

Historical Overview of the Socio-Religious Activities during the Month of Ramadan in Ilorin in the 20th Century

Adeshina Lukman,

Department of History and International Studies,
Faculty of Arts, University of Ilorin, Ilorin.

Abstract

Ramadan as one of the pillars of Islam played pivotal roles in the socio-religious life of Muslims. It is an interesting culture and way of life of Muslims because of the variety of socio-religious practices that make the month historic. Ilorin being a Muslim stronghold welcomes Ramadan with joyous mood because of the numerous socio-religious activities and the economic impacts of the month on the residents of Ilorin as a whole. Ramadan in Ilorin in the 20th century was full of activities starting from the preparations for its arrival with the middle-age pupils building symbolic mosques, washing or buying new food serving plates by women. The sighting of the crescent and commencement of Ramadan was announced by the Emir of Ilorin through his servants by beating royal drum and trumpet round the city, signifying the Emir's authority to start fasting. This paper examines the various socio-religious activities of Muslims in Ilorin during the month of Ramadan in the 20th century with emphasis on socio-religious activities in the morning, evening and night. It will also examine the economic impacts of Ramadan in Ilorin. The method of research and information gathering used are secondary source and primary source mostly derived from interviews conducted with Islamic clerics, old and young men and women in Ilorin community.

Introduction

As a culture is said to be the set of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors shared by a group of people, so also Ramadan itself is an interesting culture and way of life among Muslims because it comes with a variety of socio-religious activities that make the month historic. In Ilorin, Ramadan was welcomed with joy as this could be seen in peoples' mood with its attendant activities to mark its arrival. The socio-religious activities during the month of Ramadan in the 20th century in Ilorin started with the preparation for its arrival such as the preachings by the Islamic clerics to spiritually prepare for the month. The children would build mud mosques where they observed their night obligatory night Ramadan prayers. The royal drum and trumpet (Kakaakin) were sounded round the city to announce the sighting of the crescent and commencement of the fasting. Early in the morning

of Ramadan, people would be beating drums to wake the Muslims up for *saari* (early morning eating). This drum beating was often accompanied with songs from one house or street to another. Religiously, people trooped out in large number at night to listen to sermon from popular or notable Islamic scholars in different parts of Ilorin. The small boys in the evening engaged in an activity referred to as *Epa kuta* game (Bambara nut game). It was an exciting game among young boys in Ilorin during Ramadan.. However, these socio-religious activities, which have become cultural practices of the people, are now phasing out in Ilorin community due to civilization, innovations and security challenges amongst others. This paper therefore, seeks to show these rich socio-religious practices of the people of Ilorin community during Ramadan which should not be allowed to go into extinction.

Islam and Ilorin Community

The population of Ilorin was largely consisted of adherents of African Traditional Religion up to the beginning of the 19th century and this could be substantiated by the assertion that Sheikh Alimi could not remain in Ilorin on his first visit because it was land full of idolaters¹.

However, Islam played an essential role in the transformation of Ilorin in the 19th century. "This transformation began ever before the establishment of an Emirate due to the presence of Solagberu and al-Salih (Sheikh Alimi) in Ilorin on one hand and slave revolt of 1817 on the other"². Islam was present in Ilorin and other parts of Yorubaland for centuries, but was not yet accepted and wide spread as further north in Hausaland³. The Islamic preachers, therefore, urgently faced the task of how to spread and increase the influence of Islam.

Between 1817 and 1823, Ilorin got its acceptability as an entity from the title of Aare Ona kakanfo which Afonja derived from the old Oyo kingdom and Al-Salih's spiritual authority⁴. But after 1823, Ilorin's legitimacy was derived from her status as the "Emirate of the Yarba" (Yoruba) and the legitimate status was confirmed by Gwandu in 1829 with instruction that the Emir should not deviate from the goals of spreading Islam⁵. It was in this wise that all the Emirs of Ilorin in the 19th century paid a considerable attention to the uplift of Islam in various ways most especially through spreading of Islam as exemplified by the various expeditions of Emirs Abdul-Salam, Shitta, Zubair and Aliyu⁶. The attention given to Islam within Ilorin was attested to by almost all the Christian missionaries who visited the town at different times in the 19th century. W.H. Clarke of the Baptist Mission was impressed by what he saw in Ilorin between 1855 and 1858 during the Ramadan⁷.

