by the immortal creator for the moral beings.¹ To Africans in general and the Yoruba in particular, the living and the dead form one communion. This conception is implicit in Yoruba funeral rites and ceremonies.² Death in Yoruba thought is a necessity that must be experienced by everyone regardless of creed, status or tribe. Thus, the people sayings: "*Aiye lo ja, Orun nile*" (the world is but a market, while heaven is our home). In another regard, they opine thus: "*Gbogbo wa la da agbada iku*" (We all have made a garment of death).³

In Africa and in fact in Yorubaland⁴ everything is conceived within religious orbit.⁵ Cemetery at home is an old custom among the Yoruba ethnic. This custom has become the order of the day among Yoruba Muslims to the effects of having a grave in the Mosque premises. This custom has generated unwholesome controversy among *Ummah* particularly, in the twenty first century. Some Yoruba Muslims is of the view that, a Muslim can be buried beside his home as our noble Prophet Muhammad (*SAW*) was buried in his wife apartment. Some Yoruba Muslims denounce this opinion for it is the prerogative of Prophets of Allah (*SWT*). So any burial at home or in the Mosques premises is against the tenet of Islam. While contextualizing this

phenomenon within the framework of Islamic orthodoxy, the paper attempts reconciliation between the two opposing perspectives coupled with the fact that, having cemetery beside the home had been grossly abused among Yoruba Muslims in Yorubaland.

Conceptual Clarification

There are two key words that need clarification in order to know their meaning and the context in which they are used. These are *maqbarah* and syncretism: The Arabic word *maqbarah* is a singular term for the plural *maqbarah* which is derived from the word *qabr*, this simply connotes grave. Though, *maqbarah* refers to the graves of all Muslims. It refers especially to a muslim cemetery.⁶ According to Dictionary of Islamic Terms, the term *Maqbarah* means graveyard or cemetery.⁷ In Encyclopedia Britannica, cemetery is a place set apart for burial or entombment of the dead.⁸

Oxford English Dictionary explains that graveyard comes from 1767 and is typically smaller than a cemetery and is often associated with a church. It is part of the churchyard.⁹ In a nutshell, the term graveyard is often used interchangeably with cemetery but a graveyard primarily refers to a burial ground with a churchyard.

The word syncretism is the combining of different beliefs while blending practices of various schools of thought. It involves the merging of several originally discrete traditions, especially in the theology and mythology of religion. Therefore, religious syncretism exhibits blending of two or more religious belief system into a new system, or the incorporation into a religious tradition of belief from unrelated traditions.¹⁰ The word syncretism is referred to as *takhlit* in Arabic. While a syncretism is called a *Mukhlit*. In Islam, syncretism is the practice of mixing Islam with other beliefs and practices which are opposed to its tenets.¹¹ Jimoh quoted Usman dan Fodio's view on syncretism as mixing the beliefs and practices of Islam with those beliefs and practices which do not emanate except from disbelievers and polytheists.¹² Africans, from time immemorial before their contact with Islam were mainly idol-worshippers with many ancestral customs and traditions. When eventually they had contact with Islam, they resorted to syncretism, mingling the beliefs and rites of Islam with those of the African traditional religion. For instance, the Yoruba popular saying that depict their syncretic tendency thus:

"Oosa la fin wa omo, Imole lafi n wo"

Meaning:

Children may be sought through the divinities
though we may bring them up in Islam way.¹³

The implication of the above song is that, being a Muslim does not prevent one from partaking in ancestral worship and from seeking assistance from gods and goddesses. This view was corroborated by Adeniyi, when he submits thus:

Syncretism is the fusion of beliefs and rituals
which take place when one religion comes out to
interact with another religion.¹⁴

The above assertion connotes that, if a Muslim borrows and absorb any element from other religious culture which is against the tenet of Islam, becomes a syncretist.

