

THEOLOGICAL ISSUES IN THE ARABIC VERSES OF YORUBA ‘*ULAMĀ*’:
FOCUS ON *QASĪDAH FĪ ‘T-TAWHĪD* OF SHAYKH ‘ABDUL-LATĪF OWOLABI

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Abstract

The Arabic verses of Yoruba ‘*Ulamā*’ (Arabic scholars) are composed for divergent purposes. A perusal of the thematic range of these verses shows lyricism and didacticism as the two major themes cultivated by the Yoruba Arabic versemakers. Shaykh Abdul-Latīf Owolabi is one of the Arabic poets of Yoruba extraction. Of his contributions is *Qasīdah fī t-tawhīd*, an ode on theology. This study attempted answering questions like: Who is Abdul-Latīf Owolabi?; What served as catalyst for the composition of the *Qasīdah* ?; Of what significance are theological issues in the *Qasīdah*?. The study employed both historical and contextual methods in answering the questions. It discovered the *Qasīdah* as a worthy contribution to contemporary discussions on theological issues. Apart from being a significant contribution to the Arabic/Islamic literary productions of Yoruba *Ulamā*’, the *Qasīdah* shows the creativity of Shaykh Abdul-Latīf Owolabi and it serves as a useful material for the literary historians and critics in documenting the Arabic literary activities in Yorubaland.

Keywords: Abdul-Latīf Owolabi , Arabic verses , Theology, Yoruba *Ulamā*’, Osogbo, *Qasīdah*

Introduction

Of the Yoruba *Ulamā'* who have composed on diverse issues through the medium of Arabic is Shaykh Abdul-Latīf Owolabi. This paper examines, albeit briefly, the life of this scholar with attention paid to his significant contribution to the diffusion of Arabic scholarship in Yorubaland. In spite of being a member of *Zumratul mu'minīn*, a group known for the lopsidedness of its curriculum which works against its votaries in communicating in flawless Arabic, Shaykh Abdul-Latīf Owolabi actually distinguishes himself as a rare breed within the group through his well constructed literary productions.

Qasīdah fī t-tawhīd is one of the literary productions of Shaykh Abdul-Latīf Owolabi. It is one of the poems forming his anthology known as *Fawākihu 't-tulāb fī 'afwāhi 'l-'ahbāb*. It will be cited and translated to English in this paper. Thematic observation on the poem will also be made to facilitate an assessment of the contributions of Shaykh Abdul-Latīf Owolabi to contemporary discussions on theology in Yorubaland.

It is remarkable that the utilization of verses to convey religious messages is not peculiar to Arabic writings in Yorubaland, as the same trait has been observed even in English poetry. Stressing this, Ridler (1963:273) observes that;

...since the expression of man's deepest feelings is always in rhythmic form of some kind we should expect to find a close connection between the religious and poetic impulse...if we look back to the primitive beginnings of any race, however, we see that poetry starts with some practical purpose in mind that can be called religious whether of praise, propitiation or incantation...

Shaykh Abdul-Latīf Owolabi: The Composer of *Qasīdah fī t-tawhīd*

Shaykh Abdul-Latīf Owolabi was born in Osogbo in 1944. An earlier documentation of his life history put the date of his birth at 1946 (Abdul-Azeez and Akinola, 1999:21). However, his current curriculum vitae, the accuracy of which he confirms during our interaction with him puts the date at 1944. According to Folorunsho and Azeez (2005:60), the early life educational activities of this scholar began under the tutelage of his parents who familiarized him with rudiments of Arabic learning. Alhaj 'Abdul-Latif started his primary education at Ibadan at the age of nine and spent eight years in primary school. He passed out in 1961. He then joined a secondary school but he spent just a year at this level owing to his father's poor health.

After his withdrawal from secondary school, his mother who had lived with Shaykh ‘Uthman Lanase and was attracted to Arabic through him, suggested that little Abdul-Latif should be brought to any well-versed Arabic scholar to study Arabic and become a prominent scholar like Shaykh Lanase. He was then brought to Shaykh Abdur-Rashīd Olore of *Zumratul mu’minīn*, under whom he studied different fields of Arabic studies including *Fiqh* (jurisprudence) *Balāghah* (rhetoric) *Arūd* (prosody) *Naqd* (literary criticism) and a host of other disciplines.

