Wilberforce Island Review Volume 22, No. 1, December, 2024

The Origin and Development of Islam in Epie-Atissa, Bayelsa State (1078-2023)

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Abstract

This paper explores the history and spread of Islam in the Epie-Atissa clan, located in Yenagoa Local Government Area, Bayelsa State, Nigeria. Despite being the seat of the Bayelsa State Government, the introduction and growth of Islam in the region remain undocumented, creating a gap this study seeks to address. Employing historical, theological, and sociological methodologies, the research relies on oral interviews, published and unpublished materials, and other relevant sources. Islam was introduced to the area in the early 19th century through traders and migrants from Northern Nigeria. Initially, the religion was practiced exclusively by these Northern settlers engaged in commerce. However, the formal establishment of Islam in Epie-Atissa began in 1978, when two missionaries arrived in Yenagoa to build mosques, establish Islamic schools, and expand membership. Collaborating with a retired army officer from the region who had converted to Islam during his military service in Northern Nigeria, the missionaries succeeded in laying the foundation for Islam's growth. Since then, the religion has flourished, with numerous mosques and Islamic schools established across the area. Over time, many indigenes have embraced Islam, and its influence has spread beyond Yenagoa to other parts of Bayelsa State. The establishment of Islam in Epie-Atissa has brought significant benefits to the community. The study concludes by recommending that the indigenes continue to engage actively in Islamic religious activities, emphasizing the peaceful propagation of its tenets to ensure that more people benefit from the values and teachings inherent in the faith.

Introduction

This paper examines the origins and growth of Islam in Epie-Atissa, a community located in Yenagoa Local Government Area, Bayelsa State. Bayelsa State, carved out of the old Rivers State, comprises Brass, Yenagoa, and Sagbama Local Government Areas. Its name, *Bayelsa*, is an acronym derived from the initials of these local government areas: BALGA (Brass), YELGA (Yenagoa), and SALGA (Sagbama) (Ogbotobo, 2013).

Islam, a monotheistic religion founded by the Prophet Muhammad through divine revelation, is practiced globally and widely observed in Northern Nigeria. While its presence in southern Nigeria, including Epie-Atissa, is less prominent, the history of its introduction and development in the region has been sparsely documented. This study addresses this gap by tracing the trajectory of Islam in Epie-Atissa and its surrounding areas.

The introduction of Islam to Epie-Atissa can be traced to the early 19th century. Despite its long-standing presence, no comprehensive research has been conducted to document the religion's origin, growth, and spread in this community and its environs. This study seeks to fill this void by exploring and documenting the historical, cultural, and social dimensions of Islam's establishment and development in Epie-Atissa.

The researcher employed historical, theological, and sociological methodologies to guide this inquiry. Data were collected through oral interviews, consultations with unpublished materials, and reviews of published works and library resources.

Islam has significantly influenced the lives of many Epie-Atissa indigenes. Notable changes include the adoption of the Islamic practice of praying five times daily, the wearing of the hijab by female converts, the cultivation of long beards by male adherents, and the cultural and religious aspiration of performing the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca. Furthermore, the study highlights the impact of Islamic education, including the ability to read, write, and speak Arabic, and the integration of Islamic values into the community's cultural fabric.

Despite its profound impact, the historical and developmental narrative of Islam in Epie-Atissa has remained largely undocumented. This study endeavors to bridge this gap by providing a comprehensive account that will enrich the body of knowledge on the subject. The findings aim to serve as a foundational resource for further research and a vital contribution to understanding the dynamics of religious transformation in the region.

Islam in Epie-Atissa

Islam is a religious tradition founded by prophet Muhamad born on a Monday 12thRabil-Awal571 AD in Mecca, who belong to the family of Quraysh, a branch of Ishmealite family (Kilani 2006: 88). It was a religion revealed to prophet Muhamad, on a night toward the end of Ramadan. Muhammed was then Forty years old and where it was revealed to him was in the cave of Hira. It has its headquarters in the city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia.
Islam is predominantly found in the northern part of Nigeria, with a significant Muslim minority existing in the southern part of the country. It has an estimated population in the world of about 53:5%. Islam came to Nigeria in the 11th and 12th centuries through trade, migration, travels and through the mystic scholars along the trans-Saharan trade routes. The religion came first, through the regions of Kanem and Bornu emirates to Nigeria who had contact with the Muslim traders as early as the 19th century. Presently the estimated population of Muslims in Nigeria is about 41.1 million. It has been estimated that by 2030, it is population will be in the neighborhood of 116.8 million adherents in Nigeria. Most Northern States in Nigeria practice the Sharia law while the rest of the country is governed by secular law, (Ikilani 2006).

