

Unifying the *'Ummah* : A Concise Review of 'Al – 'Ilūrī's Viewpoints in
'Al – Islām 'al – Yawm wa Ghadan fī Nayjiriya

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Abstract

The need to build a united country has been one of the hotly debated issues among Nigerians. Islam as a religion compels unity among Muslims and it is hoped that Nigeria can leverage on the unity amongst the 'Ummah to achieve the desired national unity. Of the proponents of unity amongst the 'Ummah was Shaykh Adam Abdullah 'Al – 'Ilūrī (1917 – 1992); an erudite twentieth century Nigerian Arabic scholar who was honoured by Egyptian Government of Hosni Mubarak with First Class Gold Merit Award in recognition of his enormous contributions to Arabic and Islamic scholarship. Significant sections of one of his works, 'Al – Islām 'al – Yawm wa ghadan fī Nayjiriya were devoted to unification of the 'Ummah. Contentious issues like tribal discrimination in Nigeria, selection of Imam, Muslim women, Friday prayers and sufism were adequately addressed in the work. This paper examined the issues raised as well as the suggestions provided by the Shaykh in the work. The paper discovered that the viewpoints of 'Al – 'Ilūrī could serve as a veritable tool in our attempt to achieve a lasting unity amongst Nigerians.

Key words; 'Al – 'Ilūrī, 'Ummah, Nigeria, Muslims, Viewpoints.

Introduction

In one of his papers, Kilani has drawn our attention to the qualities and responsibilities of ideal scholars. He describes provision of intellectual solution to moral, spiritual and political catastrophes that may engulf the human community as part of their responsibilities¹. The production of 'Al – Islām 'al – Yawm wa Ghadan fī Nayjiriya (*Islam Today and Tomorrow in Nigeria*) by Shaykh Ādam 'Abdullāh 'Al-'Ilūrī appears as his fulfillment of this responsibility of providing solutions to some the contentious contemporary issues, which threaten peaceful co-existence amongst the 'Ummah. His attempt to unite the 'Ummah was not restricted to his viewpoints expressed in the subject of this paper but also in his other numerous activities. He was instrumental to the formation of *Rābitah 'Al-'a'immah*

wal-‘Ulamā’ fī Bilād Yurubā (League of Imams and Alfas) that has the unity among the Imams and Alfas as its main objective. The issue of unity among the *‘Ummah* also found favour in his *Jumu‘ah* sermons, *Tafsīr* and other preaching sessions

Our previous writing on him was an appraisal of a threnody composed on his demise². For the purpose of this paper, we shall review his viewpoints on some contemporary social issues as expressed in his selected writing, concisely. It is the contention of this paper that the views of this grand scholar could serve as ingredients in the quest for national unity and stability

Shaykh Ādam ‘Abdullāh ‘Al-‘Ilūrī (1917-1992) : His Birth and Education

The life and works of this scholar have received the attention of scholars and researchers. A number of books, long essays, dissertations, theses and articles in learned journals have been written on the Shaykh and his works. Shaykh ‘Al-‘Ilūrī was born in 1917 in Wasa village near Zugu in the Republic of Benin formerly, Dahomey. His father was Abdul Baqi. His grandfather and great – grand father were Habibullah and Abdullah respectively. The great grandfather of the Shaykh is reported to have migrated from Oyo to Ilorin just like other inhabitants of Ilorin who also came from different areas and settled till today. His mother Aisha, was a native of Wasa Village in the old Dahomey, now Republic of Benin. She was a daughter of the village head who allowed her to marry Shaykh Abdul Baqi during his stay with him as an itinerant scholar³. Shaykh ‘Al-‘Ilūrī received his early elementary Islamic education from his father, he studied the Qur’ān and other Islamic sciences such as *Fiqh* (jurisprudence) and *Hadīth* (prophetic tradition) from him. He also studied rudimentary knowledge of Arabic language under the tutelage of his father for three years. His father later took him to Ibadan to study under late Shaykh Saliu bn Muhammadi-l-Awwal popularly known as *Esin ni yio biwa*, who was the son of his father’s teacher Shaykh Malik Alawusa. Shaykh Adam benefited in no small way within a short period, he learnt from Shaykh *Esin ni yio biwa* many aspects of Islamic knowledge particularly in the fields of preaching and admonition⁴.