As part of efforts to improve the state of Islamic practice in Ilorin, Emir Zubair (1860 -1868) was the first to ban idol worship in the Emirate⁸. The fact that other non-Islamic festivals and rituals were not reported in Ilorin in most of the 19th century account is an indication that non-Muslims did not practice their religion in public⁹, and this of course was seen as compliance with the directive of Emir Zubair. The extent of islamisation of Ilorin in the 19th century is shown by putting the estimated number of mosques in 1893 at three thousand¹⁰. Campbell in 1859 identified few Islamic schools (Ile Kewu) in Ilorin and notable among them was the one founded by Sheikh Abu Bakri Bube. He founded a school in Gambari ward of

Ilorin¹¹. There was also a Quranic school founded by Sheikh al-Nafawi who reportedly arrived in Ilorin in the 1840s. These scholars had students who also became prominent in Islamic learning. Some of these students were Sheikh Musa of Okelele, Imam Habibulahi Bature and Sheikh Suleiman Jeje¹².

The visits of Reverend T.J. Bowen and Bishop Ajayi Crowther at different time with the aim of establishing Christian mission stations in Ilorin were unsuccessful as Emir Shitta and Aliyu refused to grant their requests for mission stations in Ilorin¹³. It should be stressed that “the Emirs of Ilorin in the 19th century treated the demands for the opening of a Christian mission station in Ilorin with utmost caution though they appeared friendly to the Christian religious leaders but they through tact rejected their requests”¹⁴. The Emirs’ consistent position against the preaching of Christianity was not borne out of hatred for the Christians, but as Emirs, it was their duty to prevent religious competition in the Emirate and this is a position that was in consonance with Danfodio’s directive when the Sokoto Caliphate was established¹⁵. The attitude of the Emirs was a good example of religious tolerance which has had a lasting impact on the Ilorin polity for it gave Islam in Ilorin a dual feature i.e religious and cultural, a feature that is jealously guarded in Ilorin till the present time¹⁶.

Preparation for the Arrival of the Month of Ramadan

As the month of Ramadan approached, several socio-religious activities took place, all of which were geared towards the preparation for the holy month. The general public would be in a festive mood in preparation for the month. This was due to the fact that majority of the people of Ilorin are Muslims, the in-coming Ramadan then became talk of the town. Buying and selling would increase as foodstuffs would also be bought in large quantities for this period.

Announcements were made through different means and medium. Islamic scholars would also center their sermons on the essence and greatness of the holy month, clerics would start urging Muslims to be prepared spiritually and not only prepare for Ramadan by stocking their homes with foodstuff but by purifying their hearts to usher in the holy month because the essence of the fasting is to make the Muslims closer to Allah, thus, preparations should be towards getting their hearts ready for that¹⁷. The married women on their own, as part of the preparation for Ramadan, did clean most of the plates they have stored away and some would get new sets of various plates that suited different dishes¹⁸.

Apart from the above, many mosques would engage in various acts of renovations by beautifying the mosques and getting every other essential and necessary facilities, such as re-painting, old carpets replacement with new ones, and some would plaster their mosque, all these were done just to accord the holy month the recognition it deserves¹⁹. In addition, there was a special tradition in Ilorin during Ramadan in which the Muslims of younger age built their own local mosques of various types; they sometimes got assisted by the adult and elderly ones in their various communities. These mosques were made of clay and were in most times beautified and painted white (as seen picture 1 and 2). Among

themselves, they chose who would be the Imam and also delegated various duties to one another²⁰.

It was also noticed that towards the commencement of Ramadan, young children were seen with used tin milk containers which they would be scrubbing on a cemented floor so as to remove the top cover, this was very common then when people were preparing for Ramadan, the opened tin containers were used to prepare *moin-moin* (beans cake) which was a common food along with *eko* (pap) during Ramadan fasting in Ilorin in the 20th century.

Sighting of the Crescent and Commencement of Ramadan

The sighting of the crescent preceded the commencement of Ramadan fasting and it has been the subject of controversy among the Islamic clerics. Al-Ilory in his neo-*ijtihad* put up the argument that the new crescent could never be universally sighted at a single period of time as a result of natural differences in the rising and setting of the sun which have great effect upon the season and climate of a particular environment. As a result of this unavoidable circumstance, there was high tendency of discrepancy concerning the commencement and termination of the Ramadan fasting in Nigerian environment²².