Short History of Okutala Town Kwara State

Okutala is one of the ancient towns situated in the centre of Oke-Oyi and Bode Sadu. It is in the midway between the southern of Moro Local government having its boundary with Ilorin East.¹⁵ In its pre-colonial setting, the town constitutes the area which lies on latitude 8° 20'N

and longitude 4° 18'E. it was bounded in the southeast by Ilorin east in the North by Ejidongari in the northeast by Lanwa, in the southwest by Baba Dudu.¹⁶

According to Joshua, Okutala was founded by a Yoruba hunter known as ode Ile-Apo Ayinla who migrated from Old Oyo kingdom around early eighteenth century toward the decline of Old Oyo Empire.¹⁷ Owing to internecine tribal wars in Oyo Empire, immediately after the war, many people left Oyo for different part of Yoruba land, the founder of Okutala was one of them.¹⁸

Physical features common to an area were usually the source after which settlement derived their names from. Hence, Okutala acronym was derived from two element words. Firstly, the founder's name "Ayinla" and secondary, the Rock on which he located his camp. Rock means Okuta. The name "Okuta Ayinla" was the reference point for the bush meat trade and with time the reference point metamorphosed into Okutanla hence, the derivation Okutala today.¹⁹

Alapo Ayinla was said to embarked on his journey from Old Oyo Empire with his chief Adefalu who migrated from Ile-Ife and both first settled at SAO.

Afterward, they moved forward to get the predicted place by the Ifa-Oracle until they got to a place where a tree called Igi Apa was surrounded by rocks as foretold by the Ifa oracle.²⁰

With the expansion of the settlement Alapo Ayinla naturally assumed the leadership of the new community and ruled over the people from Jokolu to Agogo immediately after Ejidongari. This marked the beginning of Alapo Dynasty in Okutala.

Emergence of Islam in Okutala

Islam was introduced into Okutala town by a young Muslim trader better known as Alhaji Ayinla but the precise date of its entry was a matter of speculation since it was unannounced and unplanned. It is certain that before the arrival of Alhaji Ayinla, there was nothing like Islam in Okutala. Therefore Islam came to Okutala through him.²¹

It is part of our research findings that Alhaji Ayinla migrated from Ita Ogunbo in Ilorin, with the principal aim of commercial activities in the town. He frequently came along with a product known as **konkoso** in the ancient era but regarded as ajo in the modern time meaning a sieve. After some years, Alhaji Ayinla later settled down in Okutala at a compound called Ile-Oni Konkoso which was assigned to him by Akabi Adefalu. Alhaji Ayinla got married in the town and was blessed with only three children whom were known as Sambo, Adio and Mustapha. Along with his settlement in Okutala the people were attracted and stimulated by his mode of worship and decorum.²²

Consequently, they join him in worship without being convinced in the totality that the only religion recognized in the sight of Allah is Islam. The emergence of Islam was quite strange in the community, which serves as a reference in the following prophetic tradition:

Islam emerges as a strange religion and it will return in the same manner, glad tidings to the strangers.²³

Cemetery in Yorubaland

Burial rites are performed principally in Yorubaland based on the belief in life and after death. These rites according to Laguda, are very elaborate and must be rigidly followed to get the desired effects of transporting the soul of the dead to the land of the spirits. Laguda stated further that, the process differs from one place to another and elaboration depends largely on the age of the deceased.²⁴ The interment takes place in a room or outside in the compound. This is to show that the deceased is still an integral part of the family.²⁵ The burial provides opportunity for messages to be sent to other dead but living ancestors. This is hinged upon the

belief that the soul of the dead still moves around for sometimes before it finally departs to the spiritual world. In the view of Daniel on this matter, burial rites in Nigeria are not only intended to dispose the corpse of a dead person, but also meant to determined where the dead should be, how he is going to relate to the living what he should become at reincarnation etc.²⁶ Ilega concludes that, the good death may be buried in his compound unless otherwise bad death.²⁷ Doi contends that, generally, if a young man or woman dies outside his home town, the boy is not brought home. The corpse is carried to the cemetery if it is in the large town like Lagos, Abeokuta, Ibadan or Ijebu Ode. But if it is in a village, the dead is usually buried in the backyard or front of the house.²⁸ This opinion was buttressed by Adeyemi, that the eldest son of the deceased brings a goat which is slaughtered at the *Ibuwe* (place where corpse is washed). The corpse is put in the coffin after a few hours later and taken to the final resting place, usually in a room in the house or in the courtyard.²⁹ Johnson opines that infants are not buried in the houses but their dead bodies are either thrown away into the nearest bush or forest, such children are called *Abiku* (born to die). While the grave of aged people, are dug in the one of the sleeping rooms.³⁰ Laguda opines that some people such as *Abuke* (hunchback) are considered as *eni-orisa* whose deformity is due to the displeasure of Orisa – nla, the creative divinity. They are buried in the sacred grave.³¹ Abimbola added that each adult who dies becomes an orisa to his own family.³² All these are suggested reasons while the Yoruba bury their dead at home.