He travelled round Yorubaland and settled at Ibadan with his cousin for some time before he moved to Omi Adio in the south of Ibadan. He polished up his Arabic both at the phonological and graphological levels with his contact in Ibadan and Lagos with the Senegalese, the Arab tourists and also the Lebanese and Syrian traders. He later undertook the study of different Arabic subjects such as *balāghah* (rhetoric), *mantiq* (logic), *falsafah* (philosophy) and *‘al-‘adabu ‘l- ‘arabi* (Arabic literature) from a Kano settler in Yorubaland

Alhajj Ādam Nama'ji. Shaikh Ādam travelled to Cairo by road in 1946 and met some Al-Azhar(University) scholars who, after examining him, awarded him an *'ijāzah* (license to teach) up to secondary level – *marhalatun thānawiyy*⁵.

Shaykh 'Al-'Ilūrī attained his status in scholarship mostly through self – effort by reading and writing. He relates the influence of some scholars who happened to be his role models. He said in one of his books:

Indeed, I obtained different branches of knowledge through my personal efforts and extensive reading, then I gained much from writing and teaching, therefore, I loved the aspect of history like my father, I took the footstep of eminent preachers of my town, and I was motivated into writing books by Wazīr Bida and Adam Namaji of Kano. I derived inspiration to research from As – Sayyūti, Ibn Khaldūn and Al-Ghazzali⁶.

Shaykh 'Al-'Ilūrī, an erudite West African Arabic and Islamic scholar was honoured by the Egyptian Government of Hosni Mubarak with First Class Gold Merit Award in Science and Literature in recognition of his invaluable contributions to Arabic scholarship. He was the proprietor of the popular *Markaz* which was firstly founded at Abeokuta in 1952 and was later relocated to Agege, Lagos in 1955.

The Literary Contributions of 'Al-'Ilurī

Shaykh 'Al-'Ilūrī was not only a teacher, preacher or jihadist but also a prolific writer with substantial literary inputs to his credits. His works feature in the lists of prescribed textbooks in the curricula of Arabic and Islamic studies in many universities in Nigeria and abroad⁷. This scholar has left indelible marks particularly in the field of Arabic and Islamic studies. A prolific writer and sound scholar, Shaykh 'Al-'Ilūrī wrote well over one hundred books, articles and manuscripts in Arabic on Arabic language, literature, Islam and related subjects.. As a prolific writer, Shaykh 'Al-'Ilūrī wrote many books on different topical issues. These books were written mainly to achieve the following aims:

- i. To fulfill his pledge to commemorate the cultural contributions of his predecessors;
- ii. To inform those who were lower than him in information and to alleviate problems of the growing students, and
- iii. To enrich the Islamic thought with valuable pearls and to provide the Arabic libraries with the best intellectual works.

Parts of these books have been written as aid to explain some difficult books; some were written to run commentaries on some ambiguous publications, while some were written mainly as textbooks for the students⁸.

It is obvious that the instinct to promote learning through writing and publication of valuable Arabic texts that would meet the need of the target audience prompted Shaykh 'Al-'Ilūrī to establish Markaz in Abeokuta for easy contact with Jimoh Bamgbola Printing Press, one of the foremost Arabic printing press in the old Western Region of Nigeria established since the late 1940s. In 1968, the Islamic Cultural Printing Press was established in Markaz mainly to publish Arabic texts. This helped the founder a lot in providing books for his students. Even, a number of these books are relevant reference materials for many courses at different levels of higher institutions in the Departments of Arabic and Islamic Studies as well as Religious Studies Department⁹.

Commenting on his works Hamid Olagunju says:

Shaykh Adam has wide knowledge of Arabic. This enabled him to write extensively on the Arabic literature in Nigeria at the time we may say that there was nobody to do such a thing. In fact, people like 'Uthmān bn Fodio, Abdullāhi bn Fodio and others had written a lot on different topics in Arabic language before him, but as for Arabic literature that covers Arabic literature in both Southern and Northern part of Nigeria, he was the first to venture into it¹⁰.

'Al – Islām 'al – Yawm wa Ghadan fī Nayjiriya (Islam Today and Tomorrow in Nigeria)

The book *'Al – Islām 'al – Yawm wa Ghadan fī Nayjiriya (Islam Today and Tomorrow in Nigeria)* is one of 'Al-'Ilūrī's books on Islamic history and culture in Nigeria. It is of 184 Pages in its printed version. Giving the reason why he published the book, he states:

I write this book in response to the request of my friends and acquaintances that I should write on the present and future of Islam as I have written on its past. They are of the opinion that this will definitely complete what I have started in my books- *Islam in Nigeria* and *A Short History of Nigeria* ¹¹.

