

The Decline of Islam among the Benin and Esan of Edo State, Nigeria: a Historical Perspective¹

Uyilawa Usuanlele²

Abstract

Recent research among Muslim leaders in Benin has revealed that the community is facing a decline in the number of Muslims among the Benin and the Esan people of Edo State, Nigeria. This decline runs counter to the popular belief that Islam is experiencing expansion and revitalization in Africa, as was enunciated by Ali Mazrui in the late 1980s. Islam spread among the Benin and Esan people in the late nineteenth century, under different circumstances. The expansion was driven by the emigration of Benin and Esan people into Islamized communities, where they embraced Islam, and by the immigration of stranger Muslims into these Benin and Esan areas, which further spread the faith. Archival records show occasional incidents of mass conversions to Islam in

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² Uyilawa Usuanlele, Associate Professor, SUNY Oswego State University of New York

some rural communities. Muslim groups established schools to sustain and spread the faith and benefited from other conducive factors, such as access to mass media. Such factors and developments in the history of Islam in Africa tended to lead to increased conversions, but instead, there was a decline in the Muslim population. This paper examines this decline among the Benin and Esan people and attempts to account for its development, dating back to colonial times.

Keywords: Islam, Decline, Conversion, Ahmadiyya, Edo speaking peoples, Benin, Esan

Introduction

The incursion of Islam into the area inhabited by the Edo-speaking peoples of Nigeria started in the second half of the 19th Century. It was originally embraced by a few, but with British colonization, which removed the pre-colonial rulers' control over their people, provided wider regional security, and improved the communication infrastructure, migration increased, and Islam expanded among the Edo, as it did in many other parts of Africa.³ David Dickson believes that Islam has also significantly expanded in the post-colonial era and has continued to expand, so much so that it is widely reported as “the fastest growing religion on the African sub-continent.”⁴ A notable Africanist scholar, the late Professor

³ Nehemia Levtzion and Randall L. Pouwels “Patterns of Islamization and Varieties of Religious Experience among Muslims of Africa” in Nehemia Levtzion and Randall L. Pouwels (ed.) *The History of Islam in Africa*, Ohio University Press, Athens, OH, 2000, 14.

⁴ David Dickson “Political Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa: The need for a new research and Political Agenda” *United States Institute for Peace Special Report* no. 140, 2005, 3. <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/sr140.pdf>. Viewed 11.54pm on 31st October, 2017.

Ali Mazrui had, in fact, also articulated this thesis about the expansion and revival of Islam. He attributed it to the loss of prestige of European missionary Christianity among Africans, the decline in Christian missionaries' resources (including funds and schools) after African independence on the one hand, and on the other hand, from an increase in resources for the propagation of Islam in Africa from the new oil wealth of the Muslim Arab Middle East. He noted as well that "Christian elites are more likely to favor smaller families than Muslim elites," which contributed to Islamic demographic expansion in Western Africa.⁵ In later works, Mazrui observed that apart from Arab Africa, "the central issue concerning Islam is not merely its revival, it is also its speed of expansion."⁶

As appealing as Mazrui's thesis is, it is difficult to verify, as there is "no scientific measurement of the progress of Islam. For instance, there is no reliable data to confirm that the Muslim population is growing faster than the whole population."⁷ Similarly, his claim of a greater Muslim population is problematic, as there is no reliable demographic data on religious affiliation. Therefore, the Mazruian thesis still needs to be tested for its veracity in areas where Islam faced competition with Christianity in West Africa during the colonial era and after.

Although the loss of the European Christian missionaries' prestige and resources and the flow of Arab-Muslim petro-dollars into African Muslim proselytization in post-independence Africa might have aided the revival and

⁵ Ali Mazrui "" in Alkali N., et al (ed.) *Islam in Africa: Proceedings of Islam in Africa Conference held at Abuja, Nigeria 1989*, Spectrum, Ibadan, 1993, 252-3.

⁶ Ali Mazrui "Islam in Africa's Experience: Expansion, Revival and Radicalization" in Ali A. Amin, Patrick Dikirr, Robert Ostergard Jr, Micahel Toker and Paul Macharia (ed) *Africa's Islamic Experience: History, Culture and Politics*, Sterling Publishers Private Ltd, New Delhi, 2009, 17.

⁷ Marc-Antoine Perouse de Montclos "Conversion to Islam and Modernity in Nigeria: A view from Underground" *Africa Today*, vol. 54, no. 4, 2008, 73

expansion of Islam, have these factors translated to real expansion and growth everywhere? Claims of demographic growth by the main world religions are common, but what explains the relapse of adherents to belief in other faiths? For instance, in Auchi, Edo State, an investigation by the Chief Imam, Professor Z. S. Oboh-Oseni, showed that “[t]he truth is that some progress had been made but not sustained. Hence retrogression is setting in fast ...” and “[t]he worst of the aspects of retrogression in Islamic affairs in Auchi is the reversion of a number of people these days to polytheism” (a euphemism for indigenous African religions).⁸

It is in the light of this exceptional development that this paper interrogates the switching of some Benin and Esan Muslims to indigenous religion or Christianity. It argues that Islam has been in decline in this area specifically because, first, its arrival coincided with the establishment of colonialism, which divested the indigenous state system of the power and resources to support its religious institutions. Second, the communication barrier between migrant proselytizers and local communities hindered the local people from deepening their knowledge of Islam and strengthening their faith, and third, there was a fear of poor prospects for those receiving an Islamic education in a modern, secular world where Western education associated with Europeans predominated. This argument is anchored in Humphrey Fisher’s theory of conversion, particularly to Islam in Black Africa, as a three-stage process of mixing, literacy, and reform. The first stage is characterized by accepting Islam without adequate understanding and mixing it with pre-Islamic religions and customs. The second, or middle, stage is when the process of full conversion

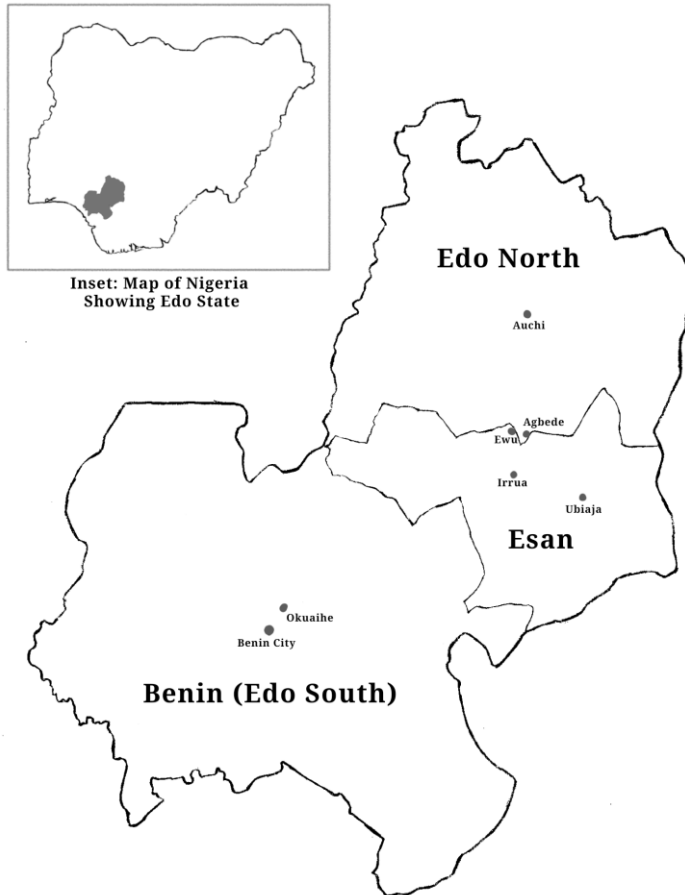
⁸ Zakariyau. I. Oseni “The Islamisation of Auchi Kingdom in South Central Nigeria” <http://unilorin.edu.ng/publications/zioseni/The%20Islamisation%20of%20Auchi%20Kingdom.doc>