Cemetery in Islam

Islam confirms that death must occur no matter our status in society. The Glorious Qur'an mentions the word death thirty five times in order to emphasize its inevitability.³³ There are a lot of rituals that Muslims are expected to perform when their fellow Muslims died.

- *Rituals to be performed before the arrival of the death*
- *Rituals at the time of death*
- *Rituals after death.*

In this regard, we are not concerned about the aforementioned rituals after death but our main focus is centered on the questions, should the home serves as a cemetery? Can a Muslim be buried in the Mosques premises? If capital no, where does Islam ordered a Muslim to be buried?

Burial in Islam

Burying the dead, even if they were non-believers is a *fardu kifayah* (communal obligation). This was the Prophet practices – and his companions as Muslims were buried in a place called *al-Baqi* graveyard; except for special cases, such as the Martyrs on the battle field. Jabir Ibn Abdullai reported the Prophet thus:

While I was waiting in Madinah, my aunt bought my (dead) father and uncle, leveling them on the two side of a camel. She entered Madinah to bury them in our graveyard. But a man caught up with her saying, surely Allah's Messenger commands you to bring back the killed ones and bury them in the places where they were killed. So we took them back and buried them where they were killed.³⁴

The above *Hadith* is an indication that the martyrs in Islam are not buried in the cemetery.

Visiting the Graves

In Islam, it is recommended to visit the graves for the purpose of getting admonishment and remembering of hereafter as this is categorically stated in the *hadith* of Prophet Muhammad Buraydah *Ibn* al-Husayb reported that Allah's Messenger thus:

I had prohibited you from visiting the graves. Now visit them, because they will remind you of the hereafter.³⁵

The above tradition is a manifestation that Muslims at the early period of Islam created a cemetery for their dead ones.

Prayer for the Deceased at Cemetery

Apart from visiting the graveyard, the visitors are enjoined to pray for the dwellers of the graveyard. Aishah was reported to have asked the prophet where he was last night. He replied thus:

“I was sent to al-Baqī's people to pray for them.”³⁶

Praying in the Cemetery

It is not permissible to pray among the graves, even if one did face them in the prayer. *Ibn* Umar reported Allah's Messenger:

“Offer some of your prayer in your houses, and do not turn them into graves”.³⁷

Abu Said al-Khudri also reported that Allah's Messenger said:

“All of the earth is a place for prayer, except a graveyard or a bathroom”.³⁸

The above traditions are glaring evidences that graveyard is a separate part of the earth and not places for prayer.

Cemetery among Yoruba Muslims between Conformity and Syncretism

It is among our findings in the modern times that, despite the practice of burying their dead Muslims in Yorubaland, a piece of land are designated as cemetery. Some Yoruba Muslims who are fortunate to have a spacious building which incorporate Mosque write a will of having their burial near the Mosque. Coupled with the fact that having cemetery at home has been accompanied with some syncretism such as building structures over the graves, writing on the graves, embellishment of graves, sitting on the graves, offering prayer (*salat*) by facing the graves, seeking help from the dead person, or asking him to supplicate for the visitors, sacrificing animals near the graves, etc.³⁹ Some Yoruba Muslims opine that a Muslim can be buried beside his home as the Prophet (*SAW*) was buried in his wife apartment. Therefore, the grave of the Prophet is inside his Mosque in the city of Madinah. Hence, there is nothing wrong in praying in a Mosque where there is a grave.⁴⁰ Other Yoruba Muslims contend that, the *Sahabah* (companion of the Prophet) did not bury him in his Mosque but they buried him in the room of Aishah and when Walīd *Ibn* Abdul Malik expanded the Mosque at end of the first century, the room became part of the Mosque.⁴¹

However, this paper argues that, it is not permissible for Muslims to use this as evidence to build Mosque on graves or bury their dead Muslims in Mosques because that is contrary to the tradition of the Prophet. The *Hadith* of the Prophet was reported thus:

May Allah curse the Jews and the Christians who took the graves of their Prophets as Mosques.⁴²

In another tradition, Abubakr reported the Prophet (S.A.W) saying:

Never did Allah take a Prophet's life except in the location where he should be buried.⁴³

The above *Hadith* is an indication that the burial of the Prophet in his wife room is specific to all Prophets of Allah.