This 184 pages book is divided into two parts: The contents of these two parts are analysed as follows:

Part 1: Islam: Yesterday and Today in Nigeria

The first part of the book consists of 82 pages (pp.11-93), in the *Muqaddimah* (foreword), Shaykh 'Al-'Ilūrī defines the title of the book and states what prompted the writing the book. It is free from the common openings adopted by the West African Arabic writers who use to start their works with doxology, thanking God, praising the Prophet and introducing albeit in brief, the author of the work. He defines the word '*Ummah*, which could be used for Muslims in a country where there is cultural, linguistic and religious uniformity (such as Saudi Arabia), contrarily he explains that Islamic society refers to the Muslims in a country with multiple cultural and linguistic background (such as Nigeria).

He examines Christianity and western civilization stating that the two are comparable to inseparable twins. He equally treats the role of Christianity in introducing English Language to the Northern Nigeria. From all these submissions, one thing that is notable is the fact that Shaykh 'Al-'Ilūrī appears as an advocate of religious tolerance as his approach to issues relating to Christianity are treated without religious prejudice.

Under politics, he examines the place of Nigeria in the League of Nations saying that she is a nation endowed with natural and human resources, where oil is explored, with arable land and a nation with technological development. He also describes Nigeria as a multi-religious state with three principal religions viz: Islam, Christianity and Traditional religion. He states that Islam is a religion that accommodates politics as its parts and parcel. He traces the issues of Muslims backwardness in politics to their attitude to it in the early days, leading to the early political groups having Christians as their leaders.

He traces the emergence of Islam in Arabia to 570 CE, and to Africa through the Islamic expansion initiated by Umar b. Al-Khattab who nominated Umar b. Al-As to take charge of Egypt and Syria. Umar b. Al-As also nominated Uqbah b. Nafi to islamize North Africa and he came downward until he got to the old Ghana Empire and brought Islam to West Africa. Back at home; he reviews the first Islamic conference of 1948, the founding of Jama'at Nasri 'I-Islam in 1964; biography of Ahmad Bello (1909-1966) and his efforts on Islamic propagation as well as politics He equally discusses the friendship between Ahmad Bello and King Faysal of Saudi Arabia. He writes on Shaykh Gumi and compares his *Da'wah* method to that of Ahmad Bello. He rounds this up by a write-up on Ibn. Fudi's *Da'wah* methods.

Part2. Towards Securing Brighter Future for Islam

This part consists of 86 pages (94-180).Discussions under this section form the core of this paper. Here, the Shaykh discusses some of the issues that generate controversies,

leading to disunity amongst the 'Ummah. The viewpoints of the Shaykh on these issues could serve as panacea and stimulant that will engender unity between the 'Ummah and the nation at large. Of the issues identified by the Shaykh are the following:

Tribalism

The Shaykh identifies the prevalence of inter-tribal hostilities and the desire of one tribe to dominate the other politically and economically as the norms among Africans in the olden days¹². He discusses the unfriendliness that pervades the atmosphere amongst the various ethnic groups in Nigeria with specific reference to the Hausas and the Yorubas in spite of the strong commercial and religious links between the two tribes¹³. He vehemently denounces this attitude and as a matter of priority, he discusses tribalism as the first evil to be removed to unify the 'Ummah and secure brighter future for Islam.

Religious Discrimination

Religious discrimination is one of the issues militating against peaceful co-existence amongst the 'Ummah. The Shaykh particularly identifies and denounces the attitude of a particular tribe in Nigeria, which categorizes the other tribe(s) as infidels¹⁴. Relying on the Qur'an where it says: *So make no pretensions to the purity of your souls. It is He Who knows best who (truly and fully) guards against evil* (Q.53:32), the Shaykh denounces the attitude saying that each tribe has its own forms of traditional and fetish practices, so no tribe is absolutely monotheistic.

While justifying why this negative attitude must be abolished, he queried: *how can we achieve the much desired unity and brotherhood amongst the discriminating tribes?*¹⁵. He opines that peace and unity can be achieved not only within the religious circle but also in the nation as a whole if the negative attitude of self-purification and condemnation of others as infidels plaguing the 'Ummah is replaced with mutual respect¹⁶

Aristocracy

Monopolization of political powers by the certain groups or individuals in the country and ascending positions of authority by heredity are classified under the issues that must be rectified to facilitate unity amongst the 'Ummah. According to the Shaykh, Islam frowns at aristocracy in whatever form it takes¹⁷. To justify his stand, he reiterates that the Prophet entrusted the leadership the 'Ummah to 'Abūbakri (d.634C.E) instead of 'Alī (d.661C.E) who was closer to him in affinity. 'Umar (d.644C.E) also selected a committee of six learned Muslims with the mandate of picking his successor amongst them by consensus, while he refused to include his son Abdullah who was equally a leading scholar during that period.

