

THE INITIATIVE TO DEVELOP MUSEUM OF ISLAMIC ARTS IN ILORIN: A PRELIMINARY REPORT

*Monica O. SUNNIE-ODODO

Abstract

Although there were some Islamic scholars before the arrival of Alfa Shehu Alimi, Islam in Ilorin became more prominent or pronounced with his coming. This article examines how the Islamic heritage of Ilorin and other parts of Nigeria can be preserved. It contends that such effort will involve the preservation of the Alfa Alimi's mosque and the setting up of a Museum of Islamic Arts in Ilorin, the first of its kind in the country to house a religious legacy. This study also examines the strategic positioning of this museum in Ilorin. In doing this, it highlights its usefulness and recommends how important it is to preserve religious heritage by documenting same in all parts of the country for the purpose of further projecting the rich culture and history of Nigeria.

Keywords: Culture, Heritage, Islamic arts, Museum, Documentation, Preservation of arts

Introduction

Kwara State is the major link to the South and to the heart of the North in Nigeria. However, geographically, the State is located in the North Central or Middle Belt of Nigeria. The state capital, which is the seat of government, is Ilorin, a historical town that inhabits Yoruba of Western Nigeria, Hausa and Fulani of Northern extraction and the Nupe of North Central part of Nigeria. Islam is the main religious heritage of the people from which other cultural practices that shape the philosophy of life of the people are distilled. Also, because of its location, it is in a relatively advantageous position to benefit economically from trade with both the northern and southern parts of the country. It is known that Ilorin, which is an ancient Islamic city, played an important role in the spread of Islam to the southern part of Nigeria. It has monumental Islamic heritage and legacies for current and future generations

to appreciate. The Alfa Alimi's Mosque and residence are two historical monuments that are directly linked with the emergence of Fulani dynasty and hegemony in Ilorin. Built around 1831 by the Fulani Muslim cleric, Sheikh Alimi and located behind the Emir's palace in the Ori-Oke area of Ilorin, the mosque served as the first Jumat mosque for the observance of the Friday prayers in the city. It was built of mud earth and thatched roof but has been renovated in the course of time with corrugated iron roof and decorated with cement. It has remained a place of spiritual visit.

These Islamic legacies and heritage and those that are in some other parts of Nigeria are what we are working on to harness and document for posterity. It is part of the philosophy and goal of the project that it should be a total museum which would share the common goals of modern museums in the world. This article is essentially a preliminary report on this laudable project.

Ilorin Belief System and the Alimi Mosque

The belief of Ilorin people is so strong that whenever there is an envisaged problem of any sort, the Mallams or elders will surge in the mosque with the Muslim congregation (Jama'ah) and prayers are distributed. For instance, during 2003 election, the following was recited after each prayer, *%Masbunallahu Wanimal, Wakil+* (Sufficient for us is Allah and an Excellent Protector/ Guardian is He). L.A.K Jimoh in his book, *Ilorin: Journey so Far*, provides a similar example by recording that during the various wars in the 19th century, while able-bodied men defended the city, the ulama stayed back at the praying ground to offer special prayers.

The people believe whatever happens to them is an act of God (Allah) and normally decide to take it the way it comes. The belief is that whomever the Mallams have chosen and prayed for to be the leader, no one goes against the person no matter what. It is also believed that anyone who raises a finger against the appointed leader, Allah's wrath will befall the person. They quote this part of the Quran often: Q 3:26, which says: say, *%Allah owner of sovereignty, you give sovereignty to whom you will and you take sovereignty away from whom you will. You honour whom you will and you humble whom you will. In your hand is (all) good. Indeed, you are over all things competent. While we were on the field trying to gather materials, most of the people we met said, 'Islam is our culture'+.*

The Vision/Initiative

The initiative started in 2003, when the researcher went into a discussion (on the cultural heritage of the people in this area) with Dr. Debo Areo who was the curator of National Museum, Ilorin at the time. The discussion resulted into a visit of some notable historical centres in Ilorin by Dr. Areo, Mr. Usman Oke and the researcher in February 2004. We then reached a decision that Ilorin Emirate can successfully house an Islamic Museum based on what we observed.