starts to occur. The neophyte in this stage still mixes religions but is exposed to literacy and develops a better understanding of the religion as a result. In the third stage, full conversion occurs, and the convert embarks on reforms and revival.⁹

The argument of this study will be supported with archival and other written sources, oral interviews with local Muslim leaders, and several biographical/genealogical histories of leading and early Muslim families. The biographical/genealogical histories will be used to demonstrate, through names and titles, the extent to which adherence to Islam has increased or decreased in the families of some of the early converts to Islam in the area. The reliance on genealogies is necessitated by the absence of census data on religion in the Nigerian government's national census.

This paper is divided into six sections. The first section introduces and describes the spread and causes of conversion among the Esan and Benin people. The second section examines the development of Islam during colonial rule and the post-colonial era. The third section examines the factors that hindered the growth of Islam in Edo State. The fourth section demonstrates a decrease in the number of Muslims over the generations by analyzing the names and titles of descendants of the earliest converts in two biographical/genealogical accounts. The fifth section presents oral testimonies of Muslim leaders about a decline in their numbers over time, and the sixth section concludes the study.

⁹ Humphrey Fisher "Conversion Reconsidered: Some Historical Aspects of Religious Conversion in Black Africa" *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 43, no.1, Jan. 1973, 31-3.



Map of Edo State showing areas with significant Muslim Population and Institutions

The introduction and spread of islam among the edo-speaking people

The Edo-speaking people inhabit the south-central area of Nigeria and are located mainly on the west side of the River Niger. Among them are the Benin and the Esan, who belong to North-Central Edo, and their languages are almost mutually intelligible. The Benin-Edo formed the Benin Kingdom, which later expanded into an empire, while the Esan and the rest of the Edo groups lived in autonomous dukedoms that were part of the Benin Empire. There is no record of

the practice of Islam among the Edo-speaking people before the 1860s. The dominant polity, the Benin Kingdom, was very strict about the introduction and practice of new religions not sanctioned by the Oba (King), and violation in some cases was punishable by death.¹⁰ The forays of Islam came through the northern Nigerian Nupe-Fulani Emirate of Bida, which invaded the northernmost Edo region with cavalry, which was lacking among the Edo-speaking people. Beginning in the 1860s, Northern Edo polities, such as Auchi, Ekperi, Ibie, and Uzairue, reached tributary agreements (*amana*) with the Bida rulers, who appointed agents known as *Azeni* to collect tribute in the form of slaves and commodities.¹¹ Consequently, Hausa, Fulani, and Nupe Islamic scholars and traders thronged the area and proselytized and taught Islam, particularly among the local people appointed as Nupe agents¹² (Mason, 1970, 207). Outside these enclaves, Islam was not widespread in Northern Edo; rather, it was a court religion among the Nupe appointees and their immediate families. During the 19th century, the practice of Islam was largely syncretic. Apart from material costume, only a few Islamic observances took hold, such as prayers, fasting and festivals, some Nupe titles, and Quranic schools with Nupe, Hausa, and Fulani teachers. In general, the indigenous cultural and religious institutions and

¹⁰ Oba Akenzua II' "Letter to Hon. Minister of Home and Midwest Affairs, 23/01/1959" in *Report of the Commission appointed to enquire into the Owegbe Cult, 1966*, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Information, Benin City, Appendix 17, 138.

¹¹ Michael Mason "The "Jihad" in the South: An outline of the Nineteenth Century Nupe Hegemony in North-East Yorubaland and Afenmai" *Journal of Historical Society of Nigeria*, vol.5, no.2, June 1970, 207.

¹² Mason "The "Jihad" in the South: An outline of the Nineteenth Century Nupe Hegemony in North-East Yorubaland and Afenmai" *Journal of Historical Society of Nigeria*, 207.

practices were maintained. Important Islamic obligatory practices like Sharia law were neither introduced nor observed.¹³

Erhagbe argues that the local rulers (appointed or recognized agents of the Nupe overlords) used force to impose Islam and destroyed the indigenous shrines in some clans, namely in the Agbede and Auchi areas.¹⁴ Audu argues to the contrary, that persuasion rather than force was employed to destroy the indigenous shrines and quell conversion in Agbede.¹⁵ It appears that a combination of both methods was used, because during the pre-colonial period, force alone would have alienated their subjects and caused them to migrate. Also, the destruction of shrines seems unlikely in the pre-colonial period, when Bida was least interested in proselytization. The destruction of shrines was carried out in the early period of colonialism, during the reigns of Oba Momodu I of Agbede (1891-1910) and Otaru Momoh I of Auchi (1919-1944).

The entrenchment of Islam in some Northern Edo communities was facilitated by the colonial administration. Examples of these communities in Northern Edo were Auchi and Okpella, which were, until 1918, under the administration of the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria, where Islam was privileged over Christianity.¹⁶ The power of the rulers in these communities was

¹³ Eddy O. Erhagbe “The dynamics of Inter-group Relations in Pre-Colonial Nigeria: Nupe Activities in Etsako land, C 1860-1897” *Canadian Social Sciences*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2012, 215.

¹⁴ Erhagbe “The dynamics of Inter-group Relations in Pre-Colonial Nigeria: Nupe Activities in Etsako land, C 1860-1897” *Canadian Social Sciences*, 216.

¹⁵ Auto Audu, *Islam and Edo State*, Hazab Printers Limited, Abuja, 1997, 5-6.

¹⁶ Frederick Lugard, the first Governor of the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria, promised the Muslim rulers in parts of Northern Nigeria that he would not tamper with their religion, and the Christian missionary evangelization was restricted to the non-Muslim areas till the 1930s. In addition, some non-Muslim areas were placed under the

greatly enhanced by the colonial administration, and their disposition toward Islam was supported. This is attested to by the colonial government's employing and paying salaries to Hausa Mallams (teachers) to teach about Islam in the government schools established in both Agbede and Auchi.¹⁷ The state's favoritism towards Islam, combined with other factors, enhanced its spread in Northern Edo communities.

