

IMPEDIMENTS TO THE GROWTH OF ISLAM IN EKITILAND, KWARA STATE: AN OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the impediments to the growth of Islam in Ekitiland, Kwara State. Although Islam is one of the fastest-growing religions globally, its development in Ekitiland compared to other parts of the state has been significantly constrained by several challenges. The study identified key obstacles such as disunity within the Muslim community, inadequate Islamic knowledge, low levels of Western education among Ekiti-Kwara Muslims, religious practices, and limited political representation. Using historical, analytical, and descriptive research methods, the study revealed that despite Islam's presence in the region for over a century, its practice and institutional structures remain rudimentary compared to other parts of Kwara State. The findings further showed that these challenges have collectively weakened the influence of Islam and hindered its expansion. The study concluded by recommending strategies such as promoting unity, strengthening Islamic and Western education, revitalizing Da'wah activities, and increasing political participation to foster the sustainable growth of Islam in Ekitiland.

KEYWORDS: *Ekiti-Kwara*, Islam, *Da'wah*, Disunity, and Non-Muslims.

INTRODUCTION

Ekitiland comprises two local government areas, namely Ekiti and Oke-Ero, with the headquarters at Araromi-Opin and Iloffa, respectively. Both are among the sixteen local government areas in Kwara state. The people of the area are called Ekiti-Kwara people, and they are a sub-tribe of the Yoruba nation (Samuel, 1960). It is believed that the people of Ekiti-Kwara migrated from Ile-Ife in the same way other *Ekitis* migrated from Ile-Ife. The land covers an area of 918 square kilometres with a population above 100,000 inhabitants. Ekiti local government extends from latitude 7° 45' North in its Northern part to latitude 7° 45' North in its Southern tip and longitude 30° South and 5° East in the eastern reach. While Oke-Ero lies

between latitude 8° 5' 36" in the North and longitude 5° 8' 32" in the East (Mindat, 2023). Both local government areas share common boundaries with Ifelodun, Irepodun, and Edu Local Government Areas to the North and Ekiti and Osun States to the West, as well as Kogi State to the East. Also, to the South, the land shares common boundaries with Ondo State.

Ekiti-Kwara people are of the same origin as the people of Ekiti State. Many traditions have been ascribed to the origin of the Ekiti people. Some scholars believe that Ekiti ancestors migrated from “the Middle East to Ile-Ife, the (fabled) cradle of the Yoruba race from where they spread all over the place to form one of the largest ethnic groups in Yorubaland. While some sources believe that some of the present sub-groups of Ekiti were the aborigines of Ekiti, various traditions of origin also claim that many subgroups or towns migrated to the present location from other Yoruba areas at different times. This seems to receive popular acceptance among some scholars; more so if it is known that the “Ekiti dialect differs, in varying degrees, from one kingdom (town) to another (Femi, 2004). Ekiti-Kwara is a completely homogenous society, made up of different family units within households that were also within districts. All the districts within each town are headed by an *Oba* or king, whose chiefs are usually heads of these districts.

Kwara State is a Muslim dominated state. The growth of Islam manifests in all sixteen (16) local government areas except the Ekiti and Oke-Ero local government areas. Islam is backward in the land under review in many facts; religiously, socially, politically, etc. The paper, therefore, seeks to beam the searchlight on the reasons Islam is not thriving as it is the case in other parts of the state. The paper adopts historical, analytical, and descriptive methods.

FACTORS MILITATING AGAINST THE GROWTH OF ISLAM IN EKITILAND, KWARA STATE

The growth and spread of Islam are apparent since its advent. The introduction of Islam to Nigeria is dated to the 11th century through North Africa via the trans-Saharan trade route to the Kanem-Borno Empire (Balogun, 1969). Despite the long-standing presence of Islam in Kwara state, several challenges are facing the growth of Islam in Ekitiland. This paper aimed to examine the factors militating against the growth of Islam in Ekitiland, Kwara, and to suggest practical solutions for the sustainable development of Islam in the area.

Disunity

Islam canvases for unity among the Muslims. But this is not always the case in any given Muslim community. Ultimately, promoting unity among Muslims requires a commitment to dialogue, tolerance, cooperation, and mutual respect that transcends narrow sectarian interests or ideologies. Islam is a religion of peace and harmony. It is a religion of tranquility and brotherhood among people. Islam teaches unity, which is the most important ingredient for the survival of people on this earth. Islam has placed great emphasis on the development of brotherhood, love, respect, and prosperity among Muslims. Allah (SWT) says:

The believers are nothing but brothers, so make a settlement between your brothers. And fear Allah (SWT) that you may receive mercy. *Sūratu'l-Hujrāt* 49:10.