‘Uthmān (d.656C.E) who was accused of favouritism by the appointment of his relatives thwarted this policy of justice and transparency in the selection of leaders. Aristocracy was bought by Mu‘āwiyah, Yazīd and subsequent administrators in the early days of Islam¹⁸. The evil inherent in this practice was the emergence of leaders who were not sufficiently competent morally and intellectually. He cites instances of manifestation of aristocracy which he considers loathsome, especially in religious circles in Nigeria.

Imamship Selection

Theologically, the prophetic tradition does not leave the *’Ummah* unguided regarding what qualifications should be considered in imamship selection process¹⁹. Selecting an Imam is one of the issues that militate against unity amongst the *’Ummah*. The Shaykh enumerates the qualifications to be considered in selecting an Imam to include Islam, maturity, masculinity and neatness. Furthermore, he states that consideration must be given to the best reciter of the book of Allah, who possesses the best knowledge of *Sunnah*, the one who has precedence over others in the case of emigration who is more advanced in age²⁰. He frowns at the divisive attitude of a particular group within the *’Ummah* who refuse to pray behind an Imam who does not belong to their group biologically²¹

The Shaykh identifies heredity or aristocracy and some of the criteria being smuggled into the qualifications of an Imam in some parts of the country. He equally identifies the intervention of wealthy Muslims in the selection of Imams, in deviance of the qualifications enumerated above²². Narrating the causes of this undue intervention, he points to the financial assistance being provided by the wealthy Muslims as well as the protection they provide for the Muslims from being oppressed by non – Muslims as the tools empowering them to intervene in the administration of mosques and selection of Imams²³ Furthermore, the Shaykh identifies mismanagement of funds due to poor administration of the mosques by some Imams as well as undue contention for appointment as Imams as another reasons for the intervention²⁴

Sufism

Of the contentions issues is the bickering over the classification of sufism as innovation and accusing its practitioners of disbelief. As a just arbitrator, Shaykh ’Al-’Ilūrī calls for mutual understanding between the two groups of Sufis and Salafis stressing that the doctrines of the two groups still remain within the ambit of Islam²⁵. He stresses the

commendable roles of the sufis in the diffusion of Arabic and Islamic scholarships in the country to justify the need to hold them in high esteem ²⁶

While exonerating the sufis from misdeeds and disbelief he describes those accusing them of drawing back the wheel of Islamic progress as transgressors. He acknowledges the positive contributions of the sufis to Islamic propagation since the third century after the *Hijrah* and concludes that though sufism as being practiced elsewhere may not be absolutely free of excesses but in West Africa, the sufis had records of commendable deeds ²⁷

Women Shaykh 'Al-'Ilūrī observes that women constitute more than half of the total world population, and this explains why it is compliant with *Sunnah* for a man to marry more than one wife. He traces the status of women in some cultures and civilizations where women were seen as mere chattels and objects of enjoyment to the extent that there was no limitation on the number of wives married by men. Some married as many as ten women, while some monarchs had more than a hundred wives, all in the service of their husband ²⁸. In Yorubaland, Adebayo observes that Shaykh 'Al-'Ilūrī expresses dismay at the gross misinterpretation of the Qur'ānic verse on polygyny, especially as being practiced in places where some Muslims marry more the approved number of four with the proof that the Prophet was survived by nine wives. Such people take this stand by interpreting the verse: "*marry what pleases you among women two and three and four,*" to mean marrying them to a total number of nine. Shaykh 'Al-'Ilūrī views this interpretation to what he describes as their little understanding of Arabic language, more so that it is illogical to marry two wives at the same time, and then marry another set of three and four at the same time.²⁹

Still on polygyny, Adebayo observes the abhorrence of Shaykh 'Al-'Ilūrī to the argument of marrying more than four wives on the basis of 'retiring' a wife due to old age and replacing her with another without divorcing the aged one, just as the Prophet did with Saudat when he spent her allotted nights with Aishah and yet kept Saudat in his house. He (the Shaykh) submits that such a privilege was given to the Prophet alone and not for the rest of the believers (Qur'an 33:50). He cites an Hadith of the Prophet where a man who embraced Islam but had ten wives was ordered by the Prophet to chose only four among them and divorce the rest ³⁰.