Similar Nupe-Fulani incursions into adjoining Esan communities did not result in conquest and tributary relations, as the inhabitants of the few affected Esan communities fled into the forest, out of reach of the Nupe-Fulani cavalry force.¹⁸ Nonetheless, Islam spread into three of the Esan clans/dukedom, namely Ewu, Ido, and Irrua, with some isolated cases of converts in Ekpoma. Islam's penetration into Irrua and Ido came about mainly through dynastic marriage relations with Agbede, whose Oba, Momodu I, was zealous in his propagation of Islam.¹⁹ Onojie Eromosele (1882-1921) of Irrua converted to Islam in 1897, following his marriage to the sister of Oba Momodu I, and his new wife, Princess Ebegie, pressured him to destroy the indigenous shrines in his palace and accept Islam, which he did, while most of his subjects continued

administration of Muslim rulers. See Flora Shaw, *A Tropical Dependency: An Outline of the Ancient history of the Western Sudan with an Account of the Modern Settlement of Northern Nigeria* (London: James Nisbet, 1905), 452-453, and Andrew E. Barnes, "Evangelization where it is not wanted: Colonial Administrators and the Missionaries in Northern Nigeria during the First Third of the Twentieth Century," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 25, no.4 (1995): 412-441.

¹⁷ National Archives, Ibadan (NAI) BP 62/1922, 1922

¹⁸ C. G. Okojie, *Esan Native Laws and Customs with Ethnographic Studies of the Esan People* (New Edition), Ilupeju Press, 1994

¹⁹ Okojie, *Esan Native Laws and Customs with Ethnographic Studies of the Esan People*, 322 and Audu, *Islam and Edo State*, 25-7.

to follow the indigenous religion.²⁰ Thus, Islam became a court religion that was passed on to his heirs. Idoa was the hometown of Oba Momodu I's mother, and his protection of Idoa refugees during a Nupe raid led the Onojie of Idoa and his subjects to accept Islam²¹

The conversion of the royal family of the Ewu Dukedom to Islam originated from a court trial that threatened the reigning Regent, Prince Omosun (1916-1932), with imprisonment and possible dethronement. During his trial, he was advised to feign conversion to Islam, which he did, saving himself from imprisonment for his alleged membership in the Osanughegbe prophetic movement, which had been outlawed by the colonial administration. Following his acquittal, Omosun and the members of the royal family of Ewu quickly adopted Islam as their family/court religion, which they still adhere to today.²²

As was the case in most of West Africa before the 19th-century jihads, Islam in two of the three dukedoms of Esan was a court religion and was not widely practiced outside the *Eguare* (palace quarters). Though few people outside the royal families converted to Islam of their own volition; those who did were usually associated with a royal court that had adopted Islam. In Ewu, for instance, some accepted Islam because of their relationship with the neighbouring Islamized Agbede. The Duze family of Ewu, for example, had

²⁰ Interview with His Royal Highness, Zaiki Momodu II, Onojie of Irrua, 86 years, at his Palace on 15 July 2016.

²¹ Okojie, *Esan Native Laws and Customs with Ethnographic Studies of the Esan People*, 322.

²² Interview (Telephone) with His Royal Highness, Issesele II, Onojie of Ewu 2017.

converted to Islam before the regent Omosun and the royal family accepted Islam in the 1930s.²³

In contrast with what happened among the Northern Edo and the Esan dukedoms, Islam came to Benin (Division) from Yorubaland. Though some Muslims followed the British invaders as soldiers and traders into Benin, it was the resident Benin traders in Yorubaland who spread Islam and persuaded their fellow Benin citizens to accept Islam after the British conquest. They joined with the migrant Hausa, Nupe, and Yoruba Muslims to establish a Muslim community in Benin City. By 1900, there were indigenous Muslims living in Benin City and in some Esan communities practicing and proselytizing freely alongside immigrant Muslims.

Islam among the Benin and Esan under colonial rule and after

The introduction and acceptance of Islam by some Esan and Benin people coincided with the establishment of colonial rule and provided a new order of free movement of persons and ideas. Many Muslim traders and proselytizers exploited the opportunity to traverse formerly closed areas. The non-indigenous Hausa, Nupe, and Yoruba Muslims who predominated established their quarters in some towns. These were known as *Yelwa* in Northern Edo and *Okemole* (among the Yoruba) and as Hausa Quarters in Benin City and other towns, while Islam remained confined to the *Eguare* or royal quarters in Esan Dukedoms.

The government policy towards Islam in both the Benin and Esan areas was one of cautious indifference, as long as Muslim activities did not threaten law and order. Since most of the people and their rulers were mainly followers of indigenous religions, the government did not factor Islam into local

²³ Anne I. Nyamali, *Duze Family of Ewu-Esan: A genealogical history*, Change Publications, Lagos, 2009, 27.

administrations.²⁴ Even in the three Esan polities where the Enigie professed Islam, their administration remained based on titles derived from indigenous religious rituals and functions. Though some titles like *Daudu* were adopted in places like Irrua, in general Islam did not penetrate into government, as the holders of indigenous titles still predominated.²⁵ Hawkesworth observed in 1931 that

[t]he Onogie and most of the inhabitants of the founder's village (Egware) adopted a somewhat broad form of Mohammedanism in 1897, but this creed has not generally proved popular in the other villages, though it has been accepted by a few dignitaries who doubtless hoped to obtain favour in the eyes of the Onogie by this means.²⁶

Even with these conversions, Muslim converts did not seem to hold any special offices in the administration.

In Benin, Muslims were virtually absent from the native administration because they shunned indigenous titles (along with indigenous ritual functions), a prerequisite for nomination to administrative offices under indirect rule. Muslim converts who wanted indigenous titles renounced Islam. An example of one such convert was Chief Obaraye Osague Erhunmuse Eke, who dropped his Islamic name, Lawani, and took the title of Obazelu of Benin in 1921, although

²⁴ Uyilawa Usuanlele "British Colonial Administration, Development of Islam and Islamic Education in a non-Islamic Society: The Benin Division (Nigeria) Experience, 1897-1960" *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 2014, 75-6.

²⁵ Emmanuel O. Ughulu, *The Short History of (Esan) Ishan Benin*, Ribway Printers, Lagos, 1950, 74-5.

²⁶ E. C. Hawkesworth, "A report on the Irrua People of the Ishan Division of the Benin Province" in *Intelligence Reports on Ishan Division of Benin Province*, National Archives of Nigeria, Ibadan, 1982, 145.

some of his children remained Muslim.²⁷ Another instance was Chief Okungbowa, who renounced Islam and took a title with an administrative office in 1918. After leaving the administration, he returned to Islam in 1933.²⁸ However, it was possible for indigenous Muslims to take indigenous chieftaincy titles without renouncing Islam, as was evidenced by Chief Usman Lawal Osula, whose indigenous title of *Arala* was hereditary.

