

A Survey of the Institution of Imamship in Islamic Jurisprudence

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Abstract

The word Imam in Islam connotes a number of meanings. It literally connotes a Muslim leader in congregational prayer in the Masjid (Mosque). Thus, it is beyond a Muslim leader in the mosque that leads or prays for Muslim congregation in the mosque. However, the roles of Imam is beyond leading the prayers in the mosque as stipulated in the Islamic jurisprudence. He plays a lot of vital roles in the development of a society couple with his primary role as the leader in the mosque. This is a reason why there are classifications of Imams in Islam with their distinct roles and features. Islam expresses the significance of Imam not only to the mosque and Muslims but also to the entire society at large. Besides, Imamship is an institution in the Shariah. It is a course of study in some advanced higher institutions so as to enlighten the populace about the institution and its impacts to the development of humanity. Therefore, this work surveys the institution of Imamship in the studies of Islamic education as well as its significant impacts -beyond the mosque administration-to the society. Etymology and types of Imam are also analysed in the study. The work is expository and historical in nature. Both the primary and secondary methods of data collection were used and recommendations from the findings were also put forward to the society on the practices of Imamship in Yorubaland.

Keywords: Imamship, Shariah, Islam, Muslim, Yorubaland and society.

Introduction

Imamship as an institution in Islam plays a number of roles not only in Islam but also in other aspects of life. Imam is the spiritual head as well as the political leader of a society of people (Abubakr, 1994). All the mosques in the history of Islam had their Imams who led the prayers (*salawat*) and performed other duties. Besides, Islamic jurisprudence lays down certain conditions for the appointment, nomination or selection of an Imam in Islam. These illustrate that an Imam can be appointed, nominated or selected under the dictates of *Shariah*. These conditions include the ample knowledge of the science of the Holy Quran and the *Ahadith* of the prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) among others.

Nowaday, there is a need to revisit the selection of Imam as a measure to sanitize the society, curb the menace of conflicts that severally generate on the selection of Imam and to enlighten the society both in the gown and town as well. By and large the significance of Imamship to Muslims and nation forms the background of this study. Additionally, the situation of mosques as the nerve centre in Islam and the primary office of an Imam also calls for a critical study in society under the institution of Imamship.

Conceptual Clarification

The word Imam is polysemous in interpretation. It is the title of a male Muslim religious leader who leads the prayers in a mosque aside from other functions; while Imamship denotes a system of selecting or appointing an Imam in Islam. It is the branch of Islamic jurisprudence that deals with the study of Imam as the head of the mosque, religious leader as well as the community head (Al-Ghazali, 1999). Emphasis are laid on the impacts and unique roles of Imam to the advancement of a society. A number of prophetic Ahadith express that a mosque or group of people of that has no Imam will be governed by Shaytan (Devil). Appointment of Imam in Islamic LAW, Shariah starts from congregation of two persons. Hence, in a community of at least two persons one of them should be selected or appointed as the head for effective administration of such a community. Moreover in the mosque, there should be a person that will be either appointed or selected as the leader at every time the spiritual prayer is called. This is a core reason while there is no mosque without its Imam. Islam is an Arabic word that literally denotes peace. It is a religion of peace practised by Muslims as ordained by Allah (God). The adherents of Islam are referred to as Muslims globally. The modality for the appointment of Imam in all Muslim communities are the same as expressed in the dictates of Islamic law, Shariah. Islamic jurisprudence is the code of conduct that guides Muslim affairs as ordained by Allah. It is also an institution that analyses ethics of Islam. By and large, there is no society in Islam that is lawless. There must be an Imam. The work implies the teachings that are embedded in the concept of Imamship as expressed in the tenets of Islam. A Muslim society is a community of Muslims. Hence, the topic succinctly summarises what the whole work is all about.