Unity gives power, strength, and courage in any community or group, and it becomes very difficult for external forces to crush, break, or harm any individual from the united community. People feel strong and secure in those societies and communities where there are fewer conflicts and more understanding.

The Messenger of Allah (SWT), Prophet Muḥammad (S.A.W.) said:

The parable of the believers in their affection, mercy, and compassion for each other is that of a body. When any limb aches, the whole body reacts with sleeplessness and fever [Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhari 5665, Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim 2586].

The above hadith shows the strong relationship among the Muslim brothers. Prophet Mohammad (S. A. W.) has drawn an analogy of brotherhood with the parts of the body, how Muslims need to take care of their brothers, and they must worry if one of them is in pain.

The Muslims in Ekitiland face intra-societal discrimination. For example, some of the Imams see themselves as rivals rather than as integral partners. Struggling for societal supremacy, the ensuing power struggles over who becomes the Chairman of the League of Imam (Quasim Abdulfattah, personal communication, 30th November 2023) and elsewhere are defeating the ideal of a unified purpose. Rather than working together as a common force against their common “enemies,” they engage in clandestine fights while posing as friendly people.

In Oke-Ero Local Government Area, unlike Ekiti Local Government Area, where the chairman of Imams is rotational, one of the Imams decided not to relinquish the chairmanship position when his tenure expired. He claimed that the headquarters of the Local Government Area is situated in his town, so he should be the permanent chairman. He supported his claim with that of the Ekiti Local

Government Area, where the chairmanship is not rotated. There are 10 Imams in Oke-Ero Local Government Area representing all the towns in the Local Government Area. The appointment of the chairman is according to the longest serving Imam after the death of the immediate past Chairman of the League. This event led the 9 Imams to be against the Imam who refused to vacate the chairmanship position. The crises exposed the lapses among the Muslim community in Oke-Ero Local Government Area to the extent that a non-Muslim Oba had to interfere in the affairs of the Muslim community by supporting the Imam from his town who refused to relinquish the position (Quasim Abdulfattah, personal communication, 30th November 2023).

The issue became more escalated and created division among the Imam, and it became one against nine. When the conflict among these Imams could not be resolved locally, it was reported to *Jama'atu-l-Nāsiri-l-Islam*, Kwara State chapter, to settle the dispute (Quasim Abdulfattah, personal communication, 30th November 2023). The issue had not yet been resolved at the time of this research. The dispute among the Imams has also extended to their followers from various towns in the Local Government Area. The Muslims now support their Imam irrespective of who is right or wrong. In the past, the Muslims were united against the external forces of the non-Muslims socially, politically, and economically. But now, Muslims from each town are left to fight and defend themselves from the persecution of the non-Muslims individually.

The case is different in Ekiti Local Government Area. There were conflicts between the Imam of a town in the Local Government Area and his followers. The root of the dispute was that the *Imam* was accused by some local *mallams* of being a tyrant and lacking the etiquette of delivering a sermon on the pulpit every Friday. Whenever there was a conflict between the *Imam* and any of his followers, the incident became the topic of his sermon on the pulpit on Friday, to the extent of raining curses on the person with whom he had the dispute. This continued until one day when the mosque was filled to capacity, and the prayer was about to commence, the congregation deserted the mosque for his family to perform the Friday prayer. Although this issue was later resolved partially, many among the congregation refused to attend Friday prayer. In retaliation, the Imam ordered that the Ekiti Muslims Assembly should not be allowed into the town for Islamic propagation (Musa Aminullahi, personal communication, 2nd December 2023).

Although Islam strongly emphasizes unity, brotherhood, and cooperation as reflected in Qur'ān 49:10 and the Prophetic tradition likening believers to a single

body, the situation among Muslims in Ekitiland, Kwara State, demonstrates how internal leadership crises can undermine these ideals. Rivalry among Imams, competition for influence, and the struggle for positions have generated factions and hostility within the Muslim community. This dispute escalated to the extent that a non-Muslim traditional ruler intervened, revealing the depth of internal weakness and exposing the Muslim community to external manipulation. Similarly, in Ekiti Local Government Area, conflicts between an Imam and his congregation, coupled with the misuse of the Friday pulpit to address personal grievances, fractured the worshipping community and led many congregants to abandon *Jumu'ah* prayer. These tensions have weakened collective solidarity, diminished trust among Muslims, and shifted focus from addressing common external challenges to internal power struggles. Consequently, the once unified Muslim community now experiences fragmentation, reduced cooperation, and declining religious harmony, all of which contribute to the weakening of the bond of brotherhood and solidarity among the Muslims in Ekitiland.