Syncretism and Practical Abuse of Cemetery

The practice of making a room or corridor in the compound as a burial place among some Yoruba Muslims in the past and present has led to some syncretism, innovation and practical abuse which include the following:

Plastering of Grave

Some Yoruba Muslims are fond of decorating their graves by plastering it with a layer of gypsum (chalk) but this was prohibited by the Prophet as in the following tradition:

“Allah's Messenger (*SAW*) prohibited plastering of a grave (with chalk)”.⁴⁴

Mounting up a Grave

Another prohibited practice common among Yoruba Muslims is building anything on top of a grave. Abu Saïd al-Khudri (RTA) reported thus:

“Allah's prophet prohibited building over graves”.⁴⁵

Raising a Grave

It is a common practice among some Yoruba Muslims to raise a grave more than a hand span which can be done by using extra soil remaining from digging it after burying the body. Aliyy *Ibn Abi* Talib (RTA) reported Allah's Messenger saying:

“Do not leave a statue in a house but destroy it and do not leave high grave but level it”.⁴⁶

Praying Amid the Graves

It is not lawful to pray amid the grave even if one did not face them in prayer. This is why the Prophet commands us to distinguish our homes from graveyard through praying in them, as mentioned earlier in the *Hadith* of the Prophet (S.A.W)

Celebrating by the Graves

It is unlawful in Islam, to make a grave a place of seasonal gathering visited for worship or other purposes. Abu Hurayra (RTA) reported Allah's Messenger saying:

“Do not turn my grave into a place of seasonal celebration and visitation...”⁴⁷

Sitting on a Muslim's Graves

As a result of burying Muslims at home, some of our children and adult turn a grave into a sitting place for discussion, even some get to the extent of drying their clothes on the wall of the grave. Abu Hurayrah (RTA) reported Allah's Messenger saying:

For one of you to sit on a hot coal, that would burn his clothes and his skin that is better for him, than sitting on standing on a grave.⁴⁸

Sacrificing Animals near the Graves

It is not permitted to slaughter animal near a grave, even if the slaughtered animal was purely offered to Allah. The people of *Jahiliyyah* used to practice such. The Prophet said:

“To slaughtering by a grave (is allowed) in Islam”.⁴⁹

Turning a Grave to Shrine

Some Yoruba Muslims visit their graves in the belief that the buried person is a saint who will intercede for them before Allah. The Prophet (S.A.W) enjoins the Muslims to visit their graves to serves as a reminder of death.⁵⁰

Reconciliation between the Opposing Views

Having examined the issues of graveyard among the Yoruba Muslims between conformity and syncretism, it behooves this study to harmonize opposing views on the controversy that centred among having graveyard beside on inside residential area in Yorubaland, in order to unravel the misconception and misinterpretation on it among the *Ummah*; in Nigeria. According to A.B. Philips, before attempting to resolve apparent conflict, the following must be established thus:

- i. The authenticity of any *Hadith* must be established.
- ii. The general rule for harmonizing contradicting text is done by treating one as general text (*aam*) and the other as specific (*khaas*)
- iii. If there is a contradiction between the prophet's statement and his actions, the general principle is to give preference to his statement over his action.⁵¹

Hence, the following *Hadith* needs to be examined and analyzed as a bone of contention between the opposing views:

Meaning:

No prophet was buried except in the place where he died. So a grave was dug for him there...⁵²

The above *Hadith* has been reported by Imam Malik Ibn Anas in his Muwatta.⁵³ The authenticity of the *Hadith* was acknowledged by scholars of *Hadith*.⁵⁴ Coupled with the fact that there are other *Ahadith* that are corroborating its authenticity, both in chain of transmission and content. Reputable scholars in the world have done great analysis on the *Ahadith* embodied in the work of Imam Malik such as Imam Suyuti, Imam Az-Zarqani, etc.