Etymology of Imām

Imām is an Arabic word which is derived from the verb '*amma*' (Cowan, 2008). Its literal meanings include 'to go', 'betake oneself', 'to be or become a mother', 'to lead the way', 'lead someone else by one's example', 'to

lead someone in prayer' (Lateef, 2003). Therefore, Imām in this context denotes a leader as well as the head of the Muslim community who leads other Muslims in a society.

Concept of Imamship in *Shariah* (Islamic Law)

Imam (إمام) is an Arabic word which literally means a leader. Its plural form is *a'immaḥ* (أئمة). It is an Islamic leadership position and a general term used throughout the world to refer to Muslim leaders both in the mosque and the society. The word Imam as it occurs in the Qur'an means a leader in the religion and society, a pattern, a model and a guide (Abubakr, 1994). Prophet Ibrahim (Abraham) was the first Imam as expressed by the Qur'an. This is illustrated by the references from the Qur'an as "... I will make you (Ibrahim) (Imam) a leader in religion for mankind (Q: 2: 124). Here Allah makes Ibrahim the leader of religion. He is also referred to as the leader or father of faith in both Islam and Christianity. This is so, because, he was tested and he succumbed all the trials ahead of him.

In the *Shi'ah* context, Imams have a meaning more central to belief. It refers to leaders of the community (Lateef, 2003). Twelver and Ismaili *Shi'ah* believe that these Imams are chosen by God to be perfect examples for the faithful and to lead humanity in all aspects of life. In other words, Imam Ali, referring to Ali ibn Abi Talib, is a phrase commonly used by both *Shi'ah* and Sunni Muslims, though with different connotations. It is a wide term that refers to the Muslim scholars who created the analytical sciences related to Hadith and it refers to the heads of the Prophet Muhammad's family in their generational times.

The Imam is the leader and the worshippers behind him are his followers whom are referred to in Arabic as *al-Ma'mum*. He guides and leads his *Jamaa'ah* (group) by giving lessons and talks. The Messenger of Allaah (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) and the Rightly-Guided khalifah who were the pioneer Imams used to hold gatherings in the mosques where the Muslims would gather so that they might consult with one another concerning religious and worldly matters and so that they might teach the people about Tawheed, fiqh, good manners, and also enjoin what is good and forbid what is evil (Sodiq, 2007, Adam, 1985 and Yusuf, 2014).

It is obligatory that every mosque has an Imam to lead the (congregational) prayers. In Islam, only male mature Muslims are entitled to the position of Imam in the mosque. Women cannot lead the spiritual prayers in the mosque, except amongst females-only provided there is no mature male Muslim (Abdullah, 1986 and Abubakr, 1994).

Origin of Imam in Islam

The Imamate origin in Islam can be traced to the life history of prophet Ibrahim (Prophet Abraham). He was first made the Imam of his community. He was made the leader after a series of divine stages which are similar to test, assessment and evaluation (from the lord Allah) in modern educational system (Q.2 : 124). Having passed the test, he was made and pronounced the Imam. (Q. 2 : 124, Q.2 : 126-129). As parts of teachings of his life, prophet Ibrahim thus prayed unto His Lord to make his descendants also Imam (Leader). Acceptance of his prayer made his son Ismail be an Imam and the prophet of Allah. Prophet Dawud (David) was also made an Imam. He was not only an illustrious prophet but also a king and Imam and was commanded to judge with justice among people. This illustrates that justice is the fundamental features of an Imam in Islam. He must do justice to people as well as his society at large.

And it was said unto him, O' Dawud, We have sent you as a
vicegerent in the earth therefore, judge aright between mankind
and follow not desire (Q. 38 : 26).