Benin Muslims largely contented themselves with Islamic titles. In addition to traditional Islamic offices in their mosques, such as *Lemomu* (*Imam* in Arabic) and *Noibi* (*Al Adhan* in Arabic), Benin Muslims adopted Yoruba-influenced mosque titles such as *Ajiroba*, *Balogun* (“war commander”), *Osarumi*, *Giwa*, *Baba Egbe* (“lineage/family head”), and *Otun* (“right-hand man/able lieutenant”). These titles were later approved by Oba Eweka II for administrative purposes, to enable the native administration to liaise officially with the leaders of the Muslim community.²⁹ This recognition of titles compensated Muslims who shunned indigenous Benin titles. It was not until 1948, when the administration's democratization began, that Muslims started to seek administrative positions.³⁰

²⁷ Paul I. Eke, “Chief Obaraye Eke, the Edo n’ Akure Community and the Restoration of the Benin Monarchy under Oba Eweka II” Paper read at the International Conference on Aspects of the Foreign Affairs of Benin Empire in history” held at Oba Akenzua II Cultural Centre, Benin City, June 2009.

²⁸ Usuanlele “British Colonial Administration, Development of Islam and Islamic Education in a non-Islamic Society...: *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*,76.

²⁹ University of Birmingham Library, UK, Bradbury papers B.D.R. 4 Muslim Brotherhood, Benin City, July 1930.

³⁰ Usuanlele “British Colonial Administration, Development of Islam and Islamic Education in a non-Islamic Society...: *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 89.

Some indigenous Muslim converts in Benin City and Esan were wealthy traders. They and the Enigie (Dukes) invested their resources in building private mosques in their homes and in their palace quarters. In addition, they organized elaborate celebrations of *Id* festivals and carried out individual proselytization activities to win converts to Islam.³¹ *Kewu*, or piazza/mosque Quranic schools, were also established to teach children the religion, while private *mallams* were enlisted to teach adult converts. The Esan Enijie of Ewu and Irrua sent their children to Agbede to study the Quran under Hausa and Nupe *mallams* or invited the *mallams* to teach their daughters at home.³² The Muslims in Benin and Ishan Divisions received no support from the colonial government for their Islamic activities. They could not, therefore, employ force to convert people, as happened in the Northern Edo communities of Agbede and Auchi. As a result, the Muslim populations in Benin and Esan grew slowly.

Certain developments and factors helped with winning more converts. One such development was the *Osanughegbe*, an indigenous prophetic and faith-healing movement which propagated the destruction of all material objects of worship and swept through Benin Province in the late 1920s and early 1930s.³³ Influenced by its mass appeal, many people destroyed their shrines, tore up their Bibles, and flocked to join the Prophet Idubor. The colonial administration,

³¹ I.A.B. Balogun “The episode of Islam in the ancient City of Benin” *Nigerian Journal of Humanities*, Vol.1, No.1, 23, Nyamali, *Duze of Ewu-Esan*, 48 and Interview with His Royal Highness Zaiki Alhaji Momodu II, Onojie of Irrua, 86 years at his Palace on 14 July 2016

³² Audu, *Islam and Edo State*, 25, Nyamali, *op.cit.*, 51 and Interview with His Royal Highness Zaiki Alhaji Momodu II.

³³ Uyilawa Usuanlele “The Osanughegbe Religious Movement and Social Ferment in Benin Province, 1926-1936”, Peter P. Ekeh (ed.) *Studies in Urhobo Culture*, Urhobo Historical Society, Buffalo and Okpara Inland, 2005.

which forcefully suppressed the movement, left Osanughebe adherents bewildered and vulnerable to both Christian and Muslim proselytizers. In 1930, Rev. William J. Payne of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) observed the vulnerability of the Osanughebe adherents and their conversion to the world religions of both Islam and Christianity; he wrote,

I was just much struck during a visit to Oke and places nearby at the growth in the number of Mohammedans in that part of the district. Most of them seem to have been followers of the “Prophet” Obonuvbegbe [sic] about three years ago, when they destroyed their juju and now that that movement has died down, they have professed Mohammedanism. A good many have become Christians ...³⁴

Another factor that assisted the spread was the dissemination of Ahmadiyya Islamic literature among young literate people. This movement made Islam seemingly more attractive through the adoption of western-style institutions. It was embraced by some western educated people, who spearheaded the establishment of formal western-style schools from the the1920s, and accounted for four elementary schools and one secondary school in the 1960s. Its proponents also struggled to have Muslims represented on the Divisional and Provincial Education Committees and to establish equal access to state funds for schools among the religious denominations. The traditional Muslims, on the other hand, built the Ansar Ud Deen Moslem School in Benin City in the 1950s. Among the Esan Muslims, the establishment of formal Muslim schools was not replicated, so they attended the Muslim schools in the Northern Edo area, particularly in Jagbe and Agbede.³⁵ By the 1950s, Islam had

³⁴ National Archives, Ibadan File CMS (Y)2/2 Vol. 15 Reports on Benin Districts, 1922-1933: Rev. W.J. Payne, “Report to Conference”, January 1930.

³⁵ Audu, *Islam and Edo State*, 31.

established a foothold in the two divisions, with formal Muslim schools in Benin and among the northern Edo of Kukuruku division, which catered to Esan Muslims. There were several mosques and sizeable populations of indigenous Muslims.

Despite the achievements in building mosques and establishing formal schools, the foundation of Islam in these societies remained weak and superficial because they lacked highly educated indigenous Muslim scholars to deepen Islamic religious and Arabic knowledge. The practices of the indigenous Muslim population were mainly ritualistic, entailing the building of mosques, observing daily prayers, celebrating *Id*, and giving Islamic names to their offspring. Their practice was also mixed with indigenous cultural practices prohibited in Islam. For example, the celebration of *Id* in some homes, particularly those of wealthy Muslims, included the drinking of alcoholic beverages and the hosting of entertaining performances by indigenous, non-Islamic dance groups.³⁶ The situation of Benin and Esan Muslims rightly captures what Sulayman Bola has observed about the “typical Nigerian Muslim home,” which he says “lacks good understanding of Islam, it’s [sic] understanding of Islam is more of ritualism. This cannot in anyway help or aid the child to be a conscious Muslim who manifests the impacts [sic] of sociological values of Islam.”³⁷ The situation made the Benin and Esan Muslims quite vulnerable to influences capable of further weakening their faith and luring them away from Islam.

Independence in 1960, however, weakened the influence of the European Christian missionaries, and Muslims gained some leverage in the

³⁶ Nyamali, *Duze of Ewu-Esan*, 49-50 and Adesuwa Anwuri, *The Man Erhunwunse Yesuf Giwa-Osagie*, Author, no Date, 11.

³⁷ Sulayman L. Bola, *Perspectives on Islamic Education*, Center for Research on Islamic Education, Lagos, 2007, 68.

government. Nigeria established diplomatic relations with many Muslim countries, which provided intellectual and material resources for the further spread of Islam. Before independence, in 1942, the colonial government changed its policy and allowed the teaching of religious subjects in government schools in 1942;³⁸ nevertheless, it was only with the beginning of decolonization in the 1950s that Arabic and Islamic religious knowledge was introduced into government schools; however, implementing this policy was problematic because of a shortage of certified teachers, with only three teachers available to teach Arabic and Islamic religious knowledge in the five Muslim schools and two government schools in Benin.³⁹ The Esan Muslims continued to rely on Agbede and Jagbe in Afenmai Division and Yoruba towns for education in Arabic and Islamic studies. The only option for Muslims in Esan and Benin was to utilize the services of informal Islamic (Koranic) schools with their peculiar problems.