On women education, Shaykh 'Al-'Ilūrī, submits that nothing should prevent women from having access to education. To him, the fact Islam confines women to reside in their houses does not hinder them from acquiring knowledge.³¹ He made references to the prophetic narrations on the vitality of women's education. For instance, Aishah was popularly

known for being intelligent, knowledgeable and she was among the first six companions that reported many *ahadith*³².

One of the controversial issues on women in Islam is their permissibility or otherwise of attending mosques to observe obligatory prayers. Muslim women kept on asking the reason for their denial of attending mosques whereas Christian women and their children were seen on Sundays flocking their churches and places of worship. In addition, there was no sense in denying Muslim women from attending mosques, whereas such women were seen competing with men and rubbing shoulders with men at markets and other social endeavours. This deprivation therefore led to serious query from the womenfolk to know why Islam has denied them this important religious opportunity.³³ He quotes some *ahadith*, among which are those reported by Ibn Umar and Umm Hani, that the Prophet said: “*Do not prevent women from attending the mosque;*” and “*I did not memorise Surat Qaf except from the Apostle of the Prophet with which he used to deliver sermon on the pulpit on Friday,*” respectively.³⁴ He further stresses that the Prophet did not in any way or any time deny women of attending mosques for daily obligatory, Friday and *‘Id* prayers, and so would be outrageous for any jurist to abrogate the Prophetic sayings with his own personal view.³⁵

One of the controversial issues discussed by Shaykh ‘Al-‘Ilūrī is the use of *hijab* by Muslim women. To the Shaykh, there was no controversy on the stand of Islam on women lowering their gaze, Muslim women not going out like those of the *Jahiliyyah* period, that Muslim women should not expose their adornment to men and that they should guard their chastity. However, doing this under the term *hijab* has remained controversial among scholars. In the view of Shaykh, three modes of *Hijab* could be identified. The first is the wearing of *Niqab*, *Niqa’* or *Khimar*. To him the use of veil predated Islam, as the wives of the prophets of Israel used to put it on. Prophet Yusuf as a man who used to wear a veil to prevent women from being disturbed by his excessive handsomeness. In addition to this, the Shaykh believed that wearing of *Niqab* was part of the Arab culture being in vogue before the advent of Islam in the land³⁶.

To conclude his argument therefore, the Shaykh opined that veiling of women was not a demonstration of piety or religiosity by those who put it on, but a means of curbing occurrence of adultery. To him, an effective means of checking adultery was to block instances of loneliness between a man and an unauthorized woman in secluded places, which could neither be attained by mere allowing women to go out only at night, preventing them from going to market, nor from attending mosques.³⁷

Jumu'ah Prayer

The Shaykh identifies the mode of presentation of Friday sermons as other contentious issue. Some scholars, especially the followers of Imam Māliki opine that the sermon must be given in Arabic irrespective of what is the mother tongue of the 'Ummah. The Hanabilites opine that the mother tongue of 'Ummah must be considered. Al – Iluri proposes an harmonization of the two views by saying that presentation should be done in two languages -Arabic and the tongue of the concerned 'Ummah³⁸ citing the Qur'an where Allah says: *And we sent no Messenger but (he spoke) in the language of his people so that he might make (all Our messages) clear to them(Q 14:4)*

Furthermore, he stresses the need to focus current happening in preparing and presentation of sermons in addition to creating a variety of enlightenment and *Da'wah* programmes to boost Islamic understanding among the 'Ummah³⁹

Other Tangential Issues

The Shaykh discusses other issues that are not contentious as addendum to the section being examined. Issues like the need to promote the learning and usage of Arabic because of the nexus between the language and Islam and engagement in literary activities by the practitioners received adequate attention under this section

ConclusionAs an international figure, it is really impossible to pigeonhole the reputable Shaykh, Adam Abdullah Al-Iluri into a particular role or compartmentalize his activities or intellectual contributions to a particular geographical region. The influence of the Shaykh in the promotion of Arabic and Islamic scholarship in Nigeria is enormous. As a matter of fact, hardly can one talk about the twin fields in Nigeria today without reference to the learned scholar. His writings embrace such disciplines as jurisprudence, literature, philosophy, history, sociology and education. One of his writings is *'Al – Islām 'al – Yawm wa Ghadan fī Najjiriya* ,a work of two sections with one of the two sections devoted to the expression of his viewpoints for the entrenchment of peace and unity within the 'Ummah. It is our observation that actualizing these viewpoints could be a veritable tool in entrenching unity between the 'Ummah h and the nation at large

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