Extension of Imamate in the history of Islam linked to the period of Prophet Muhammad. The prophet was the Imam of the people. He combined not only the spiritual leader but also political, economic and social affairs. This is buttressed by many references from the Qur'an. Upon his demise in 632 A.H., he was succeeded by four orthodox caliphs who are hitherto refer to as the four rightly caliphs in Islamic history. The four succeeded him but ruled at different periods. The first among them was Abubakr. He was made the leader (Imam and Amir) of the Muslim community and he reigned for two years (632 – 534 A.H.). Upon his demise and due to the significant role of Imam in a society, another successor among them, Umar ibn Al-Khattab was appointed as the leader. He ruled for the period of ten years (634 – 644 A.H). Next after him was Uthman ibn Affan who ruled for twelve years (644 – 656 A.H) and the last of them was Ali ibn Abi Talib. His tenure of administration as the leader and Imam of the Muslim community started from 656 – 661 A.H. The order of succession of these caliphs is necessary in the governance of a society. Islam does not want a community to live without a leader. The extension of the Imamship or rulership did not elapse on the periods of administration of the four rightly guided caliphs mentioned, it was extended to their successors as well. There were Umayyad and Abbasiyyah periods in the history of political system of administration in Islam.

Khalifah and those Umawiy (Umayyad) and 'Abbaasi (Abassid) rulers who followed their paths were the Imams or leader of prayers and of Jihad (Abdul-Azeez, 2001 and Muhammad, 1990). In Islamic history, whenever the Prophet sent a commander to a war, he would lead the prayers too, and if he appointed a man as a

governor over a city – as he appointed ‘Ataab ibn Usayd to govern Makkah, ‘Uthmaan ibn Abi’l-‘Aas to govern al-Taa’if, ‘Ali and Mu’aadh, Abu Musa to govern Yemen, ‘Amr ibn Hazm to govern Najraan – whoever he appointed as their leader would lead them in prayers and carry other Islamic rites amongst them (Al-Ghazali, 1999). This was also the practice emulated by the rightly guided caliphs who came after him and those who succeeded them hitherto. The type of administration run by the four caliphs encompassed the political, economic, religious and judicial lives of the *Ummah*. Many of their successors among the caliphs also assumed Imamship positions both as political and spiritual leaders (Brills, 1997).

Classifications of Imam in Islam

In order of their roles in society, Imam is broadly categorised into two distinct divisions viz, Imam Kubrah (Great or Big Imam) and Imam Sughra (Small Imam). The former is of higher rank than the latter. In addition to its leadership role in the mosque, the Imam Kubra organises, coordinates and directs the affairs of the society politically, religiously, educationally and socially. This is well embedded in the history of Islam. Thus, he leads Islamic worship services, serve as community leaders, and provide religious guidance (Adam, 1985). The typical example of this category of Imam is the Sultan of Sokoto. He is the Imam of Muslims in Northern, Southern, Western as well as Eastern Nigeria. The present Imam Kubra (Big Imam) in Nigeria is Alhaj Sa’d Abubakar (CFR). His roles are to oversee the affairs of the Muslim community in all geo-political zones of the nation from time to time. He co-ordinates the social activities of all the Muslims Such as sighting the moon for the commencement of the fast in the month of Ramadan (The ninth month of Islamic calendar) every year. He also announces the feast of upon the completion of the fasting.

Besides the above roles of the Imam Kubra, he also works for the peaceful co-existence of Muslim with non-Muslims. in society. This is a core reason why the government usually include the Imam Kubra in the religious affairs in Nigeria. The Sultan of Sokoto, who a typical example of Imam Kubra sighted in this work, is a member of Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC). He represents the affairs of Muslims in the nation and ensuring peaceful co-existence between Muslims and non-Muslims in Nigeria. It could be recalled that this body (NIREC) which was established to co-ordinate religious affairs in the nation represented by the religious of both Islam and Christianity has recorded number of success on religious peaceful co-existence and harmony in the nation.

