

Prayers for sale: lived Islam and spiritual marketplace in contemporary Nigerian society

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Abstract

Prayers play a significant role in the pursuit of a spiritual culture that fosters the social fabric of everyday life in a spiritual marketplace. Many people increasingly embrace Islam and Muslim clerics because they wield significant spiritual capital, often influenced by neoliberal ideology. Nevertheless, limited scholarly attention is devoted to these expressive cultural practices as it is lived. This study examines how itinerant Muslim clerics in Yoruba society creatively market and deliver prayers in public spaces and explores the socio-religious functions these practices fulfil in contemporary urban contexts. The research explores the material and embodied power inherent in Islamic symbolism by focusing on clerics who publicly offer prayers and blessings as a means to soothe and respond to the complexities of human existence. Utilising performance theory as its analytical framework, and drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in southwest Nigeria, the study explores how the commodification of prayers is mobilised to shape urban life. It further investigates the ritualised pursuit of baraka (divine blessing) among religious consumers aiming to attain personal goals, most notably success, hope, survival, and livelihood. These salient yet creative practices illustrate how the Yoruba people construct and 'live' to create a reflective spiritual lifestyle that embeds Islamic sensibilities and meanings within the broader socio-cultural landscape of everyday urban life.

Doa memainkan peran besar dalam pencarian budaya spiritual yang bertumpu pada penguatan struktur sosial dalam kehidupan sehari-hari di dalam pasar spiritual. Islam dan ulama Muslim semakin diterima oleh khalayak karena mereka memiliki modal spiritual yang signifikan, yang kerap dipengaruhi oleh ideologi neoliberal. Namun demikian, perhatian akademis terhadap praktik budaya

ekspresif ini, sebagaimana dijalani dalam kehidupan nyata, masih sangat terbatas. Studi ini mengkaji bagaimana ulama Muslim itineran (berpindah-pindah) dalam masyarakat Yoruba secara kreatif memasarkan dan menyampaikan doa di ruang publik, serta mengeksplorasi fungsi sosial-keagamaan dari praktik tersebut dalam konteks perkotaan kontemporer. Dengan berfokus pada kekuatan material dan kekuatan yang terwujud secara jasmaniah dalam simbolisme Islam, penelitian ini menyoroti para ulama yang secara terbuka menawarkan doa dan berkah sebagai sarana untuk menenangkan dan merespons kompleksitas eksistensi manusia. Berdasarkan kerja lapangan etnografis yang dilakukan di Nigeria bagian barat daya serta menggunakan teori performa sebagai kerangka analitis, penelitian ini menganalisis bagaimana komodifikasi doa dimobilisasi untuk membentuk kehidupan keagamaan di wilayah urban. Penelitian ini juga mengkaji pencarian baraka (berkah ilahi) secara ritualistik di kalangan konsumen religius yang berupaya meraih tujuan pribadi, kesuksesan, harapan, keberlangsungan hidup, dan penghidupan. Praktik-praktik kreatif ini menggambarkan bagaimana masyarakat Yoruba membangun dan menjalani gaya hidup spiritual reflektif yang mengintegrasikan kepekaan dan makna Islami dalam lanskap sosio-budaya kehidupan urban sehari-hari. Studi ini berkontribusi pada pemahaman tentang Islam kontemporer di Afrika Barat dengan mengungkap bagaimana praktik-praktik spiritual dikomodifikasi dan diperlokalkan (divernakularisasi), serta menawarkan wawasan baru mengenai persinggungan antara agama, ekonomi, dan kehidupan urban sehari-hari

Keywords: *Prayer, Itinerant Muslim cleric, Spiritual marketplace, Divine blessing, Spiritual lifestyle*

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Introduction

Nigeria, the most populous country in sub-Saharan Africa with a population of over 150 million people, is an embodiment of historical, cultural, ethnic, religious, social, and linguistic affinities and diversities. Its religious landscape is highly complex and dynamic, comprising a multiplicity of religious traditions, including the indigenous religions, the various strands of Christianity and Islam, as well as newer Spiritual Science movements. These religious traditions have mutually

enhanced and transformed each other in a highly competitive context. They serve as significant sources through which many Nigerians seek an understanding of their complex reality and existence; they are instrumental in maintaining ritual and social space and power in Nigeria's religious economy (Adogame, 2010).