However, Islam came to Yenagoa the capital of Bayelsa State, which is situated in Epie-Atissa the confine of, the area of our study in the 20th century through commerce, that is Northern traders and migration. At first the religion was mainly practiced in Epie-Atissa by traders and merchants who were mainly of Hausa origin, that is from the Northern part of Nigeria. Then, it was regarded as Hausa religion by the aborigins of Epie-Atissa clan, but soon, it spread to other communities in the suburb and even beyond. Presently, Islam could be found in all parts of Bayelsa state but with the concentration more in locations like Nembe, Akassa, Okpoma, Brass to mention but a few. The Epie-Atissa people were

initially resistant to Islam, but with time, they began to adopt it and incorporated it to their culture.

The Historical Evolution of the Epie-Atissa People's Relationship with Islam

The Epie-Atissa, or Yenagoa land, is a multicultural region that accommodates three major religious practices in Nigeria: African Traditional Religion, Islam, and Christianity. While the coexistence of these faiths is generally peaceful, historical records (e.g., Abubakar, 1992) highlight instances of confrontation between adherents of Islam and followers of traditional beliefs in various parts of Nigeria. This dynamic is mirrored in the Epie-Atissa area, where Islam, though recognized as a legitimate religion, has faced challenges aligning with the community's traditional practices and worldview.

Before the advent of Islam, the Epie-Atissa people engaged in traditional religious practices, including ancestral worship, belief in divinities, spirits, magic, sorcery, and divination. When early Muslim missionaries arrived in the region, they preached against these customs, resulting in initial resistance to Islamic doctrines. Over time, however, the Epie-Atissa embraced Islam due to perceived similarities between their traditional values and Islamic principles, particularly the emphasis on equality, brotherhood, and mutual respect.

Similarities Between Epie-Atissa Traditional Religion and Islam

The eventual acceptance of Islam in Epie-Atissa was facilitated by shared values between the two belief systems. Both traditions emphasized:

1. **Equality and Brotherhood**: Islam teaches the unity of humanity as creations of Allah, which resonated with the egalitarian ethos of the Epie-Atissa.
2. **Charity and Generosity**: Acts of giving and sharing wealth align with traditional practices.
3. **Respect for Personal Opinions**: Mutual respect and dialogue were pivotal in bridging cultural gaps.
4. **Use of Protective Symbols**: The use of amulets or traditional medicine in Epie-Atissa found parallels in Islamic protective practices.
5. **Moral Standards**: Both systems uphold high ethical values and community responsibility.

The Spread of Islam in Epie-Atissa

Initially, Islam was practiced in Epie-Atissa primarily by Hausa traders. From the early 20th century, however, the religion began to take root among the indigenous population. The significant turning point came in the 1990s with the arrival of two Islamic missionaries, Suleiman Roland from Obogoro in Atissa Clan and Isa Alagoa from Nembe, both indigenes of Bayelsa State. These missionaries sought to establish Islam in Yenagoa, the modern capital of Bayelsa State.

They faced initial hurdles, including the absence of a mosque and a local Muslim community. Their efforts were supported by Izibevie Sinime, a retired military officer from Obogoro who had embraced Islam during his service in Northern Nigeria. With assistance from Sinime's mother-in-law, Mrs. Harvest Abody Otobo, they secured a property on Harbour Road in Yenagoa, which became the first mosque in the metropolis. Over time, as the number of converts grew, larger facilities were established to accommodate the burgeoning Muslim community.

The Early Converts

The first indigenous converts in Yenagoa included notable individuals such as Mrs. E. Ogbobio (Ijaw), Monovie Figilo (Yenagoa), Izibevie Idris (Epie), Mr. Christopher Agumagu (Yenagoa), and Kpasikorumozibe (Epie). Converts from other ethnic backgrounds also played a role, including Mr. Kalilulia Ibrahim (Igbo) and Mr. Boro Idris (Southern Ijaw).