Other examples of the Imam Kubra in Nigeria are the principal Imams of each state of the federation. These Imams do not only lead the congregational prayers in their respective mosques (both the daily obligatory ones and that of the Jumah on every Friday; they also perform social duties in the society. They appoint Imams of other mosques in the states or kingdom. They also perform social functions in society; such as solemnization of Nikah (Muslim marriage), funeral rites, representing the affairs of Muslims in the state government decision among others. Any conflict or dispute that arises among other Imams in their states are usually settled by them. Typical examples of this class of Imam are Imam Alim (The Chief Imam of Ondo Kingdom), Imam Abubakr Agbotomokere (The chief of Ibadan Land),

Imam Sughrah’s roles are to lead the prayers in the mosques and to see to the smooth running of the affairs of the congregations. This type of Imam are categorised as those that lead daily salawat (prayers), the Imam for Jumat (Friday prayer) as well as Imam for special Eed salawat. Under this Category of Imam, there are institutional, societal, Ratibi, student and governmental Imams.

An institutional Imam is the spiritual leader of Muslims in each school. He leads the Muslims of an institution in both daily and Jumah (Friday) prayers. This type of Imam always acts under the norms and value of an institution. An examples of this class of Imam are the Imam of Universities, colleges of education, Polytechnics, secondary and primary schools either of the government or private ones.

Ratibi Imam is an Imam that is primary function is to lead the five daily obligatory prayers in a mosque. They equally give sermons at the end of the spiritual prayers and pray for the members of the congregation. A Ratibi Imam may be appointed by the state Imam or in some cases if the community appointed him he may be turbaned by the state or kingdom Imam.

Each muslim society usually has her own Imam as the missionary. This selection is based within the group by appointing a well knowledgeable among them as their Imam. This is in addition to the Amir of such a society. An Amir is the title of a supreme leader in a society of group of people. However, some Muslim societies appoint only an Amir among themselves to carry out the duties and functions of an Imam.

Muslim students in an institution constitute themselves under an umbrella and usually select an Imam among themselves. The case of student Imam is similar to that of the societal Imam. Some schools appoint an Amir; whose duties include leading the prayers and co-coordinating the affairs of other Muslim students within the school, while some of them usually appoint both an Amir and Imam among the executive body. This selection of Imam among the students does contradict with that of the Muslim community of such an institution.

Governmental Imam is a class of Imam that leads Muslim workers in spiritual prayers every day, on the Jumah prayers and two feast prayers (Eed Al-Adha and Eed Al-Fitr). A staff is usually appointed to fill this post.

Although, there are some instances whereby an outsider scholar may be appointed especially if there is no competent person to perform the roles or other obscure reason that may be well known to the Muslims of this Category. This may include infringement from the government of top officials of the establishment, but, the case is being changed as the government paves way for the practices of religion without depriving ones right in the ministries.

Qualities of an Imam

Knowledge: Ample knowledge is the first core quality for the selection of an Imam in Islam. Members of the Islamic faith look to the Imam for answers and guidance, so knowledge is critical for an Imam. He should have complete knowledge of the Qur'an and Islamic faith and of spiritual and religious laws (Shari'ah). He must know and understand the practices of Islam and comprehensive meanings of the teachings of the Islamic jurisprudence, Ahadith and other sciences of Islamic studies (Al-Ghazali, 1999, Adam, 1985 and Sodiq, 2007).

Moral Qualities: An Imam's morality and ethics must be above reproach. He should be pure and free from sin. He must infallibly follow all of the laws of Islam and not make errors in his everyday life. As a leader, he must lead by example and earn the trust of his followers and of society (Abdul-Azeez, 2012).

Allah Consciousness: Imam is the bridge or intermediary between (Allah) God, or the divine, and his followers. In order to fulfill this task, he must have God consciousness and be in direct communication with Allah. An Imam then passes this divine, spiritual guidance and grace to the followers of Islam.

Infallibility or Being Free from Sin and Error: An Imam, must, like a Prophet, have the station of purity. He should be free of sin and error, otherwise he cannot lead and be a model for the people and receive the trust of society. He must consume the heart and He is the preserver and guardian of the Divine Law as well as the leader and guide of the people.