Historically, the Yoruba people of southwest Nigeria have constantly had a glowing religious and spiritual life, and they were well known for their strong relationship and attachment to the Muslim religious clerics or, as religious entrepreneurs. From its early days in Nigeria, Islam has always carved a niche for itself among the people in the society. Abbas (2003) has described the engagement of numerous activities of the itinerant Muslim clerics in Yorubaland, preaching to natives in towns, villages, squares, marketplaces, Palaces, and other places of gathering. Likewise, the religion became more accepted and established through the efforts and encouragement of the community leaders and traditional rulers who overwhelmed the world with spiritual rejuvenation of human life and the community.

Over time, the interaction of Muslim clerics with the wider community and the elites grows, proselytises, and improves, with the provision of war charms and aggressive marketing of spiritual life, as an era of miracles and wonders. This act has given the Muslim clerics to have a very strong hold on the Yoruba public sphere. Paradoxically, the Muslim clerics are seen as men of God who possess spiritual influence and 'locus of power' (Gbadamosi, 1978; Peel, 2016; Abbas, 2003). While this tradition is deeply reshaping moral lives, interactions, self-perception, and everyday life, through a commodification process that is frequently aided by the logic of the capitalist free market, which consequently fashioned their activities and engagements with the public to carve space, earn income, and maintain a minimal livelihood in the society (Mudasiru, 2022; Yusuph & Oniya, 2023). For Obadare (2007), this situation could be linked to the late 1980s historic moment in Nigeria, marked by the implementation of

structural adjustment initiatives and neoliberal ideologies. These obvious developments resulted in the Nigerian state's privatisation and the market's deregulation. The gradual withdrawal of the state from the economy generated a new public sphere evolving around private enterprises, including religious practices and organisations. Today, religious groups account for some fifty per cent of all social service provision in Nigeria (Obadare, 2007; Iroanya, 2024; Opara et al., 2024).

However, one of the evolving trends in Islamic religious culture in the contemporary Nigerian landscape is the growing set of more specific rubrics of spiritual and religious practices that resonate with a curious public. Such practices, according to Roof (2001), focus essentially on the discourse of spiritual 'journey' and 'growth' of ordinary citizenry, as spirituality is voiced both inside and outside of the established space. This, he argued, is a shift away from religion as traditionally understood to more diverse and creative approaches to a generation of people with a unique set of spiritual values (Roof 2001; Amin & Ritonga, 2024; Uyuni & Adnan, 2024). In this regard, Muslim clerics seek to have an impact on their society by affecting individual lifeworlds by rendering and offering prayers and other spiritually related services to them. Thus, this study shifts from previously established narratives around Islam in Nigeria, which, while true earlier in Nigeria's account, no longer accurately describes the daily life of Muslims today, to debates concerning lived religious practice and engagement of the Muslim clerics. Hence, it builds on the existing literature of Islam and Muslim cultures in (Southwest) Nigeria to understand shifting terrains, patterns, and the metaphor of a spiritual quest. So, based on ethnographic case studies and vignettes from the fieldwork that was conducted in Ibadan, the largest city in Nigeria, after Lagos and Kano, a city with a considerable population of Muslim faithful and religious clerics. Although Ibadan was founded as a war camp, over time has become the commercial nerve and political headquarters of the Yoruba

race. The city has also developed into a multi-religious society. In other words, our focus on the Ibadan metropolis epitomizes a typical African city to understand its role in the process of socio-religious change, globalisation, and post-colonial modernity.