Core Beliefs and Practices of Islam

Islam centers on the worship of Allah, the one true God, with key beliefs including:

- **Monotheism**: Submission to Allah's will is the foundation of faith.
- **Angels and Prophets**: The belief in divine messengers like Gabriel and prophets such as Noah, Abraham, and Jesus.
- **Judgment and Afterlife**: Adherents anticipate the Day of Judgment, eternal bliss in paradise for the righteous, and punishment in hell for the wicked.
- **The Five Pillars**: Profession of faith (Shahada), prayer (Salat), charity (Zakat), fasting (Sawm), and pilgrimage to Mecca (Hajj).

Ethics in Islam emphasize Allah's consciousness and universal brotherhood, fostering harmony and mutual care within the Muslim community.

Development and Growth of Islam

Islam's growth in Epie-Atissa was driven by its peaceful practice, contrary to initial misconceptions about its nature. Early adherents demonstrated values of tolerance, humility, and respect, debunking myths about Islam as a violent religion. Today, the religion continues to thrive in Yenagoa and surrounding communities, reflecting its integration into the cultural and spiritual fabric of Epie-Atissa society:

> They found out that Islam is a peaceful religion and its teachings and practices are good, Mr. Suleiman that is, himself and us had to look for a spacious place that can contain the teaming population of the adherents, hence, we went to Government house Yenagoa, to meet with the government of the day to give us a piece of land, and also solicited for financial assistance with which we intend to use to build a mosque. The government gave us a financial support of One Million Naria and with the little that the devotees could generate from peace

> offering, we got a spacious land at Obogoro community and built a mosque and that happened to be the first Central place of worship in Yenagoa city and its environs.

Obogoro happen to be one the community the pioneer converts of Islam Mr. Izibevie Ogbotobo in Bayelsa State. The mosque in question was built in the year 2010. Today, Islam has spread beyond Epie-Atissa, it has spread to all other parts of Bayelsa State. We have about 13 mosques spread all over the Epie Atissa clan, they are located at the following places; Arietalin Road (1), Ovom, Yenagoa (1) Ekeki (1), and this happens to be the current central mosque in Yenagoa City, (Suleiman Abudlahi Oral Interview), INEC Road, (1) Swali Community (1), PDP Road, Yenizue-engene (1) 16thAirforce Brigade Headquaters Elebele Road, Yenagoa (1) Tombia Round-about (1) Navy Camp, Agudama-Epie (1), Igbogene Community (1), Opolo Junction, Opolo Community (1) and Lastly Obogoro community (1).

In other Local Government Areas in Bayelsa State, we have the presence of Islam in all parts of the State but its concentration are more in about three Local Government Areas. This is outside Yenagoa, the capital of Bayelsa State and Mosques for its worshippers located in each of them. They are Nembe Local Government Area (2) located at Nembe Basambiri and Nembe Ogbolomabiri, Ogbia Local Government Area, (2) located at Imiringi and Otueke communities respectively.

In Brass Local Government Area, we have (2) worship places for the believers of the Islamic religion and they are located at Okpoama and Kula communities. (Alhaji Jubril Oral Interview).

The Population of Muslims in Bayelsa State presently is extimated at 24% of the entire population of the State including no- indigenes which amounts to about 35 thousand adherents.

The Profound Influence of Islam on the Epie-Atissa People

The Islamic religion has profoundly shaped the lives of the Epie-Atissa people, leaving an indelible mark on their culture, economy, religion, and political landscape. The transformative impact of Islam is evident in various aspects of life in the region, tracing its origins to the efforts of pioneers such as Sheikh Abdula Azeez Saliu, who played a pivotal role in fostering its growth and acceptance.

The Genesis and Expansion of Islam

Initially introduced to the Epie-Atissa community by two individuals, Islam has grown significantly over time. Sheikh Abdula Azeez Saliu, a key figure in this expansion, established Zawiyas and Islamic schools within local mosques, facilitating access to Islamic education. His efforts also led to the creation of the Bayelsa State Islamic Council, which united Muslim groups across the state and promoted cooperation among adherents.

His contributions to fostering harmony and understanding within the Muslim community have been critical in ensuring the religion's enduring presence in the region.

Economic Contributions

Economically, the introduction of Islam has spurred considerable development among the Epie-Atissa people. One notable achievement is the establishment of an Islamic bank in Yenagoa, which provides financial assistance to adherents and traders. Offering interest-free loans without requiring collateral, this bank has uplifted many individuals economically.