Low Level of Islamic Education

Muslims in Ekitiland do not have adequate knowledge of Islam. Thus, this is really affecting the practice of Islam among the faithfuls. It is so disheartening that the few Muslims in the area have inappropriate Islamic education. Islam places more emphasis on the search for knowledge. Islamic Education implies a thinking system, directly or indirectly, originating from the Islamic values. Islamic education is defined as the nurturing and formation of an ideal Muslim individual whose life is brought to bear on the Islamic ideal intellectually and mentally. The content and methods of the education of an ideal Muslim were closely bound by the ideology of Islam. Abu Salih precisely presented Islamic Education as the nurturing and preparation of the Muslim for his earthly and immortal life (Muhibbuddin, Abu Salih, Migdad, Yalgin, and Abdu'r-Rahman An'Nahlawi, 1982).

The growth of Islam in Ekitiland has been significantly constrained by inadequate Islamic education and the persistence of syncretic practices rooted in traditional Yoruba culture. Although Islam arrived in the area as early as 1882, formal Islamic learning did not take shape until 1989 with the establishment of Anwar-ul-Islam Arabic and Islamic College, leaving over a century during which Muslims had limited access to structured religious instruction. With only a few formal Islamic institutions available, many Muslims lack sufficient knowledge of essential Islamic doctrines and practices, resulting in widespread ignorance and

nonchalant attitudes toward religious knowledge. This weak educational foundation has facilitated the blending of Islamic beliefs with elements of African Traditional Religion, such as participation in traditional festivals, use of charms and amulets, and consultation of fortune tellers, all of which contradict the principles of *Tawhīd* (Muhammad, 2000). The continued influence of cultural practices that conflict with Islamic teachings not only dilutes the religious identity of Muslims in the region but also projects a distorted image of Islam to non-Muslims, undermining effective *Da'wah* and limiting the religion's expansion. Consequently, the combination of weak Islamic education, syncretism, and the dominance of traditional customs poses a major obstacle to the sustained growth and internal consolidation of Islam in Ekitiland, Kwara State.

Traditional festivals are one of the legacies of African Traditional Religion; they are celebrated purposely among others to commemorate historical, cultural, and religious events that are of great significance to the community. These various traditional festivals aim at thanking the divinities and ancestors and soliciting their continued blessing and protection. The festivals are usually accompanied by elaborate rituals, sacrifices, and appeasements, which are referred to as *Irubo*, *Etutu*, and *Ipese*. The *Egungun* festival, for instance, symbolises the traditional belief in life after death. The superstitious belief associated with this festival is that those that died live elsewhere, and this is meant to appease the dead. Some Yoruba Muslims and non-Muslims worship through this festival in the area; this is syncretism (Dioka, 2001). Many of them have the same characteristics and rationale for their celebration. Participation by some Yoruba Muslims in some of these festivals, which have their root in *shirk* (associating partners with Allah (SWT) in worship), is an indication of syncretism. Syncretism is nothing but *Kufr* (Muhammad, 2000). Its presence affects the growth of Islam in that many Muslims may remain nominal who might not be truly faithful in the sight of Allah. More so, it also renders some Muslims to be hypocrites. This is so because they would have their allegiance divided between Islam and ATR (African Traditional Religion). This is bound to have negative implications for Islam in terms of population and strict adherence to its teachings and principles.

There was a significant decline in pupils' enrolment in Arabic and Qur'anic schools, as Western education now attracts most Muslim parents. The proportion of Muslim children attending Islamic schools has dropped sharply compared to those enrolled in conventional schools, with many parents increasingly preferring Christian

missionary schools over the few available institutions that combine Western and Islamic education because there are more competent teachers in Christian schools.

Low Level of Western Education

The educational imbalance between Muslims and non-Muslims in Ekiti-Kwara has significantly hindered the growth and influence of Islam in the region. Historically, the reluctance of Muslim parents to enrol their children in Christian missionary schools created a long-term gap in access to Western education among the Muslim minority. Since formal education became the primary pathway to socio-economic mobility and access to white-collar employment, Muslims who avoided these schools were largely excluded from influential positions in government institutions and professional sectors. This underrepresentation weakened their voice, limited their capacity to advocate for Islamic interests, and reduced their participation in decision-making processes affecting their community. Additionally, the concentration of Muslims in low-income occupations, such as petty trading, hawking, and messenger positions, reinforced negative stereotypes and diminished the social prestige associated with Islamic identity. The limited exposure of Muslim children to modern literacy and administrative skills further constrained the development of strong Islamic institutions capable of responding to contemporary societal challenges. Consequently, the historical mistrust of Western education has contributed to the slow intellectual, socio-economic, and institutional growth of Islam in Ekiti-Kwara, leaving the Muslim minority less empowered to sustain and promote their religious identity in a pluralistic environment. Some Muslims believe that prosperity is attached to religion, which makes them attend crusades organized by the churches.