For Garth Myers (2011), the characterizations of African cities must be based on the lived experiences of city dwellers themselves rather than on the (often vague) practical knowledge of urban theorists. Moreover, taking a clue from Janson's (2012) narrative on religious encounters in Nigeria, the analysis of Yorubaland as a religious marketplace and the Yoruba as religious consumers suggested that there was a limitation on the existing approaches that understand religious practices as a ground for religious violence. Against this background, this study highlights some of the lived religious and cultural practices among Muslim clerics and religious consumers that are found to be peculiar and changing with place and time, as it is practiced in a contemporary context. Thus, the search for meaning in life and direction takes on increasing momentum. Perhaps, in all things, Nigerians are religious. As sensitive as religion is, it is worth living for, a source of pride for people, as they subsequently derive satisfaction from it, as well as a sense of security. While the *Alfa* sold prayer as an expressive commodity of what the individual and communities not only believe, but also desire and cherish as right, good, and truthful, despite the influence of world religion and modernity.

This study specifically examines the creative and entrepreneurial dimensions of itinerant Muslim clerics' prayer performances in urban public space. It explores how these religious actors commodify Islamic prayer and analyses the social, cultural, and spiritual functions that such practices fulfil in everyday life. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2019 and 2021 in Ibadan, using participant observation and in-depth interviews, the study reveals how Islamic blessings become expressive commodities shaped by local

agency, economic conditions, and spiritual demand. All informants' identities have been anonymised for ethical considerations.

Muslim clerics: between patronage and religious consumer

One significant way to make sense of the discourse is to attempt to understand, on one hand, the ways that the market space is constructed and conceived, and on the other hand, the cultural value and imaginary impact of prayers of the Muslim clerics in the context of everyday lived religion and how it, in turn, structure and transformed human experiences as a vitality of consumption.

From the in-depth interviews conducted, it is revealed that the market space as an institution has been an integral part of the Yoruba community and custom since time immemorial, it enjoys a beehive of wide activities – cultural, political, and religious. In their description of the market, Kotler and Armstrong (1996) postulate that people interact as they are shaped by culture. Perhaps, the instrumentality of such interaction and engagement is a beacon of social and cultural expression. Quite a few scholarly works have attempted to define the market as an interactional space that social actors contest to make a daily living. In recent social theorising, the role of space in defining and structuring the boundaries of social interaction is acknowledged. As such, space is shaped by human relations and bound by social actions, cultural actions, and exchange (see Lawuyi, 2015; Omobowale and Omobowale, 2019; Mudasiru, 2014; Adebayo, Falase, and Akintunde, Abel, 2017; Ajala, 2008). In other words, Nigeria has always been a market, one in which, from its inception in 1914, has been a social space where choices are made, and negotiations are transacted symbolically. Lawuyi (2014) thus argues that a market culture is characterised by exchange, accessibility, and choice, which are necessary conditions for a patron-client relationship that may be of short or long duration.

Similarly, it is known to be a public space where people interact closely, irrespective of ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic status, the most specific set of people that rely solely on daily income. In this respect, it is an undeniable fact that Nigeria's informal sector is a panacea for the social and livelihood survival of the teeming population of vulnerable citizens who are unable to secure employment in the formal sector, including the religious actors, turned religious entrepreneurs. Thus, it provides easy access to work and livelihood because of the ease of entry and exit (Omobowale, 2019). While the Yorùbá live mainly in big towns and cities, with an urbanisation history that dates to pre-colonial Nigeria (Mabogunje, 1976). Their cities, particularly Lagos and Ibadan, are arguably the largest in Nigeria. It is also on record that eight of the first ten secondary schools established in Nigeria between 1859 and 1913 were sited in Yorùbáland (Ololajulo, 2022).

