



LASU JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES (LASUJOH)

VOL. 14, 2020 EDITION | ISSN: 978-274-384-4

A publication of:
Faculty of Arts
Lagos State University, Ojo
Lagos, Nigeria.
Email: dean-arts@lasu.edu.ng

LASU Journal of Humanities (LASUJOH)

Volume 14, 2020 Edition

© 2020 Faculty of Arts
Lagos State University, Ojo
Lagos, Nigeria

ISSN: 978-274-384-4

Produced by

FREE ENTERPRISE PUBLISHERS LAGOS

HEAD OFFICE: 50 Thomas Salako Street, Ogbal Ikeja, Lagos.

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Journal Address: LASU Journal of Humanities
c/o The Dean, Faculty of Arts, Lagos State University, Ojo
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The Life and Times of Musa Ajagbemokeferi: 1933–2000

Bello, Mufutau Olusola, PhD & Balogun, Badrudeen Adesina

Abstract

This work is on the life of Shaykh Musa Ibrahim Ajagbemokeferi: 1933-2000. It focuses on his life, da'wah and his contributions to the growth and development of Islam in general. The introduction of Islam in Ekitiland seems to be identical in nature as it was the work of traders, itinerary preachers and slave trade returnees from other part of Yorubaland. However, its spread and growth was through the clerics such as Ajagbemokeferi. This work is historical; hence the method used is purely descriptive analysis. Data were sourced through his immediate family and relatives. Other relevant information were drawn from Muslims and non-Muslims in Igbemo and in all places he visited during his da'wah programs. Findings show that Ajagbemokeferi impacted much on Ekiti Muslims. It also reveals that the preponderance of non-Muslims and nominal Muslims across the state were the result of vehement reaction to his singularly intolerant brand of Islamic evangelism.

Keywords: life, time, shaykh, Ajagbemokeferi

Introduction

THE COMMUNITY NOW KNOWN AS ORUN-EKITI IN IREPODUN/IFELODUN LGA of Ekiti State was formerly an integral part of Igbemo-Ekiti in the Ifelodun axis of the local government. It was then known as Orun quarter. The greater part of the community came from Orun in the present Ise/Orun LGA some 100 years ago.¹ After a long series of agitations for recognition as an autonomous community outside Igbemo, the Orun quarter was granted autonomous status by the state government on Dec. 19, 2013, hence, Orun-Ekiti became the 12th community of the local government.² Historically, therefore, Ajagbemokeferi lived and died as a citizen of Igbemo. He belonged to the family of Odopetu of Itolofø (Oke-Imale, Ayegbami and Òkè-Ìlèmø) a section of Ilemo-Orun Street, Igbemo.

His Early Life

His parents were Ibrahim Fagbotemi, alias Megida, the first Egbedi of Ilemo-Orun and the mother was Princess Fatimah Oke, from the family of Chief Ajapinsa in Oba-Orun compound. God blessed them with six children comprising four males and two females. The youngest child who was born in 1933 was the Shaykh. The Gregorian calendar was not known to his family and there was no accurate record of his birth, as such the exact date of his birth could not be determined.³

Musa grew up in a family where western education was not popular, if at all, there was such an opportunity. The first school was founded in 1935 by the Church Missionary Society (CMS). It is now known as St. John's Anglican Primary School, Igbemo-Ekiti. Before this period, there were many Qur'anic schools manned by many learned Muslims who were versed in Arabic and Islamic Studies. It was therefore, erroneous to say that because of the non-availability of western education, that the people of the time were illiterates. Islamic education was in vogue in Igbemo, such that nearly all Muslim households or mosques have Arabic and Islamic studies centres. As a result of his place in the larger family, influenced by the age of the parents, Ajagbemokeferi almost became a spoilt child. He was not ready to stay in the early Qur'anic Schools. He ran from one school to the other, fearing the high-handedness of the local alfas. He eventually started his elementary school at St. John's, but he could not go far as he refused to be converted to Christianity.⁴