Muslims from northern Nigeria, who form a significant portion of the Islamic community in Yenagoa, engage in various trades, including petty trading, water vending, and operating *keke* (tricycle taxis). Their economic activities have bolstered the local economy through rent payments, purchases of goods, and services from indigenous Bayelsa traders. These economic exchanges have created a mutually beneficial relationship between the Muslim community and the Epie-Atissa people, enhancing the overall financial stability of the region.

Political Influence and Peacebuilding

Islamic organizations have significantly contributed to political stability and peacebuilding within the Epie-Atissa community. During moments of tension, such as the tragic incidents involving a *keke* driver and a military altercation in 2002, Muslim leaders played crucial roles in brokering peace between the Muslim and indigenous communities. Their efforts, in collaboration with state government officials, were instrumental in preventing reprisals and restoring harmony.

Muslims in Bayelsa State have also become an influential political force. With their numerical strength, particularly in Yenagoa, they have contributed to the election of political representatives in the Bayelsa State House of Assembly and other legislative bodies. Politicians frequently seek support from the Muslim community during campaigns, underscoring their growing political significance.

Prominent Muslim figures with Bayelsa roots, such as Alhaji Asari Dokubo, have also played roles in political activism. His advocacy for resource control and the rights of the Ijaw people reflects the intersection of Islamic identity and political engagement within the state.

Religious and Cultural Impact

Islam's cultural influence is deeply embedded in the fabric of Epie-Atissa society. The integration of Islamic values into traditional attire, such as the *Woko* and *Etubo*, exemplifies this cultural synthesis. Garments now feature Islamic symbols and inscriptions, including "Bismillahi" (In the name of Allah), reflecting the growing prominence of Islamic aesthetics.

Additionally, the adoption of Arabic names and phrases among converts has become widespread. Names like Dauda, Ali, Musa, and Isah are now common, and Arabic greetings have gained popularity. The younger generation has shown a heightened interest in learning Arabic, leading to its increased presence in local signage and documents, particularly among Muslim traders.

Islam has also influenced personal attire, with many converts embracing the flowing gowns traditionally associated with northern Nigerian Muslims. These shifts highlight the profound cultural transformation driven by the spread of Islam.

Religious Syncretism and Continuity

While Islam has left an indelible mark on the Epie-Atissa people, it coexists with traditional beliefs in a dynamic and syncretic manner. Many adherents continue to practice traditional rituals and ceremonies alongside their Islamic faith. Elements of indigenous spirituality, such as the use of traditional medicine and belief in spirits, have been incorporated into an Islamic framework, showcasing the fluidity and adaptability of religious practices in the region. The Islamic religion has undeniably enriched the lives of the Epie-Atissa people, influencing their economic, political, cultural, and religious spheres. From fostering economic empowerment and political participation to reshaping cultural identities and encouraging interfaith harmony, Islam has become a vital part of the Epie-Atissa community's identity. Its enduring legacy is a testament to the resilience and adaptability of both the religion and the people who have embraced it.

Conclusion

This study has meticulously traced the origins and development of Islam among the Epie-Atissa people from 1978 to 2023. Islam, a faith rooted in submission and surrender to Allah, initially entered the Kanem and Borno regions of Northern Nigeria through the vibrant exchanges of trade. However, its consolidation within the Epie-Atissa community began in earnest in the early twentieth century. Over the decades, the religion has flourished, extending its reach across the study area and into other parts of Bayelsa State.

The impact of Islam on the Epie-Atissa people has been profoundly positive, reshaping their socio-cultural, economic, and political landscapes in transformative ways. The efforts and activities of its adherents have left an indelible mark on the community, fostering unity, progress, and intercultural dialogue. It is not an overstatement to assert that the advent of Islam in the region has been a blessing, enriching the lives of its people rather than detracting from them.

From the perspective of academic contribution, this study adds a significant chapter to the body of knowledge on Islam's influence in the Epie-Atissa area and Bayelsa State at large. By documenting the historical trajectory, cultural integration, and socio-political impact of Islam in this unique context, it offers a valuable resource for future scholarship. Thus,

this work stands as a testament to the enduring legacy of Islam and its role in shaping the identity of the Epie-Atissa people.

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