Courage: An Imam must be the bravest individual of Islamic society because without that courage of the leader, it is not possible to accept him as a leader. He must have courage in face of the difficult events of life and sudden and unexpected happenings. He must be courageous before those who use coercion and who are oppressive and courage before external and internal enemies of Islam (Sodiq, 2007).

Austerity: Imam must be free from any chains or bonds of the material world, from all whims, lusts, any ambition, wealth and position so that he cannot be deceived and influenced. Thus, he should not surrender and compromise the dictates of Islam.

Ethical or Moral Attractions: Imam as a leader in a society is in need of goodness so that the people are magnetized towards him (Brills, 1997).

Criteria for Selection of an Imam in Islam

Hadrat Abu Mas'ud has reported the holy Prophet as saying: "The *Imam* of the Muslims should be such a person who possesses the deepest knowledge and understanding of the Qur'an. However, in case of many people that are equal in this quality, then the *Imam* should be a person who has profound knowledge of the *Hadith*, *Sunnah* and *Shari'ah* regulations.

Hadith is an Arabic word which denotes the sayings of prophet while Sunnah connotes the practices of the prophet. These two are the second fundamental primary sources of Shariah. Ample knowledge of the studies of Hadith and Sunnah along with the knowledge of the Qur'an qualifies a Muslim to be appointed as an Imam of any kind in a society. Shariah is the Arabic term of all the knowledge of Islam. It includes that of the *Qur'an*, *Hadith*, *Sunnah*, *Sirah*, *Tarikh* and others branches of Islamic knowledge.

However, if all are still equal in this, he should be the one who migrated first (This is translated nowadays as the oldest in Islam). And if all are equal in this too, then the one who is most senior in age" (Muhammad, 2009). The deepest knowledge of the Qur'an" implies that he should have a special inclination and taste for the Qur'an. He should have committed a large portion of it to memory, and should be able to recite it well with the *Tajweed*. *Tajweed* is the science of reading the Quran with its rules and regulations. In addition to this, he should have deep insight into its meaning, contents and understand its messages well.

Appointment of Imam in Islamic Jurisprudence

Selecting an Imam is highly examined in the Islamic jurisprudence. This is due to the distinctive roles of an Imam in a society as the spiritual as well as the political head of a society. In the first premise, Imam may be selected or appointed by a selective group of people in a community. Such group is referred to in Shariah as the Shura. It is made of committee of learned scholars in Arabic and Islamic knowledge. The existence of this group had been since the period of the prophet. Moreover, the appointments of the orthodox caliphs were done via this Shura. The Qur'an illustrates the significance of Shuran in a number of verses as pre-requisite for the selection and or appointment of an Imam in Islam.

Shariah allows Muslim members of a community choose someone who is considered knowledgeable and wise in the knowledge of Arabic and Islam. He represents the holy Prophet in the mosque and his duties and

responsibilities are of unique importance and significance in the religious system of Islam. Only such a person, therefore, should be appointed for this job, who is on the whole the best man available among the worshippers not only in matters of knowledge, righteousness, spirit of sacrifice and insight into religion (which are the necessary qualities of an Imam), but he should also possess leadership qualities to guide them in the practical affairs of life (Lateef, 2003 and Sodiq, 2007).

In some instances, appointment of an Imam needs to be ratified by the government. This is the usual common especially to the appointment of governmental Imam and Imam al-Kubrah (Supreme or Chief Imam in a state of kingdom). Imam of the government may be selected by the group of Muslim workers under the government who are also knowledgeable in the Shariah. Such an Imam can be among them or an outsider. In all cases, the approval of his selection or appointment is subject to the government's consent. Such a Muslim must be the one who has most knowledge of the Qu'ran and is of good character. Selection or appointment of Imam in Islam requires a number of qualities. These include: adequate knowledge, honesty, justice and selflessness (Abdullah, 1986).