In the farm, he was good and he therefore engaged himself in farming activities. He used to join his mates in social gathering after farm work and in the moon light chats *Eré Òsùpá*, whereby they engaged in wrestling, storytelling and local songs. At times, it was a mixed gathering of males and females. The shaykh was very good and renowned in these social displays. However, he was not doing well in Qur'anic Schools. He left Igbemo for Agbado-Ekiti in Gboyan LGA, where he continued his farming activities. He was there till 1947 when his father died. He came home with very large quantities of farm products, such as yams, yam flour, vegetables, to celebrate the funeral ceremony of his late father. By 1949, he had decided to stay at home partaking in social activities. He joined the then flourishing "Sákárà group" managed by alfa Yusuf Bakare Ologundudu. The star of the musical group was alfa Salami Jobgodo Esan with *iyá-ilù*, the trio of Musa, Amodu Ejalonibu (later known as Amodu Seli) and young Yakubu Adesina Balogun, were behind the chorus of the group. They brought great highlife to the town as they pulled crowds wherever the performed.⁵

Marriage

Alhaji Musa, as he was fondly called by his siblings, married his first wife in 1954, Jemilat, a native of Igbemo, before his adventure to Isale-Eko in Lagos. They had to stay in Mushin for their accommodation granted them by Adiamo. The first marriage produced two children. The second marriage with Hajarat, who stayed for a short spell, produced the first female child of the family, Nafisat. He

took Habibat as his third wife and she was the mother of the second *khalifah*, Habibullah Musa (d. 2019). The fourth wife was Nimotallah, a native of Itapa-Ekiti, followed by Sikirat, a native of Ado-Ekiti. Others were Ayoka (daughter of late Chief Imam of Ikole-Ekiti, Yusuf Olatunji Ogunlai); Ummuani (popularly called Iya-Bashirat) from Ayede-Ekiti; Latifat from Ilesa, Osun State; Amudat, also from Ilesa; Fadhilah from Owo, Ondo State; Fadhilat Ogotun-Ekiti; Zulikha, popularly called Iya Rasaq, the third *khalifah*, from Irun, Ondo State; Sabitiyu from Ido-Ekiti; Eniola from Ado, *Iya-Muslimah* from Ikare-Akoko; Sidikat from Ado (she bore him no child); Fatimah from Iwo, Osun State; Mary'am from Ikun-Ekiti; Salimota from Ire-Ekiti; Funmilayo from Ise-Ekiti (she bore him no child); Suwebat Dayo (daughter of late Balogun Mùsùlùmí of Igbemo, Muhammad Akanbi); Zainab from Okene, Kogi State; and the last in the series was Adeola from Ado (she bore him no child). She was the one that bagged the title of Osemawe of Orun quarter in 1991.⁶ As we could observe, he had 22 wives but not all of them were in his house at a time. Some deserted him during his crisis while some divorced him owing to his strict adherence to Islamic tenets.

His Children

Ajagbemokeferi had 68 children, over 160 grandchildren and many great-grandchildren. Only 56 of his children outlived him. His first born was late Abdul-Ganiy Olohunkemi (d. 2016) and the last born is Nafisat Musa. He had 28 male and female children each, the female headed by Nafisat. In spite of his busy schedule, he had time to play with them. He also demonstrated such to his grandchildren as his responsibility of guiding them to Islam. In spite of his overwhelming love for his children, he understood his responsibility of guiding them to Islam and made all of his children dependable Islamic scholars.⁷

He made it clear to his children that they did not enjoy special privilege for being his children if they themselves did not believe and do righteous deeds. He used to render one of the sayings of Prophet Muhammad to his daughter Fatimah: "I cannot help you before Allah. Ask me for whatever you want of my wealth."⁸

His Education

He had deep sharing interest in listening and copying the style of the sákárà group artists like Babalegba, Ojindo, Saka aka, Amuda Ikare-Akok,o and others who used some quranic verses in their songs. This inspired him as he wanted to learn to read the qur'an to boost his chorus. Thus, he began to learn from the rudimentary stages; i.e. alphabet, short verses and/or chapters under the tutelage of Abdur-Rahman Balogun, the first Chief Mufasir of Igbemo. This was the first move to change his life career unconsciously to be capable of reading and reciting the qur'an.⁹

By 1951, he followed Idris Maliki Ajana to Lagos, he then bragged that he would go and learn how to read and recite the qur'an fluently for the use of his new profession of sákárà chorus. He returned after two years with some of his

colleagues with the display of the quality of the knowledge they had acquired, a new lease of life came upon Muslims and non-Muslims who were interested in attending their respective night preaching under the leadership of Idris Malik Ajana and Shuaib Adeleye as the interpreter (*ajanasi*).¹⁰ In order to acquire more knowledge, he went back to Ibadan in 1957, at Amunigun, to further his studies. On his return in 1959 the tone and style of his *da'wah* had gradually changed and he could boast of acquiring more knowledge than his cohorts.