Zumratul mu’minīn as an organization embraces the teachers as well as students of a scholarly religious movement believed to have been made prominent in Yorubaland by Shaykh Abdul-Salām Bamidele Bada of Amunigun Ibadan. Kankawi (2016:523) traces the origin of this group to Shaykh Yusuf Abubakri of Agbaji quarters of Ilorin in 1907. Members of this group are easily identified by the turbans on their heads and by their going about in the streets in single file led by a turbaned leader with lyrics of various forms on their lips. Having studied for a period of twelve years under Shaykh Abdur Rashid Olore of Ibadan, Shaykh Abdul-Latīf Owolabi automatically became a member of this movement because his master was a prominent member of the group. His erudition secured the enviable post of *Mufassir* of the movement for him in Osogbo and Olorunda Local Government Areas of Osun State.

Shaykh Abdul-Latīf Owolabi is a prominent itinerant Islamic preacher. He travelled widely and he has been to United Kingdom, United States of America, Ivory Coast and Ghana for Islamic propagation, under the umbrella of Muslim Association of Nigeria. He has trained more than twenty ‘*Ulamā*’ in his Arabic school situated in his residence. He has presented public lectures and participated in debates and symposia on various Islamic issues. He was one of the discussants in *Tafaqqah* a weekly thirty minute program me on Osun Radio.

Shaykh Abdul-Latīf Owolabi has distinguished himself as an erudite scholar despite the fact that he received no formal training in Arabic studies. His works surpass many other literary productions of Osogbo ‘*Ulamā*’ in terms of simplicity of expression coupled with minimal grammatical errors. Some of the original works of Shaykh Abdul-Latīf Owolabi are *Nūrul – Islām* ,*Misbāhu ‘s-salām*, *Fawākihu ‘t-tulāb fī ‘afwāhi ‘l- ‘ahbāb* and *Tashīru ‘l- ‘Akhdarī* .

Qasīdah fī t-tawhīd: Text, Translation and Thematic Observation

Qasīdah fī t-tawhīd is a poem on theological issues. Apart from being a significant contribution to the Arabic/Islamic literary productions of Yoruba *Ulamā'*, the *Qasīdah* undoubtedly shows the creativity of Shaykh Abdul-Latīf Owolabi and it serves as a useful material for the literary historians in documenting the Arabic literary activities amongst the Arabic scholars of Yorubaland. It is one of the poems in *Fawākihi 't-tulāb fī 'afwāhi 'l-'ahbāb* which is a compilation of nineteen poems of multi various genres composed by Shaykh Abdul-Latīf Owolabi. This Shaykh collected the poems into a single volume for easy accessibility and avoidance of the loss of any of the verses he composed on various issues. The collection is also intended to replace the irreligious poems being chanted by Arabic learners at various occasions. The work is printed with copyright reserved for the author. The first edition used for this study was printed in October 1992/ Rabi'u'th -thānī 1413. It contains twenty-nine pages, of nineteen poems .

Examining the poems, one discovers that they are totally devoid of those themes that were common to the poetry of the period of *Jāhiliyyah*. The *Nasīb* (preamble) is not irreligious. Also, the '*Aghrād* (genres) of the *Jāhiliyyah* period like *Fakhr* (self praise) *Hijā'* (satire), *Ghazal* (amatory verse) and *Khamriyyāt* (wine poem) are not contained in the compilation. It also lacks *Rithā'* (elegy) which is a common theme of the poetry of Yoruba '*Ulamā'*. However, it features poems on *Madh* (eulogy), *Murāsalah* (correspondence) *Hikmah* (philosophy) *Ta'līm* (pedagogue) *Dīnī* (religion/asceticism) and '*Istighāthah* (distress appeal)