Observing the religious scene in Nigeria today reveals a distinct pattern that reflects a change and continuity in the religious sphere. This situation is largely a reification of the attendant pressures of economic crisis and reform that have gripped Nigerian societies, leading to the proliferation of new religious actors and movements. Peel (2001) also posited that the quest and desire to be fulfilled and achieve life dreams for oneself and the children was a major factor in Yoruba's search for spiritual agency. The Muslim clerics, on the other hand, believe they have the responsibility to care for and serve their immediate communities and the people around them, and the performance of prayer is seen as an instrument for fulfilling this critical obligation. What matters to people today is how to find spiritual meaning and direction in life. What might be meaningful to them? This inward search for greater spiritual penetration and ritual fortification was evident in many Nigerian societies, where people considered petitionary prayer as a human security to soothing and confronting existential challenges and barriers that often obstruct people's progress in life. While a great variety of religious

experiences signal the shift of religious energy towards spiritual seekers and consumers, who are in direct need of prayer fortification and spiritual security for themselves, businesses, and households. Thus, the *Alfa* often spent much of their time praying for people, as embodied practices, even outside the known spaces to perform these blessings and spiritual relief for people in a myriad of contexts.

On a visit to Bodija market in Ibadan, a market regarded by many people as the largest food market in southwest Nigeria. It was on a Monday morning, with the market men and women just beginning to commence the day's activities. This market consists of several sections for different foodstuffs products and sellers. One significant aspect of this space is the intertwined relationship between religious beliefs and everyday life. For instance, there are many Mosques and Muslim clerics as visible as possible. However, the presence of itinerant Muslim clerics was conspicuous and visible as one of the critical stakeholders in the space, who use religion to appropriate the most appealing and intercede for the market dwellers.

At a closer look at the butcher section of the market, I saw three middle-aged young men dressed in attire and holding the popular Muslim rosary (Tesbiy) that can be described as a Muslim cleric's outfit (*Alfa*). Sometimes, they could hang the tesbiy on their neck like a necklace, and hawk and move from one corner, place, or shop to the other to offer and render petitionary prayer to the people within the space of the market, competing with clusters of potential market consumers and other users.

These *Alfas* frequently conducted the petitionary prayers by supplicating and rendering special litanies but personalised prayer sessions for them and the adjourning shops' owners. This act involves the recitation of formulaic prayers complemented by bodily motions, as well as the repetition of certain verses from the holy Qur'an suitable for specific human benefits. Firstly, the audience is activated through a proper intention (*Aniyat*), as a conscious turn of focus towards Allah (God). While they sometimes claimed to be busy at that moment, they always paid full attention to the clerics' work. Secondly, they all embraced the *Alfas*, as they showed a total

commitment to it as they were responding to the prayer genres and litanies with loud and resounding Amin intermittently¹.

At a point, they must make their intention known, either silently or openly, as one desires it, by stretching both hands and talking to Allah (who answers prayer requests). Thus, quoting a narrative from the hadith, as follows: An action without a true intention is a show and pretence; it is a cause or rejection, not closeness to Allah².

Hence, the quotidian nature of the practice among the people suggests the acceptance of the prayers being rendered for them, which influence their daily life. Hence, the notion of spirituality and religiosity is inextricably linked to neoliberal modernity in a place such as the Yoruba community.

In contrast to the hegemonic discourse on entrepreneurship, one significant aspect of this prayer practice and cultural context is the use of Yoruba language accent, usually branded with kind words of intervention and mediation which rendered legitimation to the narratives provided, thus.

*Olorun ko ni je ki eri Idamu
E o ni ri iko aburu lagbara Olorun
E o ni sise, a o ni sile te
E ni subu danu
Okuta oni wo gba yin
Okuta ibanu je ko ni wo ile yin*

*Alubarika to po yoo wo innu oja yin
Ata jere le mota
Lola Makkah ati Meddinah
Lola Anabi lodo Olorun
Ola Masha Allahu LakuwataIlahi Billahi Ahyu L-Azeezm*

*God (Allah) will not allow you to be forsaken.
God will silence all storms in your life.*

¹ Fieldwork interview at Bodija Market, Ibadan.