Factors that undermined and weakened adherence to Islam among the Benin and Esan

Besides inadequate educational institutions that inhibited the deepening of knowledge of Islam among its adherents, other factors worked against the consolidation of Islam among the Benin and Esan. First, Islam entered the area at a time when British colonialism was establishing an administration to serve its own interests, and this was not a conducive time for the consolidation of Islam, as the British were apprehensive about it because of its potential for

³⁸ National Archives, Ibadan, File BP 2126 Religious Instructions in NA and Government Schools: S. G. Morris, Director of Education to Secretary, Western Provinces, 27/3/2942, 3.

³⁹ BTCA LEA 628 Local Education Authority Office, Benin City to Local Education Adviser, Benin Province, 13/04/1960, 31.

conflict and insurrection.⁴⁰ Since insurrectionist tendencies conflicted with British interests, the British did not nurture its expansion and consolidation; instead, this was achieved through the removal of the power of the indigenous rulers over religious control; however, the *Enijie* were unable to compel their subjects to convert or to destroy their indigenous religious objects of worship, as they did among the Northern Edo. The situation of the *Enijie* was also made difficult by the lack of resources to dispense patronage. Among the Esan, all the Muslim *Enijie* were grouped with non-Muslim *Enijie* in only one of the six districts in the Ishan division, so they had to jostle for the leadership position with the non-Muslim *Enijie*, and none permanently held the position. They were not only poorly remunerated, but also prohibited from receiving tribute from their subjects and so were unable to maintain their formerly large families and retinues of followers, nor were they able to proselytize widely.

The situation of the Muslim Esan *Enijie* was further worsened by political troubles that, in some cases, arose from colonial-induced financial insolvency. This occasionally made them resort to graft, which was severely punished by the colonial administration.⁴¹ Such political troubles did not allow for patronage under colonial rule. Yet, despite the lack of patronage and benefits, some converted to Islam through marriage or through expectations of political patronage.

The Benin native administration under the Oba (King) had no place for Islam. Nor did Islam have much attraction for most of his subjects. Conversion to Islam in Benin barred people from accepting the chieftaincy titles that were a

⁴⁰ Jonathan Reynolds "Good and Bad Muslims: Indirect Rule and Islam in Northern Nigeria" *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, vol. 34, no. 3, 2001.

⁴¹ Okojie, *Esan Native Laws and Customs with Ethnographic Studies of the Esan People*, 335-6.

prerequisite for patronage and political/administrative office. In sum, Islam attracted few members of the elite and their dependents in Benin because it conferred no political influence there.

The situation in which the Benin and Esan Muslim leaders found themselves was like that of Muslims in 19th century Cyprus when the Ottoman *Tanzimat* reforms (1839-1876) and British centralized administration (from 1878) of *Waqf* funds deprived the Cyprus Turk *Ulama* of the means to proselytize and fund the social welfare (education) needs of the rural communities. The vacuum thus created by the absence of Muslim proselytizers was exploited by the Greek Orthodox church missionaries, who proselytized among Cyprus's Turkish Muslim community and converted them to Christianity between the late 19th century and early 20th century.⁴² Like the rural Cypriot-Turkish people, most of those in Esan and Benin were stuck between their indigenous religion and leaders who valorized Islam but lacked the resources to grant patronage capable of expanding and consolidating Islam in their domains through Islamic education.

Lacking the resources and support from the state to improve education, the Benin and Esan Muslims, as was theorized by Fisher, remained at the stage of mixing religions. They required the deepening of their education to achieve the next higher level.⁴³ Arguing along the same lines, Oseni emphasized that

⁴² Altay Nevzat and Mete Hatay "Politics, Society and the Decline of Islam in Cyprus: From the Ottoman Era to the Twenty First Century", *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 45, no. 6, 2009, 915-920.

⁴³ Fisher, "Conversion Reconsidered: Some historical aspects of Religious Conversion in Black Africa," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 33-4.

“Islam and Quranic education go together.”⁴⁴ However, Islamic education has not been seriously developed and was weak among the Edo, particularly among the Benin and Esan Muslims. This was because of the conflict between the Ahmadiyya and traditional Muslims, which hindered cooperation in developing Islamic education. For instance, when the Muslim Brotherhood, spearheaded by a Yoruba convert, appealed for donations for its school in Benin City in 1935, the Muslim elite boycotted the fundraising, and the main donors were government officers and some Christian elites.⁴⁵ This disunity made it difficult for Muslims to raise sufficient funds for their formal schools to satisfy requirements for government aid or assistance.⁴⁶ Some orthodox Muslims further prohibited their children from attending the Ahmadiyya schools, thereby denying them the benefit of an Islamic education.

Not only were the Muslim schools few before the government take-over of schools in 1973, but also the amount of teachers of Islamic religion and the Arabic language in the schools in Benin was grossly inadequate, numbering only three certified Arabic and Islamic religious studies teachers in the 1960s, out of 476 Arabic teachers in Western Region.⁴⁷ There were probably a handful more in the 1970s, sharing their time between the Muslim-owned and government schools. As a result, only limited conversions, if any, could be made through schools. In 1973, the Nigerian government took over all voluntary agency

⁴⁴ Zakariyau I. Oseni “The success of Qur’ānic Schools in Nigeria: A case study of the Edo State experiment” *Muslim Education Quarterly*, vol.14, no.1, 1996, 72.

⁴⁵ Usuanlele “British Colonial Administration, Development of Islam... *Contemporary Journal of African Studies*, 82.

⁴⁶ Benin Traditional Council Archives, File LEA 520 Inspection Report of Ansar Ud Deen Moslem School, Benin City, 1960.

⁴⁷ Benin Traditional Council Archives, File LEA 628 Enclosure 22/06/1960.

schools, including the few Muslim schools. “In October 1972,” according to Z. I. Oseni,

... the then governor of the state, Col. S. O. Ogbemudia abolished the teaching of I.R.K. in Bendel primary schools. Many of the Mallams were dismissed from teaching, and a few who could teach other subjects were retained. Those of them who even had the certificate in Arabic and Islamic Studies were reduced to the status of untrained teachers. At least one of them resigned his appointment as a result of this.⁴⁸

What Oseni’s report obscures is that the objective of the above exercise, known as “Operation Know Your Teacher,” was to remove many unqualified and uncertified teachers to improve the standard of teaching.⁴⁹ This affected Islamic religious studies most, because some of the *mallams* (Islamic Religious Knowledge [IRK] teachers), had no formal educational certificates recognized by the government, and some of those with certificates had not been professionally trained. It was a major blow to the expansion of Islam through the schools. This development was revised in 1976 when the Military Governor, Commodore Hussein Abdullahi, a Muslim from Islamized Northern Nigeria, reintroduced the teaching of IRK into schools with a few certified teachers, and this did impact Islamic education.