Ilorin being an Islamic city was not exempted from all this discrepancy, a lot of controversies did come up, but most times the responsibility fell on the Emir of Ilorin to announce the sighting of the crescent (moon). The Sultan of Sokoto is the head of all Nigerian Muslims who has the overall authority on the announcement of moon sighting and commencement of Ramadan fasting in Nigeria. After sighting the moon, the news would be passed down to the Emir of Ilorin who would make it known to the Ilorin populace. Generally, when the moon was sighted, they usually sounded a royal drum and a trumpet called *Kakakin* around the city to announce the sighting of the moon and thus indicated the commencement of Ramadan fasting, in the other way round, the drum and *Kakakin* trumpet would also be sounded to indicate the end of Ramadan²³.

Socio-Religious Morning Activities during Ramadan in Ilorin

One major activity worthy of being documented and which other morning activities revolved around was the *Saari* known as *suhur* in Arabic (pre-dawn breakfast). *Saari* is a corrupted word from Arabic word *sahur*, which was an act of waking people up between the hours of 2:00am and 5:00 am to eat before the morning call to prayer. During the interval of these hours, people would be seen with drums which they had bought for the purpose of waking people up to eat. This act of waking people up with drum beating was often accompanied with series of songs, some Islamic songs and others of different kinds, going from one house or street to another²⁴. This historic act of waking people up with *weere* songs other than Islamic resulted in a situation whereby a lot of music talented people were discovered. These people later chose music as their careers. For instance, late Baba Miliki, Alhaji Baba Olobi, Easy Kabaka, Saka Danfo, Majesta and Alhaji Aremu Alade-owo amongst many others who became popular musicians in Ilorin in the late 20th century were discovered from the *weere* music that was

sang while waking people up for *Saari*²⁵. It was observed that many people would not sleep after waking up for *Saari* but rather they started with the early morning religious activities such as Quranic recitation in different mosques while some people would go for *Tafsir* i.e listening to Quranic commentary at the Emir's palace which was led by the chief Imam of Ilorin or in some other places from notable Islamic clerics in Ilorin²⁶.

Socio-Religious Activities in the Evening and at Night during Ramadan

In the month of Ramadan, series of socio-religious activities took place but it should be known that all these activities if not practiced, would not invalidate the people's fasting, rather they were all there to add more value to the holy month. Ilorin generally is known for its innate trait of appreciating and fashioning Islamic religious activities in a social way being that the city is a Muslim city, and Ramadan is of the one major binding social phenomenon that facilitated and enhanced the people of Ilorin's unity.

In the evening, small boys engaged in a social activity called *Epa kuta game*, this was a game very common during Ramadan in Ilorin in the 20th century. The social activities therein were very interesting because the excitement was well seen in the faces of its players while playing it. Apart from the excitement, the game was also emotional²⁷. The *Epa kuta* is a leguminous seed known as Bambara nut in agricultural science, it is also called "Boroboro" in Ilorin. The game was played by two contestants; the object of the game was the *Epa kuta*. In playing the game, a hole was dug in the ground with two sloppy sides, each player took position at the sides of the hole with a number of the *Epa-kuta* i.e Bambara nut, a contestant would roll a nut at the top of the sloppy side and hit it with little force, by this, the nut rolled along the sloppy side into the hole, the second contestant would also do the same. A winner emerged if his nut drop on top of another seed in the hole, his reward for that feat was that all the seeds in the hole became his, this process would continue till when a contestant exhausted all his *Epa-kuta* seeds and that contestant automatically became the loser because he has no more seed to play with²⁸.

Apart from the above, another common practice in Ilorin during Ramadan was the one popularly known as *lohilo* among small boys of 15 years old age downward. They moved at night from one area to another, visiting one house after the other praying for people and in return were given money and food²⁹. In most cases they kept the money given to them till after Ramadan before they share it among themselves. These boys went round the town in those days praying in a singing pattern as thus:

'Lohilo llahuwa
iya mi lohilo llahuwa
baba mi lohilo llahuwa
emi gungun, alafia
ti owo ti omo ni ode de re
iwoyi emi, alhaji le maa je

*iwoyi emi, alhaja le maa je
Loilo llahuwa³⁰.*

Its translation goes thus:

*'there is no deity worthy of worship except Allah,
mother, I bear witness that Allah is one,
father I admit that there is only one God deserved to be worshipped,
long life and sound health, I bear witness that Allah is one,
by this time next year may you be blessed with abundant prosperity,
by this time next year may you become Alhaji,
by this time next year, may you become Alhaja,
there is no other deity worthy of worship except Allah'*

People also came out in large number at night to listen to sermon from different clerics as part of religious activities in places like Ode Alfanda, Masingba, old and new Ilorin Central mosques and other parts of Ilorin metropolis³¹.