قَصِيدَةٌ فِي التَّوْحِيدِ

أَوْحَدُ رَبِّي بِلِسَانِي تَكْمَلًا ** وَأَتَيْنِيهُ نَظْمًا لَهُ تَجَمَّلًا
وَأَشْهَدُ أَنَّ اللَّهَ حَيٌّ وَأَنَّهُ ** قَدِيرٌ وَبَارِي الْعَالَمِينَ مُجَمَّلًا
هُوَ الْأَوَّلُ الْأَعْلَى فَلَا شَيْءَ قَبْلَهُ ** وَلَا بَعْدَهُ شَيْءٌ يَكُونُ مُمْتَلًا
هُوَ الْمَلِكُ فِي الدَّارَيْنِ قَدْرًا وَمَنْصَبًا ** هُوَ الْمَالِكُ الْكُلِّ مَكَانًا وَمَنْزِلًا
هُوَ الْعَالِمُ الْغَيْبِ سِوَاءَ لِكَانِبٍ ** فَمَا قَوْلُهُ إِلَّا افْتِرَاءٌ مُضَلَّلًا
يَرَى لَا يُرَى وَهُوَ الْمَهِيْمُنُ قَادِرٌ ** فَأَيْنَ النُّجُومُ وَالْمُنَجِّمُ قُلْتُ لَا

أَلَا إِنَّ رَبِّي عِنْدَهُ عِلْمٌ سَاعَةٍ ** يُنَزِّلُ مِنْهُ الْعَيْثُ دَوْمًا تَنْزِلًا
كَذَا السِّرُّ فِي الْأَرْحَامِ لِلَّهِ وَاضِحٌ ** مِنَ الْجِنْسِ وَالْعُمُرِ مَعَ الرِّزْقِ مُكَمَّلًا
وَيَعْلَمُ مَاذَا يَعْمَلُ الْعَبْدُ فِي الْعَدِ ** وَمَا قَدْ مَضَى بِالْأَمْسِ سَعْيًا وَمَقُولًا
وَيَدْرِي مَمَاتَ الْمَرْءِ مِنْ بَعْدِ عَيْشِهِ ** عَلِيمٌ وَرَبُّ الْعَالَمِينَ تَجَلَّلًا
إِذَا مَا أَرَادَ اللَّهُ شَيْئًا يَقُولُ كُنْ ** لَهُ فَيَكُنْ طَوْعًا وَكَرْهًا مُذَلَّلًا
بِتَوْفِيقِهِ نَالَ الْمَرْيَدُ مُرَادَهُ ** لَدَيْهِ يَكُونُ مَا يُرَامُ مُكَمَّلًا
إِذَا لَمْ يُوَافِقْ مَا يُرِيدُ مُرَادَهُ ** وَجَهْدُ الْمَرْيَدِ عِنْدَهُ كَانَ مُبْطَلًا
ثَبِي كُلُّ خَيْرٍ فِي يَدِي فَضْلٍ رَبَّنَا ** فَثَبِي لِمَنْ شَاءَ الْخَيْرُ تَفَضُّلاً
جَزَاءَهُ بِإِلَّا شَكِّ لِكُلِّ عَبِيدِهِ ** فَذَلِكَ مِنْ جِنْسِ الَّذِي كَانَ عَمَلًا
حَوَى كُلَّ مَجْدٍ يَبْتَغِي بَعْدَ شُكْرِهِ ** وَقَالَ اشْكُرُوا لِي يَا فَرِيْقًا مُثَقَلًا
تَوَكَّلْ عَلَى الرَّحْمَانِ يَا صَاحِبَ الْحِجَى ** يَزِيدُ خَيْرًا مَنْ عَلَيْهِ تَوَكَّلَا
وَمَا زَالَ بَيْنَ الْأَنْبِيَاءِ شَفِيعُنَا ** أَمِينُ إِلَى كُلِّ الْبَرِيَّةِ مُرْسَلًا
لِذَلِكَ فِي الْأَذَانِ يُذَكَّرُ إِسْمُهُ ** وَفِي الصَّلَوَاتِ الْحَمْسِ كَانَ مُؤَصَّلًا
لَقَدْ كَانَ قَبْلَ الْأَنْبِيَاءِ جَمِيعِهِمْ ** وَمَا مِنْهُمْ مَوْءِدٌ إِلَّا بِهِ قَدْ تَوَسَّلَا
صَلَاةً وَتَسْلِيمًا عَلَيْهِ وَأَهْلِهِ ** وَأَصْحَابِهِ وَالتَّابِعِينَ تَجْمُلًا

I affirm the unity of my Lord with my tongue; I emphasize
this and beautify Him with my composition

I testify that Allah is Living and Powerful, the Creator of
generality of beings

He is First, the Most High, nothing was before Him and
nothing after Him is comparable unto Him

Unto Him belongs honour here and hereafter, the Powerful
and the Dignified, the Owner of all places

He knows the hidden, other (god) beside Him is a liar, his
(other god's is nothing but undependable, misleading.