His *Da'wah* Activities

Ajagbemokeferi engaged himself in the establishment of qur'anic schools and regular preaching. He was an itinerary preacher as he moved from one place to the other. In the course of his travelling and moving closer to some of his converts who were once idol worshipers of various deities, he got a deeper knowledge of their remote doctrines. He started exposing the secrets in the mode of worship of the traditionalists. Making loud portraits of the secret cults and the unholy acts of adherents of African traditional religion thus earned him the nickname *Ajagbemokeferi*, one who hounds unbelievers, a unique name of his. He subsequently named Abdulazees from Esa-Odo residing in Ibadan and Ekunlusi, a native of Ikare-Akokon Ajagbemokeferi. He became a threat to them, visiting them in their cult gatherings, carting some of their objects away to be displayed to the public. This was the beginning of his *da'wah*. He did not hesitate to enter any place and/or saying anything about the secret cults. He visited many big cities of notable divinities. He appeared brave and his bravery earned him favorable acceptance by the elderly Muslims who supported and cheered him when he got to their towns. He pulled crowds in his public preaching because of his penchant in exposing the secrets of the divinities so adored by the practitioners of African traditional religion. He had little or no challenges; hence, his *da'wah* was not violent. He earned the courage of making use of any of the oral gains or materials confirming the pontifical usage of them. The adherents of such beliefs felt proud of coming near him and/or sharing views on their positive benefits. He never denied the existence of these things but refuted the idea of worshipping them instead of one true Allah. They were created for use and not for being worshiped.¹¹

Many people consulted him on their private problems, even, various communities used to invite him to pray for the peace and progress of their towns and their children respectively. The result of these activities boosted his popularity not only within Muslim circles, but among the non-Muslims. His visit to Ilasa-Ekiti where there was only a handful of Muslims in 1974 was a morale booster to the small Muslim population. Today the Ilasa-Ekiti Muslim community has become stronger among the Muslim groups in Ekiti East LGA.¹² As he moved from one place to the other, he had many pupils joining his *qur'anic* school. Unlike some of his group members known in various towns in Ekiti as *zumuratul-mumin*, he did not separate himself from the body of the Muslims in Igbemo. He had no separate place of worship for both Friday and 'Eid prayers. Beside his

personal mosque in his house that served as part of the *ratibi* mosque; he used to contribute immensely to his father's mosque because he saw himself as an active member.¹³

Professional Life

Ibrahim Ajagbemokeferi worked as a laborer in the farms of Igbemo and neighboring towns, like Ire and Agbado during the early years of his life, which was the main occupation of every youth. He later graduated to have his own farm. He engaged in farming activities throughout his lifetime and also encouraged his children to go into farming. He grew rice, yam, and other varieties of farm produce common in Igbemo. He had a rice-processing mill. At Aisegba-Ekiti, he learned tailoring and practiced the profession for a while before his sojourn into music.

He was a hajj pilgrimage agent to Makkah and Medina from 1971 to 1983. It was on record that he was the first in Igbemo native to embark on pilgrimage to Makkah and Medina in 1960 by road. He was unable to return until 1962. Jimoh Balogun went in 1961 and returned that year. This alarmed the township and all hope was lost that Ajagbemokeferi was forever gone, that they had lost a gem. This situation made the return of Balogun a huge celebration and he was named Adesina—one who opened the pace for Muslim pilgrimage in the town. Musa returned home in the year 1962.¹⁴

His Leadership Roles

Being a learned person and a philanthropist, Musa Ajagbemokeferi occupied a prominent position among his contemporary clerics in Ekitiland. He was recognized by many individuals, as well as, organizations. He also wielded considerable powers. His disciples paid their due respects to him when they visited him or when he visited them for fatherly advice. His influence was so great to the extent that a large number of visitors came regularly to pay homage to him and his pupils and were ever ready to obey his commands. The completion of the qur'an which is marked by a solemn ceremony was a money-making occasion for him.