Roles of Imams in the mosques and Society

An Imam is highest leadership position that can be attained in the Islamic faith. His role is to converse with God and bring his messages to his followers. He provides council, guidance and spiritual education. In addition to providing leadership role to individual, he also provides social and political leadership for the Islamic faith (Al-Maneef, 2014 and Abdullah, 1986). He is not only a spiritual and religious leader of the individual followers of Islam. Imam is responsible for spreading Islamic knowledge and defending Islamic tenets as well as providing intellectual guidance.

The primary responsibility of an Imam is to lead Islamic worship services. On Friday, he should deliver the *khutba* (sermon) and also leads the *taraweeh* (nightly prayers during Ramadan), either alone or with a partner(s) to share the duty. He equally also leads all other special prayers, such as funerals, prayers for rain, prayers during an eclipse and more. He equally leads Islamic formal (*Fard*) prayers, even in locations outside the mosque.

Moreover, Imamate is a religious leadership. It entails the management of the affairs of the Muslim society, improving and exalting the position of the Muslims. Besides being a religious leader, Imam is in capacity as leader of society, responsible for all government functions, and as such should possess the requisite qualifications to shoulder that responsibility (Muhammad, 1990).

He is a Political Head. Imam is a Leader of Theology or Law. Dispensation of justice is another function of an Imam. He defends Islam and invites people to Allah by means of logic, argument and good advice based on the dictates of Islam (Abubakr, 1994).

Other functions of the Imam are to safeguard and defend the Islamic faith. He upholds justice and fair play in matters of litigation in accordance with *Shari'ah* provision. He should also ensure that Kharaj, Zakat as well as Sadaqah are collected and distributed as stipulated by the Shariah (Muhammad, 1990).

Imam Sughrah is the director of the Masjid. He is responsible for the mosque. His role is not restricted only to leading the prayers, because the Imam in the mosque is like the sultan in his sultanate. His position of leadership is a divinely ordained system through which Allaah gives him practical guidelines to achieve noble aims and lofty purposes, such as worshipping Him.

His Social Roles in the community

Besides leading the Islamic prayers and services, he also takes on a larger role in providing community support and spiritual advice. In addition to being a prayer leader, the great Imam also serves as a member of the larger leadership team in a Muslim community. The society seeks for his counseling in personal or religious issues. He also responds to spiritual advice; helps with a family issue, or in other times of need (Fafunwa, 1976, Yusuf, 2014 and Lateef, 2003).

The Imam may be involved in visiting the sick, engaging in inter-faith service programmes, officiating marriages, and organizing educational gatherings in the mosque (Sodiq, 2007). In modern times, the he is increasingly in a position to educate and reform youth away from radical or extremism. By and large, he reaches out to youth, inspires them in peaceful pursuits, and teaches them the correct understanding of Islam in the hopes that they will not fall prey to misguided teachings and resort to violence (Sodiq, 2007).

Summary

In peroration, the Imam must be the most aware and most knowledgeable person in relation to the religion of God. Institution of Imamship constitutes a lot to the peaceful co-existence of Muslims in their various societies. It is a political system of governance that establishes the criteria for appointing as well as the selecting a leader in lieu of favoritism and nepotism which are the root causes of bad leadership.

Recommendations

- Institution of Imamship should be well understood by every Muslim; not only in academic milieu but also the Alfas in the town.
- Muslim clerics should adhere strictly to injunctions of Islam as it were expressed by the Ahadith of the prophet on the selection and appointment of Imams.
- The Imamate should not be used as a post of getting fame by the Imams. Instead, whoever is appointed to the post should be conscious of Allah in disseminating his services to the society and humanity.
- As examined in this work, on no account should a female be made an Imam of a community (of both sexes) irrespective of her level of Islamic knowledge.
- Political leaders in the country should be religious and open-minded to the masses. Their roles in society are pertinent to that of Imams. Hence, they should disseminate their duties effectively. If this is done, there will be peace, harmony and justice in society in lieu of survival of the fittest and injustice.

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