Before we could commence work however, the curator was transferred. Everything was at a standstill until February 2008 when I wrote the headquarters of the National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM) Abuja through its Ilorin office. A fresh report on the need for the museum was prepared by me and forwarded to the NCMM headquarters in October 2009. The NCMM is strategically positioned in the state to promote both tangible and intangible cultural heritages, so the documented report on the enlistment of Alimi/Ilorin mosques in the National Monuments list and citing of the first Islamic Museum in Nigeria was forwarded.

Work on the information and collection of materials including books, manuscripts and other artefacts commenced almost immediately. Efforts were made to reach the Royal Father, the Emir of Ilorin, Alhaji (Dr) Ibrahim Sulu Gambari, CFR, to present and discuss the proposed project. We met Dr. Isiaka Aliagan, one of the founding members of Ilorin History and Culture Bureau, who commended the idea and indicated that their own culture bureau is also doing some work in that direction (that is collecting manuscripts) which will be one of the things needed in the proposed museum. He then pleaded and proposed a partnership between the Bureau and the National Museum. We then advised that the Bureau should write the museum headquarters through the Ilorin office, and this was done on 25 February 2010.

While all efforts to reach the Royal father by the Staff of Monuments, Heritage and Sites Department of the National Museum, Ilorin failed, we then decided to go through the Bureau and a letter was written to this effect on the 22 March 2010. Professor Abdul-Rasheed Na'allah, the Vice Chancellor of Kwara State University, and the researcher did a follow-up visit to the Emir in April 2010. The Emir was very delighted about the idea and promised to support it. Professor Na'allah showed much interest and commitment in the project and he also proposed Kwara State University as a partner to the project.

Experience/Fieldwork

On the field, we discovered that a majority of the people are very reserved and unwilling to open up on issues as they relate. Consequently, we concentrated efforts on getting on board more of the indigenous Ilorin elites who will share in the idea of institutionalizing the project with a view to convincing and gaining their confidence. Hence, the setting up of a steering committee to build a foundation for the take-off of the initiative and it comprised members/people from across borders that shared similar ideas.

The members comprise people from the University, the Culture Bureau and the National Museum:

Professor Abdul-Rasheed Na'allah	-	Chairman
Dr Debo Areo	-	Vice Chairman

Arch. Saifullah Alege	-	Member
Dr Moshood M. Jimba	-	Member
Mrs Monica Onyeche Sunnie-Ododo	-	Member
Mr Usman Oke	-	Member
Professor Sunday E. Ododo	-	Member
Dr Isiaka Aliagan	-	Secretary

The Director-General of the National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM) Alhaji Yusuf Abdallah Usman, who made the propagation of community museums a cardinal objective of his administration, gave the pet project, a convenient platform to commence. This is in line with the Federal Government Policy on Public Private Partnership (PPP) and supported by the decree No. 77 of 1979.

So far, the project has generated a lot of interest among the Ilorin elites, Islamic clerics and key political players in the Emirate. The Director-General of the NCCM came officially to kick-start the stakeholders' meeting on the 21-22 June 2010. Also, the work plan committee was constituted by the Director-General of NCMM and comprises the following:

- i) Mr N. M. Adediran (Director of Museums)
- ii) Dr Isiaka Aliagan
- iii) Architect Sarfullahi Alege
- iv) Alhaji Yunoos Kareem
- v) Prof. Suleiman Jamiu
- vi) Mr F. O. Adedayo (Director, Monuments, Heritage & Sites)
- vii) Mr P. M. Usman, Secretary

Conclusion

The museum when in place, would collect, document, preserve, exhibit and research on the cultural heritage of Nigeria. It will also engage in translation, preservation and reproduction of rare collections. The researcher in the course of the work made so many findings on how wonderful Islam is. As a practising Christian, the researcher marvels with excitement at the beautiful tenets of Islam and its heritage. This is when the idea of preservation of this interesting revelation and heritage was born. The essence is to use them to educate the people and let them know the good

heritage they have and for humanity at large to learn from. The project is conceived to have the museum of Islamic Art, which will have a library where these books can be kept for research and education. Scholars can come from different parts of the country and beyond to make use of them. It is this study's belief that with proper information through Islamic arts, the tide of religious crisis and misgivings would be stemmed. There would be better appreciation and accommodation of each other's religious beliefs.

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Oral Interviews

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Alhaji L.A.K Jimoh.

Alhaji I. Abdulkareem