Political Weakness

The growth and consolidation of Islam in Ekitiland, Kwara State, have been significantly constrained by both educational and political factors. Historically, the reluctance of Muslim parents to enrol their children in Christian missionary schools resulted in limited access to Western education among Muslims. As formal education became the primary pathway to socio-economic advancement and white-collar employment, Muslims who avoided these schools were largely excluded from influential positions in government institutions and professional sectors. This underrepresentation weakened their socio-economic status, reduced their political voice, and limited their capacity to advocate for Islamic interests. Additionally,

Muslims were concentrated in low-income occupations such as petty trading, hawking, and messenger roles, reinforcing negative stereotypes and diminishing the social prestige of Islamic identity. The limited exposure of Muslim children to modern literacy, administrative skills, and institutional knowledge further constrained the development of strong Islamic institutions capable of addressing contemporary societal challenges.

The political marginalization of Muslims in Ekitiland was narrated by a former Muslim councillor who served between 2007 and 2010. He said that during that period, only two Muslim councillors were elected, and that was the first time in the political history of Ekiti local government area that the Muslims would have the highest number of representatives out of ten councillors (Hon. Ishaq Amodu, personal communication, 17th September, 2024). He further said that the attitude of the Muslims in the area towards politics is very poor. Many of them do not participate in politics. Sometimes a Muslim politician will be used to fight another Muslim politician who is a civil servant. He gave an instance of a political leader who decided to seize the salary of a Muslim in an opposition party because the latter did not belong to his political party. Thus, this will allow the non-Muslims to persecute the Muslims politically (Hon. Ishaq Amodu, personal communication, 17th September 2024).

Political marginalization has compounded these educational disadvantages, further hindering the growth of Islam in the region. Despite having historically held various political positions, Muslims remain underrepresented due to their low numerical strength, limited participation, and internal divisions within the community. This underrepresentation restricts access to public resources, such as sponsorships for religious pilgrimages, and limits their ability to protect constitutional rights or advocate for community interests (Alhaji Salih Abdulsalam, personal communication, 1st April 2024). External political interference, including decisions by party stakeholders from Ilorin (Abdulrahman Abdulrasheed, personal communication, 1st April 2024), and the collaboration of some Muslims with non-Muslims against their fellow community members, have weakened collective Muslim influence. Consequently, Muslims in Ekitiland are politically marginalized, restricting their ability to exhibit God's consciousness in governance, promote community development, and strengthen the spread and institutional presence of Islam. Collectively, these educational and political challenges continue to impede the intellectual and religious growth of the Muslim minority in Ekitiland, Kwara State

(Alhaji Salih Abdulsalam, a member of Ekiti Muslim Assembly interviewed on 1st April, 2024).

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the major factors that continue to hinder the growth and practices of Islam in Ekitiland, Kwara State, despite more than a century of presence in the region. The findings reveal that the practice and institutional development of Islam in Ekitiland remain comparatively weak when measured against other parts of Kwara State. The key challenges identified include internal leadership crises, which have significantly weakened collective efforts. Likewise, limited access to formal Islamic learning and the prevalence of syncretic practices undermine doctrinal purity and proper religious understanding. Furthermore, historically low participation in Western education has restricted Muslims from attaining socio-economic and political positions that could advance the interests of their community. These factors collectively contribute to the slow and fragile state of Islamic growth in Ekitiland. It is recommended that Muslim leaders and stakeholders should focus on unity through reconciliation and dialogue to resolve internal conflicts and promote development. Scholars and organizations are urged to strengthen Qur'anic and Arabic education for all ages to improve Islamic literacy and reduce misconceptions. Parents should be enlightened on the value of Western education, supported by scholarships and integrated Islamic-Western schools. Muslims in Ekitiland should engage in politics for fair representation, supported by leadership training. Finally, *Da'wah* efforts must be enhanced through peaceful dialogue, community service, and outreach to correct misconceptions and attract others to Islam.

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