It was only recently, in the 1990s, that a few Muslim-owned private schools started to be established in the area, particularly in Benin City and Ewu. The Ansar Ud Deen School, Benin City, was rebuilt by the Chief Imam of Benin

⁴⁸ Zakariyah I. Oseni “Modern Arabic and Islamic Studies in Bendel State” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, vol.8, no.1, 1987,189.

⁴⁹ Tayo Akpata, “Takeover of Schools in the Midwest State” in Tayo Akpata, *In pursuit of Nationhood: Selected writings on politics in Nigeria*, Malthouse Press, Lagos, 2000, 186.

City in 2012 with financial support from the state government and is now operational, with students drawn mainly from the Muslim population.⁵⁰ Ewu in Esan has a handful of Muslim schools, which also serve Irrua.⁵¹ However, the Muslim schools are no longer able to convert young people to Islam.

The informal/traditional Quranic schools that facilitated the expansion and consolidation of Islam (in the Northern Edo) are few and far between in the Benin and Esan areas. These schools are conducted by Hausa and Yoruba teachers who do not utilize the local Edo languages of Benin and Esan. Moreover, most Hausa and Yoruba Quranic teachers do not understand the English language nor the popular pidgin variant. They teach only in the Hausa and Yoruba languages, which Edo children do not understand. The language problem is best appreciated from Oseni's report on Northern Edo, where the teachers taught "in Hausa, a language which most of the pupils do not even understand" and "which to Afenmai [including Benin and Esan] people was like what Arabic is for Muslims all over the World."⁵² Attendance at the informal Quranic schools by Edo and Esan children was further discouraged by the brutality of the Hausa *mallams*, who used the whip and other forms of corporal punishment to force the children to learn. Criticism of such excessive brutality by the teachers has been made by Professor Oseni, the Islamic scholar and Chief Imam of Auchi, who used the Quran and the opinion of other learned scholars to

⁵⁰ Interview with Alhaji Abdulfatah Ikponmwosa Enabulele, Chief Imam of Benin City, aged 46 years at Benin City Central Mosque on 16 July 2016, and Mallam Abdulmalik Esekhaigbe, Muslim School Proprietor, Ewu, Edo State, aged 35 years at Irrua on 12 July 2016.

⁵¹ Interview with Mallam Mahmud Musa, Chief Imam of Irrua aged 45 years at his residence, in Irrua town, on 12 July 2016.

⁵² Zakariyau I. Oseni "The Success of Quranic Schools in Nigeria: A Case Study of the Edo State Experiment" *Muslim Education Quarterly*, vol.14, no.1, 74.

describe it as not only un-Islamic, but also “an aberration to beat pupils mercilessly.”⁵³ HRH Zaiki Alhaji Momodu II, Onojie of Irrua, stated that his late father, HRH Zaiki Isidahomen II (1941-1971), experienced such brutality at Agbede, and it discouraged him from sending his children to Islamic school; instead, he sent them to Christian missionary schools, where they were converted to Christianity.⁵⁴ Thus, the teachers’ excesses hindered learning by Edo children and were unattractive to their parents, too. Only a few determined children were able to learn the Quran under such conditions.

The traditional Islamic schools were made even more unattractive by the facts that they issued no certificates and that completing a Quranic education did not qualify a person for employment in the modern service sector of the economy. As a result, Koranic education was not seen as relevant to their livelihood and social standing in society. Thus, education, the most critical factor in the making of a Muslim, was grossly inadequate in most communities and its conduct was repulsive to both children and parents.

This situation of Muslim education was worsened by competition from Christian missionaries for the conversion of the indigenous children. With the repulsive learning environment of the traditional Islamic schools and the late establishment of modern, formal Islamic schools, the local Muslim families faced the dilemma of whether to choose a Western formal education. The Esan area was well provided with secular government schools, with eight in 1915 (and

⁵³ Oseni “The Success of Quranic Schools in Nigeria: A Case Study of the Edo State Experiment” *Muslim Education Quarterly*, 75.

⁵⁴ Interview with His Royal Highness Zaiki Momodu II, Onojie of Irrua, 86 years at his Palace on 14 July 2016.

four in 1936), while the Benin division had only one.⁵⁵ In addition, Esan had eight Church Mission Society (CMS) and 13 Roman Catholic mission (RCM) schools, while by 1927 Benin had 21 CMS schools, one RCM school, three Baptist schools, one African Church school, and one Evangelist Mission School.⁵⁶ The Christian Mission schools increased in arithmetic proportions, while the Muslim mission schools increased from only one in the 1930s to five in the 1960s in Benin Division.

The schools, whether government, Native Authority, Christian Missionary, or Ahmadiyya Islamic, were under European Judeo-Christian influence, with English and Edo languages as the medium of instruction. The policy of providing teachers of Arabic and IRK for schools was not implemented in Ishan division, which had no government secondary school and only private Muslim formal schools. In general, this situation of inadequate schools and a dearth of teachers of Islamic and Quranic knowledge threw the field open for Christian missionaries to proselytize in their schools. Without an adequate grounding in the Islamic religion, the impressionable children became captives of the Christian missionaries, who made attendance and membership in the denominational church a prerequisite for attending their schools. The boarding schools of the Christian missionaries were the most fertile ground for conversion to Christianity. Even the relatively more Islamized Afenmai-Edo were not spared from such conversions of children to Christianity, as was attested to by the Okugbe-Ukpillla/Okpella Muslim community in 1968:

Owing to lack of Muslim Schools here, our children go to Catholic and Anglican Schools where they are later forced to change their

⁵⁵ Nigeria *Blue Book 1916*, Government Printers, Lagos, 1917, U8 and Nigeria *Blue Book, 1936*, Government Printers, Lagos, 1936, Q12.

⁵⁶ National Archives, Ibadan, File BP62/1927 Education Returns Annual, 54-5.

religion to Catholicism [sic] and Anglicanism and thereby deadening the Islamic religion in the hearts of our children. The children in their part come home to convince their Muslim parents to change their religion from Islam to Catholic or otherwise.⁵⁷

In addition, Balogun was told by the Iyaro (Ivbiaro) Muslim community that “[m]ost of our boys and girls in the Secondary schools have been diverting their attention out of our religion all in search of education because of the scholarship grants by some missionary society.”⁵⁸ Furthermore, influenced by the absence of Muslim schools and the fact that Western education was a prerequisite for salaried/remunerative employment, some Muslim children converted to Christianity.

Another major problem faced by Islam in the area was the lifestyle and aspirations of Muslim immigrants. Although the conversion of people to Islam and the expansion of the religion were influenced by the exemplary lifestyle, actions, and character of Muslims,⁵⁹ such exemplary lifestyles were difficult to find or access during and after the colonial period. The characteristic segregation of immigrant Muslims from the local communities made a mixing of populations and emulation problematic. Most Muslim immigrants, particularly the Hausa and other groups from Northern Nigeria, lived, and still live, in segregated quarters in the communities, operating their own exclusive political and religious organizations. These immigrant Muslims eschew involvement in the affairs and

⁵⁷ Ishmael A. B. Balogun “The introduction of Islam into the Etsako division of the Midwest State of Nigeria” *Orita*, vol. 6, no.1, 1972, 36.