² Abu Hamīd Al-Ghazālī, On Intention, Sincerity, and Truthfulness/ Kitāb al-niyya wa'l-ikhlaṣ wa'l-ṣidq (Book XXXVII of the Revival of the Religious Sciences), trans. Anthony F. Shaker (Cambridge, U.K.: The Islamic Texts Society, 2013)

*No calamity shall befall you by God's Grace
Your pathway shall be fruitful.
You shall not fall into the enemy's trap.*

*Divine blessings shall come into your business.
God shall pave the way for good sale and worthy profit shall be yours.
He shall continue to have Mercy on you³.*

Surprisingly, in this context, a strong aspect of the event was how the people responded to a specific segment of the petitionary prayer when a particular Qur'anic verse was recited as *Khutbah*. The entire audience paid rapt attention to the *Khutbah*, which was promptly followed by tangible and meaningful monetary exchange. The entire session lasted for about 30 minutes. According to several interlocutors, this gesture constituted a key aspect of the prayer activity. In their understanding, a prayer cannot be truly received or answered by Allah—who answers prayers—without a demonstration of commitment, gratification, and reciprocal appreciation toward the *Alfa*, regarded as a man of God with the spiritual authority to deliver supplications to the Almighty. This is largely a deliberate attempt to perform, and it is a key aspect of spiritual performance and patronage. This was further stressed as a central plank of prayer consultation and consumption to attain a good standard of living, peace, and security.

As such, the sincerity of purpose being displayed during this process is not only a reflection of cultural expectations but also an indication of individual beliefs, symbols of affinity, and ritual performances³.

Upon inquiry, one interlocutor tactfully explained that such practice was common among Yoruba people. In order to obtain a prompt response to prayer requests and supplications, it is believed that these should be supported and accompanied by gifts and monetary offerings to the *Alfas*. This act is thought to

³ Fieldwork interview conducted at Bodija market, Ibadan, Nigeria.

deepen the individual's spiritual connection with the divine. The *Alfas* are held in high regard for their spiritual capital, which enables them to mediate spirituality and facilitate everyday meaning-making.

The above open narratives and vignettes above clearly provide significant cultural impetus to the sifting pattern in the expansion, revivalism, and development of religious expression as it is lived in contemporary form, and found in Nigerian culture and experience. Cosmologically, it is stereotyped in the Yoruba society that the 'spirit of misfortunes' will trail a seller in a marketplace throughout the day, if his/her first customer does not buy a priced good item from him/her, hence, the need to always pray fervently, engaged or consult and be closer to the religious experts in their localities, who will invoke God's name and good spirit that will always wash away such ugly feet from their shops. It is a recurring adventure in the most noticeable big markets in Ibadan, and elsewhere in Yorubaland, such as Dugbe, Aleshiloye, Oritamerin, Oje, Agodi Gate (Spare Parts market), Gbagi (Textile), Ojoo, and beyond, where we have a cluster of human beings competing for survival in the space.

Accordingly, informants argue in an interview that they believed vehemently in the power of prayers and that it is why we often engaged these *Alfa* who hawk 'prayers for sale' to supplicate by deploying Islamic esoteric rituals to fortify us, and our business (market) space regularly. This will surely sustain and keep us on track to making good sales of our products among our competitors in the marketplace. Thus, the power of prayer will overcome the enemies and evil ones, conquer spiritual attacks or untimely death, and ensure the healing of people⁴.

Strikingly, this view is drawn upon a belief in supernatural forces. In this context, prayer serves as a mark of defense against any diabolical forces and elements in the market. In other words, an average market person is expected to

⁴ Fieldwork interview conducted at Bodija market, Ibadan, Nigeria.

be closer to his/her religious advisor, but here we are/ from the earlier hour of the day till late evening. So, since we have *Alfas* that would bring the prayers to our doorstep and space, we absolutely embrace them wholeheartedly, patronize and motivate them monetarily as we often see the result of their prayers on us and the business. Certainly, the *Alfa* modified Islam as a lived experience that feeds into everyday people's needs and meets their aspirations with momentous and deleterious effects upon their lives.