He sees and is not seen, He is a Guardian; powerful where
are the stars and stargazers not existing!

Behold! With my Lord is the knowledge of the hour, from
Him do rain falls constantly.

Also the foetus in the womb is known unto Allah, the sex,
life and sustenance are all known unto Him.

He knows what a servant will do tomorrow and what
emanated from him yesterday – deeds and utterances.

He knows where man will die, the knowledgeable and the
Lord of the creature in general.

If He intends a thing He says “be” to it and it be willy-nilly
in humility.

With Him the seeker achieves his aims; he gets what he
desires in full.

If what he seeks contradicts what He wants for him, the
efforts of the seeker become ineffective.

All good things are on the hands of our dignified Lord, these
He grants unto whom He pleases.

He rewards His servants undoubtedly, in accordance with
individual's deeds.

He possesses dignity and seeks for being thankful unto him,
He said! Thank me, O two great creatures (men and
jinn)

Depend on the Beneficent O wise one, goodness increases
for him who depends on Him.

Among the creatures we have an intercessor, the trustworthy
one sent to all the creatures.

That is why his name is chanted in '*Adhān* (call to prayer) in
the five daily prayers, blessing is sought for him.

He had been in existence before the entire household; none
of them could avoid him as the step.

Blessing and peace unto him and his family, his companions
and the entirety of the followers

Thematic Observation

The *Qasīdah* discusses monotheism (*Tawhīd*) as well as asceticism (*Zuhd*). It declares the absolute unity of Allah by describing Him as the Ever-lasting King, the Most Powerful, the First and the Last. Almighty Allah is described further as the One Who decrees the existence with 'be'. It also features ascetic expressions like dependence on the Almighty Allah (*Tawakkul*). It opens with religious doxology thus: '*I affirm the unity of my Lord with my tongue; I emphasize this and beautify Him with my composition*'

The whole *Qasīdah* is devoted to discussion about the unity of Allah this makes it impossible to divide it into segments because there are no adjuncts or intervening motifs. The uniqueness of this *Qasīdah* is in its being a mono thematic composition, a style that is common to *Qit'ah*. According to 'Al-Hāshimī (n.d., 19), a poem having between three and six lines is described as *Qit'ah*, while the term *Qasīdah* is applicable to a poem of seven lines and more. Whereas a *Qasīdah* deals with one or more themes, Arberry (1965:4) describes *Qit'ah* as an independent poem composed on a specific theme and in a particular context.

It goes from discussing the divinity of Allah to expressing the powerlessness of man in the sight of Allah. It emphasizes the Islamic doctrine of eschatology by stating that '*He rewards His servants undoubtedly, in accordance with individual's deeds*'.

On dependence on Allah as the provider of human needs, the *Qasīdah* in one of its lines states '*Depend on the Beneficent O wise one, goodness increases for him who depends on Him*'. The last four lines of the *Qasīdah* are devoted to extolling the sterling qualities of the Prophet. He is declined as the intercessor, the trustworthy one sent to all the creatures. The last line is devoted to seeking the blessing of Allah Prophet Muhammad. Featuring this invocation at the end of the composition as well the first line is in conformity

with the common features of the Arabic works Yoruba provenance (Abdul-Rahmon, 1995 :315-325)

Conclusion

Shaykh Abdul-Latīf Owolabi is one of the Arabic scholars of Yoruba ancestry who employ their literary productions to disseminate Islamic teachings. His contributions cover a wide range of genres and the writings, in addition to projecting the ideals of Islam, are intended to correct the erroneous impression that only the graduates of modernized Arabic schools could write flawlessly. One of his significant writings is *Qasīdah fī t-tawhīd* , a poem that represents his contribution to contemporary debates on theological issues. The *Qasīdah* is of twenty-one lines, all devoted to discussing Islamic theology, asceticism and eschatology. Other features of the *Qasīdah* that are related to theology include the expression of doxology as its prologue and epilogue respectively

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