He was to his pupils a spiritual leader whose leadership was nice and sincere. For instance, he provided free boarding for his pupils and their families. He also treated his students with kindness. He would gladly assume responsibilities on behalf of any of his pupils who needed his assistance. Most of the informants in this research claimed that, some students came to him for qur'anic studies along with their wives. He treated his female children more kindly than the male ones. Whenever any of his daughters was getting married, he would give her what could sustain them for some time. Sometime, he took responsibility for his poor sons-in-laws' needs. Whenever any of his married daughters visited him, he gave them enough foodstuffs to take back to their homes. He was also generous to all members of his families irrespective of their religious affiliations.¹⁵ Besides these, he was also not left behind in the area of community development. Despite his

negative stance on western education, he donated his big generator set to power students' hostel of Igbemo Community Comprehensive High School, which was established in 1975 with twenty-five-naira cash for taking off while his house remained in darkness.

His Travails

Due to his strong stand against the perpetration of evil by both Muslims and non-Muslims, the community conspired against him and he was deemed *persona non grata* in 1979, due primarily to his membership of the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) as against the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) which was the dominant party in the town. He was implicated in the murder of the UPN chieftain Samuel A. Oloketyl, whose death was linked to the political disagreement between them, but it was not substantiated. One of his wives, Fatimah, had contested the membership of Ondo State House of Assembly on the platform of the NPN, with Oloketyl. However, Oloketyl emerged winner, but died shortly after the election. Many believed it was Ajagbemokeferi that killed him because he had already vowed to deal with him in the presence of many people. Those who thought they had lost a gem started burning the houses of NPN members, especially that of his extended families. This crisis affected his religious activities. He was sent on exile and decided to leave Igbemo for Ado on Sept. 11, 1979.¹⁶

On settling down at Ado, he became more comfortable as he was blessed with houses and cars. His travails began again on March 28, 1983 when some policemen came to arrest him on a charge of kidnapping. He was arrested because elections were drawing near. It was speculated that an attempt to kill him in detention led to the unrest in the prison. He was still in detention when his houses and vehicles were burnt in connection with political riots again. He was detained for seven months, March 28 to Oct. 7, 1983. The result of the investigations revealed his innocence and was therefore released unconditionally. While in detention, he preached to his fellow inmates to the extent that he converted some of them to Islam. No wonder, when he was leaving the prison custody, some inmates and his converts shed tears for missing his kindness and generosity.¹⁷ His arrest, detention, relationship with inmates and his release later raised him to an exalted position which was likened to the fate of Prophet Yusuf in Egypt. It was later discovered that his travails were masterminded by political opponents who wanted to curtail his influence by keeping him out of circulation. On his release, Ajagbemokeferi went to Ikole and later to Iwo, as some of his wives were from these towns. At Iwo, he continued his *da'wah* activities and organized another Arabic and Islamic training centre from where many pupils graduated. He was in Iwo for about three years, between October 1983 and January 1986. He returned to Ado in 1986 after he had renovated his burned houses.¹⁸ People's observation about him dwelled on the following

- i. Those who knew a hidden side of the event that mitigated his sudden

attack and suppression viewed the reactions of the people as a loss of thought on what actually happened;

- ii. The political bitterness in the town had a long precedence;
- iii. East or west, home is best; when the entire *ulamā* of the Yorubaland met at Ojā-Oba Central Mosque in Ibadan to view and think of counter-reactions, he vehemently turned down every other move not in agreement with reconciling him with his people;
- iv. His shelving of any counter-reaction saved the community from havoc and loss of lives on both sides;
- v. His yearning to return to Igbemo to live in peace among his people whom he thought were misdirected against him;
- vi. His installation as Ààrè Mùsùlùmí of Igbemoland came as a surprise to those who thought his disagreement with the community would remain forever intractable.
- vii. The ways he resolved his problem with his people is a lesson to various schools of thought to handle their own problem carefully.

Homecoming and Recognition

In 1985, the Ansar-ud-Deen community in Igbemo sent a delegation led by his cousin, Amodu Tijani Egbedi to tell him to return home. He inquired to know the purpose. He was informed that they wanted to honor him with an Islamic chieftaincy title. He told them to give him some time to decide and discuss the issue with his family. It would be recalled that he was sent on exile because of political crisis. During these periods all his family members most especially the Odopetu family of Ilemo-Orun and a handful of Muslims in Igbemo, were with him. The Muslims wanted to use the position to bring him back to Igbemo. He was therefore accorded the title of Ààrè Mùsùlùmí (leader of the faithful) of Igbemoland March 3, 1986, witnessed by a large crowd. Many were surprised that a man of his caliber, so previously derided by his people, was now being exalted with a title.