Motor park and spiritual breakthrough

Motor parks, like market spaces, are open public spaces where people also interact closely, irrespective of ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status. It is usually accommodating largely informal workers like commercial car drivers, head porters, tri- and motorcyclists, and hawkers, among many other users. Likewise, we are very conscious of the fact that there are a lot of myths associated with Nigerian roads, and to remove them while you are on a journey, prayers became profound and significant to prevent any such sights. Here, prayer is seen mostly as a critical instrument of human security for averting the dangers of the road, for the driver, as well as for the passengers.

One of the routine and everyday scenarios that one witnesses preeminently at most prominent Nigerian motor parks is the large presence and concentration of Muslim clerics and other clerics competing for recognition in this space. For instance, from the popular Iwo Road, Ojoo, and Challenge Garages to a score of other motor parks in the Ibadan metropolis, and other urban spaces in southwest Nigeria. Any traveler on a journey will see that the parking space is often saturated with people offering insightful and powerful prayer litanies. How these itinerant *Alfas* are unconsciously becoming partners in progress with the drivers and other business owners within space to keep the economy moving and earn a living. In other words, you find these Muslim clerics, placing prayer for sale by rendering, offering, and praying for the intending travellers and passengers, the drivers, and as well as the vehicle that is about to live the park.

These religious clerics, mostly young and middle-aged Alphas, are probably still learning at the Arabic institute but desire to make ends meet and survive as students at the Arabic school. Their appearance suggests that these *Alfas* have leaders who tutored them in these innovative and creative activities because they often devise certain ingenious ways of praying and conducting their activities, with some kind words that are appealing to the people. The kind words usually caught and attract the intending passengers who hardly hesitate to listen to them and reward handsomely with money after the prayer supplication⁵.

In an interview with one of the *Alfa* at Iwo Road motor parks, *Alfa Jamiu*, he opined that he has been in the venture for some years, and it is a profitable adventure for him to sustain his family and survive on the proceeds from it.

I usually resume here every day, except on Fridays, to offer prayer for travellers at this park before their departure, and encourage them to pay for the prayer, through what we call *sadaqah* (charity or sacrifice). And the Alfa often remarked with ‘Olorun agba’ May Allah accept it for you, as a word of appreciation. Of course, the Yoruba tradition and stereotype is understood to believe that there are certain local deities and evil ones from the village that obstruct the progress of the people and cause road mishaps. So, the need to lock and cage them with prayer fortification against their evil and deadly plans⁶.

Amazingly, it was fun to see and witness such Alfa at work as they unfolded their act to unlock the spiritual world for the benefit of the people in most of these parks.

I prayed against any accident on the road today and of your life, this vehicle and the driver are being committed for safety. All the passengers in this vehicle shall get to their destination safely In shall Allah. And one common laudable prayer litanies, which often acts as the closing remark is “*Laola Walah Qumalat, Ilabilah Aliyu Al Aẓeem*” This is promptly followed and greeted with impactful and resounding

⁵ Interview with a trader at Bodija Market, Ibadan, Nigeria

⁶ Interviews were conducted for Muslim clerics sited at Iwo Road, Ojoo, and Challenge Motor Park Ibadan, Nigeria.

Amin Ya Allahu, irrespectively of the religious identity of the passenger in the vehicle, either Muslim or Christian.

Remarkably, a passenger during the fieldwork also asserted that he believed in the efficacy and power of this prayer act. As a Yoruba man, you cannot ignore nor dishonour a prayer being said for you, especially when you are on a journey like this; you need spiritual fortification for yourselves, the vehicle, and the driver, because you don't know what the road will look like. It is the prayers like this that will ensure a safe trip and a merciful journey for you. So, it is not about being a Christian or Muslim, it is about your safety, and negotiating spirituality⁷.

This narrative obviously suggests that the emphasis and major preoccupation at the heart of these itinerant Muslim clerics is the meaning-making, subjective wellbeing, and prosperity for all, using the instrumentality of prayer symbolism as social and spiritual infrastructure, which is being deployed for everyday life.