Socio-Religious Activities to Mark the end of Ramadan

One major social and popular event organised to mark the end of Ramadan was the one generally referred to as 'challenge', especially in the 1970s up to the early 1990s. It was a musical competition whereby all those that have musical talent would gather in front of the Emir's palace to show case their talents³². It usually took place at night preceding the Eid-1 Fitr day i.e Ramadan festival day. The kind of music that was featured at the 'challenge' for competition was *weree* music that initially sung to wake people up for early morning eating in Ramadan called *saari*, as previously explained. This kind of music which was popular in other Yoruba towns like Ibadan and Lagos later metamorphosed into Fuji music³³.

However, the music competition was condemned and described as un-Islamic by the clerics. This condemnation later resulted into its cancellation and replacement in the 1990s with various religious activities such as reading of Quran, Islamic poetry, sermon and verbal discussion on major issues affecting Ilorin community as whole³⁴.

Impacts of Ramadan in Ilorin

In the month of Ramadan, there were changes in the economic activities in Ilorin as it was discovered that fruits and beverages as well as foodstuffs like Rice, Beans, Yam flour, and Maize along with food ingredients were in high demand. Certain increase was noted on the prices of the goods in the market. Ramadan also boosted the purchase of items like kitchen utensils, radio, batteries amongst others. All these contributed to the economic growth of Ilorin during Ramadan³⁶. The higher rate at which people bought grains and other staple food for the purpose of giving out to the less privileged people (*zakatul-fitr*), as dictated by Islam at the end of Ramadan was also identified as one of the contributions of Ramadan to the socio-economy of Ilorin³⁶.

Apart from the above, Ramadan period witnessed a great increment in alms giving. During *Iftar*, i.e fast breaking, people engaged in giving food to the less

privileged with whatever they have, either in the mosque or individual houses, some stayed along the street giving *Dabinu* (date palm fruit) and all sort of fruits to the fasting Muslims. In addition, Muslim in Ilorin metropolis were observed to have taken the advantage of Ramadan to move closer to God, the holy month was accorded a great respect. There was usually no time for any social vice or immorality among the Muslims in the town, rather all what was seen were religious activities which were geared towards making people move closer to God (Allah). Thus, crime and other social vices were reduced to the barest minimum; people in Ilorin were freed to move around the town at late hours without any fear during Ramadan, as the period has been known to have brought some degrees of God fearing³⁷.

It should be mentioned here however, that, there was a decline in some social activities during Ramadan while on many occasions certain social activities were suspended till after Ramadan. Findings showed that the decline or suspension of some social activities like ceremonies, night clubbing, going to eateries and all other social hubs across Ilorin, which promoted social gatherings all witnessed relatively low patronages, showing a decline in social activities during Ramadan³⁸.

Conclusion

Ilorin, a predominantly Muslim city was famous for its rich Islamic cultural heritage, this feature stand out this ancient town among its contemporaries in Nigeria. One of the most conspicuous aspect of the cultural endowments of Ilorin was reflected in the annual preparation and commencement of Ramadan as well as the socio-religious activities during the month of Ramadan fasting. It was one of many activities which showcased the richness of Ilorin culture by the way of Islamic traditions and customs. The Ramadan fasting period in the 20th century was an occasion which often brought together sons and daughters of Ilorin Emirate to felicitate and fraternize with one another in appreciation of the uniqueness of its Islamic culture and traditions. A lot of socio-economic and religious activities have been in existence for long time during Ramadan in Ilorin with their impacts. It was these activities that made the holy month in Ilorin metropolis worthy and captivating but nowadays, people are not practicing most of these activities as a result of different social phenomena and security challenges in our society.

Picture 1

Picture of a clay molded mosque made by children during Ramadan in Ilorin.



Picture 2

Picture of children praying in their clay mosque during Ramadan in Ilorin.

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