Musa Ajagbemokeferi settled down with his family. Hardly had he settled down that he resumed his *da'wah* activities and also reintroduced his qur'anic school. The school and his *da'wah* activities quickly reshaped things. The school again brought competitions among the existing qur'anic schools in town. Notable among the existing ones were those of Ibrahim Akeukanwo Balogun that had been in existence since 1952, Abdullah Junaid qur'anic school (1973), Abdullah Olaleye (1982). His school at Ilemo-Orun was competing with the schools of Ibrahim Akeukanwo Balogun and Abdullah Olaleye at Balogun Mosque and Egbedi mosques, respectively. He renamed his own street, Oke-Itolofo, to Ayegbami Street, Ilemo-Orun. His new mosque joined the league of ratibi mosques in the town. He re-enacted the old order of participating in local affairs. He was acknowledged as Elérébí (leader) of Odopetu family. The idea of taking part in party politics was dropped. However, a polling unit was stationed in his

immediate family compound where his family members and students used to vote during elections.¹⁹

Another major development in his return from exile was the drastic change in his view on western education. At the beginning he actively participated and contributed immensely to the funding of Ansar-ud-Deen Secondary Modern School and Igbemo Community High School, which were established in 1964 and 1975 respectively. He registered his children in the schools. At the inaugural launching of Igbemo Community High School in 1975, he, in conjunction with other Muslim leaders, donated money and materials to the construction and takeoff of the schools. Nearly all his children who had attained school age were pupils and students attended either Ansar-ud-Deen Primary and Igbemo Community Comprehensive High School Igbemo. As soon as he returned home, his position on western education changed. This brought a setback to the laid-down structured background from which he could have produced graduates of different professional backgrounds such as those of other high-profile clerics like Najimudeen Al-Kuburah of Ibadan. It was learned that he was directed by his zumuratul mumin members across Yorubaland to withdraw his children from the western schools to the qur'anic schools, to bequeath Islamic and Arabic knowledge to his progeny.

On the social scene, he did not appeal to anybody again to be socialized in western ways. Before his exile, he was averse to taking pictures but when he came back, he took one during his installation as Ààrè Mùsùlùmí. He had a TV set and radio sets in his home prior to his exile, but discarded them when he came back, saying that these contraptions belonged to social clubs and other social functions in line with western ideology could lead people astray. However, before his death, he purchased a TV set, a radio and a video player again. The reason for the change of his mind was based on the positive effect of those items. He wanted to be able to broadcast educative Islamic programmes on both TV and radio stations. He was using the video player to play educative lectures of other Muslim scholars.

On the issue of marriage, he had 10 wives, as against the maximum of four approved by Islam (Q4: 3). He was ordered by his teacher at Amunigun Ibadan to reduce the number to the four recommended by Islam. Eventually, he picked the following four wives (Jemilat, Zainab, Hamdat and Fatimah) and divorced the remaining six. This decision caused a lot of legitimate crisis within the family when the children of the divorced wives needed explanations on their positions in the family. The matter was resolved with the explanation that they have the same status like other children whose mothers were retained. Later, those wives were permitted to return on the condition that they would accept veiling. He later married another two wives that made the number of wives that outlived him and performed four months ten days *iddah* (waiting) period in his house a total of 12.²⁰

On his cordial relationship with the other Muslim groups in the town, Ajagbemokeferi did not break away from the main body of the Muslims in the

town, the Ansar-ud-Deen. He was a member of the Nurudeen within the Ansar-ud-Deen central mosque, Igbemo, till his death. He and his entire family, and his students were observing prayers in congregation with the Muslim community. He believed in the *jama'ah* and whenever he had any program, he would create a chance for the Igbemo *jama'ah* to perform their own duty before his group would take charge of the program fully. Throughout his life time, he observed *juma'ah* service with Ansar-ud-Deen *jama'ah*; he never envisaged to have separate *juma'ah* mosque. He used to observe his Eids prayers with the Ansar-ud-Deen. Shaykh Ajagbemokeferi, with all his children and students, would sing and chant the praise of God and His Noble Prophet to and from the Eid grounds. The people of the town irrespective of their religious affiliation used to stay in the front of their different houses to receive his blessings. He would stop and pray for them from one house to the other. After his demise, his first khalifah, Abdul-Ganiy Musa, followed in his footsteps.²¹