⁵⁸ Ishmael A.B. Balogun “The introduction of Islam into the Etsako division of the Midwest State of Nigeria” *Orita*, 36, Footnote 3.

⁵⁹ S.A. Balogun, “History of Islam up to 1900,” in Obaro Ikime (ed.) *Groundwork of Nigerian History*, Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, Ibadan, 1980, 221.

activities of the local communities, as suggested by the Benin saying “*A i miɛn Igabari vbe Ugho*” (“You can never find a Hausa person in a local social dance”—a euphemism for impossibility). With such limited interaction, it is not hard to understand why the immigrant Muslims cannot spread their religion and influence the local population. The fact that immigrant Muslims, particularly the Hausa/Nupe and some Yoruba, do not allow their children to attend Western educational institutions further narrows the space and scope of social interaction. The immigrant Muslims are seen as people on the fringes of society and do not serve as models of social aspiration for the local non-Muslim people. These factors contribute to making Islam unappealing and creating social distance between the immigrant Muslim community and the local community.

Given this social distancing between immigrant Muslims and locals, the practice of Benin and Esan Muslim converts has remained superficial. They have not achieved a good understanding of Islam beyond its basic tenets. Since Esan and Benin converts can neither read nor understand Arabic, educational information on Islam is not accessible to them. To ameliorate this problem, HRH the Onojie of Irrua has noted that the Sultan of Sokoto recently advised Muslims to read the Quran and Hadith in English to develop their faith.⁶⁰ As a result of inadequate knowledge of Islam and this liberalism among the early converts, many of their descendants have broken ranks and shifted to other religions, particularly to Christianity, which has also contributed to the decline in the local Muslim community.

⁶⁰ Interview with Onojie of Irrua.

Central mosque, Igun Street, Benin city, Edo state, Nigeria



Accounting for the decrease in the population of Muslims among the Benin and Esan – the biographical/genealogical evidence

Given the paucity of data on religion and the absence of religious data in the national census,⁶¹ it is necessary to employ other sources to assess demographic change among the various religious groups in Nigeria. The sources that come readily to hand are biographies and genealogies. Though these sources are not representative of the whole community, they contain the names and titles of family members and offer insights into the possible religious affiliations of the people. Naming in Africa is usually associated with the circumstances of a family, parents, and the birth of a child. The coming of Islam and Christianity affected naming patterns, as they started changing to reflect the new religions of the converts. With independence and cultural awakening in the 1960s and 1970s, there was a resurgence of African names competing with foreign names,

⁶¹ Carl Haub, “Nigeria Census surprises experts,” *Population Today* 20, no.6 (June 1992), 3.

including Christian and Islamic names.⁶² African names are problematic for this work, as they obscure the religious affiliations of the bearers. For this study, we used Christian/European names and Arabic/Hausa and Nupe⁶³ names to identify Christians and Muslims.

The names were collected from two biographical and genealogical accounts of Muslims in Benin and Esan, respectively. These sources provide useful information on the religious identity of the descendants of early Muslims, often indicating whether they remained Muslims or changed their religion. However, although the names of the descendants of the Muslim personalities listed in the biographies are used in this study to identify religious affiliations, they do not necessarily always reflect a person's religion. Grandparents or parents might have given their children Islamic names, but the children may have taken a Christian name following their conversion, while retaining their Islamic name.

The first biographical evidence comes from Adesuwa Anwuli's biography of her grandfather, titled *The Man: Erhumunse Giwa-Osagie 1878-1947*. It documents the life of one of the early Benin Muslims, who hailed from

⁶² Z. I. Oseni "Islamic Names in Nigeria" *NATAIS: Journal of the Nigerian Teachers of Arabic and Islamic Studies*, vol.2, no.1. 1980, 37 and Oyeronke Oyewumi "Towards a genealogy of gender, gendered names and naming practices" in Oyeronke Oyewumi, *What gender is Motherhood? Changing Yoruba ideals of power, procreation and identity in the age of Modernity*, Palgrave Macmillan, Houndsmill Basingstoke, 2016, 160.

⁶³ It has been observed that Muslims in Esan and Northern Edo who came under the influence of Hausa and Nupe Muslims in some cases adopted Hausa and Nupe names as well. See Hakeem B. Haruna "The effects of Nupe invasion of 1860 on Auchi Indigenous Names and Modes of Clothing" *Lagos Notes and Records*, vol. 10, 2004, 41-2.

the Oloke family in Benin City. Erhunmwunse was a trader like some other early Muslims and was probably influenced by his brother Bello Osagie, a pioneer Benin convert to Islam. Giwa-Osagie had the *sunna* or Islamic bath (name-change ceremony) possibly between 1900 and the 1910s, taking the name Giwa (a Hausa name) and was later accorded the title of the *Mogaji* of Benin Muslims. He had twelve wives and twenty-five children at the time of his death in 1947. His biography includes information on some of his children, grandchildren, brothers, nephews, and nieces. This enables the reader to deduce the religious affiliations of his descendants from their names and titles.

The work provides information on only 11 of the 25 children, likely the most accomplished or prominent. Eight of the documented children bear Christian or European names and church titles, along with their children.⁶⁴ Among those with Christian titles is Ernest Aliu Giwa Osagie, who is identified as a reverend of the Christian faith. The daughters include the late Mrs. Selia Ukponmwan, a Deaconess; Mrs. Dora Safu Balonwu, a mother in Israel in the Cherubim and Seraphim Church; and Dr. (Mrs.) Sadatu Osahon, a pastor.⁶⁵ Of the eight grandchildren included in the work, only one was a practicing Muslim, going by the title of Alhaji Rilwan. Others bear Christian names and some even have Christian titles.

Another biographical work is Anne Inadi Nyamali's *Duze of Ewu-Esan: A Genealogical History*, which documents the life of Okoebor Musa Ikhiria, one of the early Esan Muslims. It is detailed and comprehensive in its treatment of the subject's descendants. Okoebor Musa Ikhiria, later known as Duze, was born in the late 19th century in Ewu, Esan. He fled the tyranny of the Onojie of Ewu in the late 19th century and settled in Agbede, where he worked in the palace of

⁶⁴ Anwuri, *The Man*, 23-42.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 27, 35, 39 and 41.

the Muslim Oba (ruler) of Agbede. He converted to Islam and performed the *sunna* with the Muslim name Musa. He later worked with the colonial administration in Owo, Ifon Division, as an interpreter. Armed with money and influence acquired as an ex-colonial service worker, he returned to Ewu and dared the Onojie (who had oppressed his family in the pre-colonial period) to assault him again. Under colonialism, the Onojie, lacking his former autocratic power, opted for a peaceful settlement of past wrongs to Ikhiria's family. Musa Ikhiria's successful challenge of Onojie earned him the nickname *U du o zei*, meaning "strong-hearted" or "bold," later written by the Europeans as Duze. He lived the rest of his life as a rich farmer, a Native Court/council member, and head of Ekori-Ewu village, where he built a mosque. He also employed Quranic teachers from neighboring Agbede to teach his children and grandchildren and adhered to Islam until he died in 1955. He left behind 13 children, who are documented in the book, along with grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and great-great-grandchildren. An analysis of the names of Duze's descendants was used to assess the status of Islam in this prominent Muslim Esan family of Ewu.