On the subject matter of the above *Hadith*, it is crystal clear from the *matru* (content) that the *Sahabah* (companions of the prophet) disagree on the actual place to bury him. According to some scholars that was the first argument that ensue after his demise.⁵⁵

There are four religious burial rites which scholars of *Hadith* disagree upon from the above prophet's tradition. While there is no divergence of opinions on which day the prophet (S.A.W) died and who are the *Sahabah* to have ritual bath for him.

Issues of divergence of opinion encapsulate the day the prophet was buried, where should he be buried, how should he be washed and the type of grave to accord for his burial.

Our major concern in this context centered around where he should be buried. During the course of disagreement among the *Sahabah*, Abubakar's arrival put an end to it when he asserts thus: "No prophet was buried except in the place where he died".⁵⁶

The above prophetic tradition was the evidence uphold by scholars who contend the view that Muslim should not be buried at home because the burial of the prophet took place in the apartment of Aishah, his wife as a result of the place where the prophet died.

While other scholars, corroborate their view that it is permissible to bury Muslims at home with the following tradition reported by Hisham Ibn Urwah's father thus:

I would not like to be buried in *Al-Baqi*. I would prefer to be buried elsewhere. The one is buried in *Al-Baqi* is one of two people. Either is an oppressor and I do not like to be buried with

him or he is virtuous and I would not like his bones to be disinterred for me.⁵⁷

The above tradition was also embodied in the work of Muwatta. This tradition belongs to the kinds of *Hadith* known as *Maqtu* (severed); because in terms of reference of authority it cannot be traced to the prophet but his companions.⁵⁸ There are other traditions in the work of Muwatta such as *mawquf* (stopped) and *mursal* (hurried). By and argue, the authenticity of the tradition was established by scholars.

We can infer from the foregoing that both traditions were authentic. Scholars of *Hadith* were categorized into two on this subject matter while certain scholars considered having Muslim burial at home as *mustahab* (recommended). Other scholars content that it is an act of *makruh* (reprehensible act) not *haram* (forbidden).⁵⁹

It is our humble submission that both scholars' views on burial of a Muslim at home and graveyard are under the *shariah* precept. Islam as a way of life gives preference to bury a Muslim at the Muslim graveyard. For the fact that, there are other prophetic traditions which enjoins Muslim to visit the graveyard.

There are more advantages for the deceased to be buried at the Muslim graveyard than at home. Particularly, the abuse of graves at home in our environment is nothing to write home about. The prophetic tradition has established the fact that only the prophets of Allah are to be buried where they died.

However, it is not permitted to look down upon those who prefer having the burial of their deceased at home for one reason or the other. For the fact that they have evidence embodied in the *shariah*

It is in this context that we need to interrogate factors that instigate burial at home among the Yoruba Muslims in Nigeria.

Contributing Factors for *Maqbarah* at Home in Okutala Town

It is crystal clear from our previous discussion that the dead is usually buried at the backyard or front of the house in Yorubaland.⁶⁰ There are certain social legal which re-entrench the spirit and culture of having graveyard at home in the contemporary society. The prevalence of social ritualist in our modern day in Yorubaland is one of the factors contributing to burial of corpse at home, the Daily Trust of Thursday, 3rd August 2017, published the story of an Ilorin based Islamic Cleric (Alfa) who allegedly exhumed his friend's corpse for ritual purpose seven days after he had been buried and brought the decomposing body to his room.⁶¹ Earlier in May 2017, the Oyo State Police Command arrested and detained a pastor who was caught with, human head buffalo horn, gun powder and other charms.⁶² These phenomena are quite rampant in our immediate society. It has threatened the safety of religious graveyard. This trend calls for the attention of religious leaders to keep up security and safety of people's corpse since Islam enjoins the burial at graveyard and people had abuse grave at home which is not in line with the tenet of Islam.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, this paper has been able to address the controversy which surrounded the phenomenon of taking home or mosque as a graveyard among Yoruba Muslims. This was accomplished through the provision of sunnatic practice as established by the Prophet and his companions. This research enlisted and exposes the syncretism that accompanied the practice of taking home as a graveyard. Similarly, this work concludes that having graveyard beside the home is not in line with the Prophetic traditions and it adverse effect on the entire society and

Ummah is quite enormous. Hence, it advocates for jettison of such practice, with the hope that the spread of contagious diseases such as corona virus, lassa fever etc will be greatly reduced in our society.

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