Ajagbemokeferi did not canvass for Zumuratal Mumin in Igbemo because he knew that they were dedicated Ansar-ud-Deen members who would not heed to him in that regard. Even his contemporaries who went to zumurah qur'anic schools did not join him in any Zumratul Mumin outlook. They were more than 30. The other 20 belonged to the Ansar-ud-Deen society. His immediate family of Odopetu is predominantly Muslim and all of them are members of Ansar-ud-Deen. As leader of the family, he tended to abide by what they were doing before he joined the Zumuratal Mumin.

During the harvest ceremonies of the Ansar-ud-Deen, he used to participate and give them moral advice that the money realized must be used judiciously. In 1989, when he was one of the harvest chair-holders, he was the highest donor. Also, during the end-of-the-year prayer session called *Ádúá ọdún*, his immediate family always took the lead, and he would make sure that all the names of his wives and children appeared in the list of donors.²² Although both harvest and *adua odun* have no basis in Islam, but they see both as another avenue to raise funds for the mosque project.

On community development, he played prominent roles. He was a pillar around which all and sundry revolved. He was the Elérébí of Odopetu family for more than 20 years before his death. He committed himself to the family and community at large. He was one of the movers for autonomy of Orun from Igbemo, which was eventually realized.

His Literary Works

Shaykh Musa Ibrahim Ajagbemokeferi wrote two different books: *Ìtàn ÌtÀsírí Awọn Ológbóni* and *Ọrọ Ìbá Áwon Ájé Jà* (Parts I-IV) [The History of Secrets of Ògbóni Cultists] and *How to Overcome Evil Forces Witches* (Vol. I-IV). In these books, he ridiculed and relegated the activities of Ògbóni cultists and witches. He urged those still involved to quit and embrace Islam. The publication of these

books aroused a big clash as one would expect, between Ajagbemokeferi and the Ògbóni members.

In these books, he explained the language of Ògbóni cult, their culture, the initiation of new members and how to join them at meetings. According to him, the neophyte would be covered with white linen before the ritual was performed for him. The books also explained the burial rituals and funeral ceremony of a dead member and how the ritual was performed. He also explained that the rituals are spearheaded by the *Asípa*, who is the leader of the cult. Items used in the rites include kolanuts, snails, duck, and pigeon. He concluded that all the things done in the *Ògbóni* cult amount to nothing but a practical demonstration of ignorance. He urged those who fear God not to join them because they have completely gone astray. The books were written in Yoruba. He also wrote some pamphlets with different titles. These, he distributed to the people wherever he went to preach. There are many other Islamic/Yoruba songs composed by Ajagbemokeferi which are even enough for further studies.

His Death

On Oct. 31, 2000, the covenant of Allah came to pass on Musa Ibrahim Ajagbemokeferi. He was 67 years old when he gave up the ghost. The following are some of his farewell messages²³:

- i. Since death is compulsory for every living soul, I am not afraid of death at all.
- ii. My children should continue the struggle in the cause of Allah from where I ended it, and never allow the struggle to die.
- iii. He instructed his children to relate with the *jammāh* of Igbemo; i.e. Ansar-ud-Deen Society, the main body of Islam in town, and to never neglect them.

Conclusion

It is no gainsaying that Musa Ibrahim Ajagbemokeferi impacted positively in the development of Islam in Ekitiland and even in Nigeria as a whole. It is noteworthy that his activities traversed religion. He influenced the whole state socially, most especially in the area of education. Apart from his positive role in the establishment of and sustenance the western primary and secondary schools in Igbemo, he also had an array of students from his Arabic school who are currently leaders of Islam in their respective domains.

It is worthy of note that some of his ways of life are against the Islamic stand. For instance, he married more than four wives. However, he should be applauded for his role in *da'wah* which in an applause for Islam in Ekiti land and Nigeria as a whole. On a final note we hope to recommend that Muslim clerics of today should go back to *da'wah* activities as a means of propagating the religion. They should learn how to work with people of other faiths like Ajagbemokeferi worked with the Christians in Igbemo in his later years.

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