Children	African names	Christian/European Names	Arabic/Islamic/ Hausa names
Children	0	2	11
Grandchildren	17	36	36
Great-Grand- Children	81	124	32
Great Great- Grandchildren	35	32	0

The names in this table indicate that over successive generations, the number of children with Arabic/Islamic names decreased, while those with Christian, European, and African names increased. By the third generation (the great-grandchildren) there was an increase of children with Christian and European

names, while in the fourth generation, the number of children with African names was slightly higher. Another observation from the biography is that the switch or conversion (of Duze's descendants) from Islam to Christianity started when Pa Okoebor Duze was still alive, with his first daughter marrying a Christian man, Mr. Isiwale. The Duze family/genealogical history also reports cases of Muslims whose children exclusively bear Christian and European names, and of others with children who bear a mix of Muslim and Christian or European names. In the latter cases, the children were given Muslim names when their parents were still Muslims, while the children born after their parents' conversion were given Christian or European names. For example, five of the first six children of Duze's grandson, Mr. Simeon Odigie Okougbo, bear Arabic/Islamic names: Bintu, Jaffaru, Ibrahim, Razaki, and Mohammed. One bears an African name only, while the remaining seven bear African or Christian/European names—Ehinome, Ehinomen, Rachael, Raphael, Peter, Joseph, and Benjamin.⁶⁶ The first two children of another grandchild, Mrs. Rabi Adefisayo, bear the Muslim names Khadiya and Abdul Rahim, while her last two bear the Christian names of Rebecca and Joseph. Another granddaughter, Mrs. Ashetu Adegbola, gave her first child the Muslim name Abdul Maliki but gave her two subsequent children the African and Christian names Oseka and Emmanuel. These are clear cases of conversion from Islam to Christianity.

It is also clear from the text that there was a greater tendency to convert to Christianity among the second generation of descendants, who bore Christian names and who married Christian husbands or wives. This is not unconnected with the difficulty of getting a spouse within the smaller Muslim community because of the many blood relationships, which customarily prohibited people from marrying one another in Benin and Esan culture, contrary to the practice of

⁶⁶ Nyamali, *Duze of Ewu-Esan*, 91.

cross-cousin marriage in Islam.⁶⁷ People with a Western education had better prospects and social status and were more likely to take Christian spouses.

This analysis of these two Muslim families shows the proliferation of Christians among the descendants of these early Muslims, some of whom became reverends, pastors, deacons, or holders of other Church titles. There does not seem to have been a corresponding increase in conversion from Christianity to Islam.

Evidence and corroboration of stagnation and decline from an examination of Islamic leaders

Professor Oseni's reference to reversion, even to polytheism, in an Islamized community in Auchi, where all the indigenous religious shrines had been destroyed in the 1920s, attests to a decline in the Muslim population. The Muslim leaders interviewed since 2011 are unanimous in declaring such a decline in their communities. Major Alhaji Umar Otokiti, former Imam of the Nigerian Army, Arabic scholar, and scion of two chief Imams of Benin City, lamented a decrease in the number of Benin Muslims and an increasing conversion to Christianity, even by some members of his own family.⁶⁸ Alhaji Abdul Fatah I. Enabulele, the present Chief Imam of Benin (son of a former deputy Imam of Benin City), also mentioned the conversion of some of his own siblings to Christianity. Though he disagreed with the decline thesis, he opined that Islam is "both declining and

⁶⁷ Sura 4 and Nisa, 23, *English Translation of The Qur'an*, ICNA Canada, Oakville, ON., No Date, 54.

⁶⁸ Personal Interview with Col.(Rtd) Alhaji Umar Otokiti (aged 62 years), former Imam, Directorate of Islamic Affairs, Nigerian Army interviewed at his office in Benin City, 11th July 2011.

growing in Benin.”⁶⁹ He particularly lamented the decline among the descendants of the earliest Muslim families and the insignificant number of new converts among the Benin people.

The perception of a phenomenon of “slow growth” is shared by some of the Esan Muslim leaders. Both the Onojie of Irrua and the Chief Imam of Irrua affirmed that Islam was in decline, with no new conversions in recent times.⁷⁰ In contrast, in Ewu, Esan, some descendants of the earliest Muslim families have maintained a strong adherence to Islam, particularly in Ihenmwun quarter/village and Eguare, which have large Muslim populations. However, Ewu, home to two leading Pentecostal Christian pastors, presently faces increased Christian incursion and penetration (Onojie Isesele II, interviewed, 2017).⁷¹ The Onojie of Ewu expressed concern about the unimpressive growth of Islam in his community. Given this unanimity among the Muslim leaders in both the Benin and Esan communities, it can be concluded that Islam is not experiencing the expected growth but rather, is facing a decline. The decrease in the number of Muslims and the decline of Islam among the Benin and Esan people becomes obvious when one recognizes that the number of new converts to Islam is fewer than the number of Muslims converting to Christianity.

⁶⁹ Personal Interview with Alhaji Abdul Fatah Ikponmwosa Enabulele (aged 46 years) Chief Imam of Benin City at his Central Mosque Office, Benin City 2016.

⁷⁰ Personal interview with HRH Alhaji Momodu II, Onojie of Irrua and Okajesan of Esanland (86 years of age) at his Eguare Palace, Irrua, 2016, and Mallam Mahmud Musa, Chief Imam of Irrua, (45 years of age) at his Irrua Residence, 2016.

⁷¹ Personal interview with HRH Alhaji Barrister Yusuf Isesele, Ojiefu III Onojie of Irrua (5 years of age) via telephone on 2017 and Mallam Abdulmalik Esekhaigbe (aged 35 years), an Islamic school teacher and proprietor at Ihenmwun-Ewu, 2016.

Conclusion

This essay examined the Mazruian thesis of expansion and growth of Islam in Africa and Nigeria, using the cases of the Benin and Esan Muslim communities in Nigeria. The study was prompted by alarms raised because of the reversion of some Muslims to indigenous African religion in Auchi and conversions to Christianity by the descendants of Muslim leaders among the Benin and Esan. This study used the three-stages mode of conversion of mixing, literacy, and reform posited by Fisher to assess the development of Islam in the two communities in the colonial and post-colonial periods. The results indicate that Islam faced problems from a lack of state and financial support to enhance and deepen Islamic education in the communities during the colonial period, and after as well, due to the barrier imposed by the immigrant Muslim communities' exclusive use of their own languages in teaching. This poor educational situation was compounded by a massive investment in education on the part of the European Christian missions, which provided better employment prospects that encouraged the descendants of early Muslim families to drift away from their faith, mainly to Christianity. This is attested to by a decrease in the number of Muslim names in the biographical and genealogical histories of early Muslim converts. Assessments by some leaders of the Muslim communities corroborate that Islam is not experiencing the growth and expansion theorized by the Mazruian thesis, because the stage of literacy has remained stagnant due to a lack of the financial resources needed to establish and sustain Islamic educational institutions.

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