The above vignette and narrations explain one of the emerging religious marketplaces within the Nigerian context, which seems to be complex, hence it requires academic studies. Like other aspects of human existence, the religious sphere has a history rooted in the socio-cultural, political, and economic experience of diverse African societies. Janson and Akinleye (2015) asserted that death on the road is a near-daily event; car wrecks and corpses on the tarmac are common sights. Rumours abound that the dead are the victims of the “Kings of the Road” (armed robbers) and ritual murder; these “urban myths” are sutured with others about abductions from taxis and buses, trade in body parts, spirits, and other predatory evil powers. Of course, diverse forms of religious practices and beliefs existed across time and space before the imposition of the logic of capitalism, globalization, neoliberalism, and commodification over much of

⁷ Interviews and observations at Iwo Road, Ojoo, and Challenge Motor Park Ibadan, Nigeria

human engagements. However, these forms of mindset continue to shape the characteristics of Nigeria's spiritual marketplace, as it lived in recent times. This study aims to contribute to the established discourse around lived religion and spirituality in Africa.

Livelihood and mobile spirituality

In today's competitive world, human survival and social existence are often translated into a search for power to secure a place in society. Prayer is seen as a source of empathy and compassion to support and attain well-being. During the fieldwork for this study, an encounter was made with Alfa Hamidu, aged 65 years, who was subsequently interviewed. He bore his mind with the researcher. When he was confronted with questions about his commitment, that, for him, and many others in the business, having spent over twenty years as an itinerant and mobile *Alfa*. He did not deny his motivating intent. He claimed that he has been sustaining and maintaining his family with the returns, earnings, and proceeds from this religious engagement.

Aside from making little earnings from the petitionary prayers, he sees his involvement as making Islamic spirituality and power available to all and sundry at their doorstep. Thus, enhancing people's chances of achieving a good life.

He believes that the performance of the prayer for them is to deepen their faith and cultivate a stronger sense of connection with Allah, which will surely have a transformative effect on their lives.

It is also a sign of devotion to strengthen their faith and relationship with their creator, he said:

One of the various prayer litanies that often attracts the audience is *Warafanahu Makana Aliyaa ...*

May you continue to enjoy the quintessence of Allah in all your life endeavor

Paradoxically, our people understand this utterance and recitation in the Arabic language as imbuing the substance with the curative power of the *Qur'an* itself. Because it is a form of healing and mercy for believers.

As hinted in his words, many of us have been openly condemned, criticized, and variously attacked by other Muslim clerics, who often cursed us for extorting money from people in the name of prayers. These critics tend to label such engagement as nothing more than begging. However, the clerics involved argue that their actions are genuine, grounded in service, and aimed at spiritual healing. The central question, they assert, should be whether these prayers are truly offered with sincerity and spiritual intent. If so, then the criticism becomes unjustified—especially given that many lives have reportedly been healed, liberated, or protected from spiritual affliction. Instead of being appreciated for their work, such clerics are frequently misjudged as financially exploiting religious consumers. In reality, for many of them, this religious calling is their only means of livelihood. They survive and care for their families through the daily offerings they receive. Furthermore, if other Alfa routinely accept *sara* (gifts) from the public, such conduct should not automatically be interpreted as deceit or exploitation⁸.

It is plausible that a reciprocal relationship and affiliation thus always emerge between them, a religious cleric, and the people, religious consumers in the form of clientelism, which involves a pragmatic approach that dominated the religious sphere. This pattern of exchange and the production of piety logically provide analytic tools that intertwine commodification with transactions to generate productive, consumptive, and performative aspects of interactional spaces. This also resonates well with Nile Green's assertion on the study of the

⁸ Alfa Hamidu Yekeen is a Muslim cleric, aged 60 years, with long-time experience and involvement in itinerant religious engagement for many years in the various motor parks in Ibadan. He trained many of his children as well as wives (2) with earns from this religious act.

religious economy of Islam in India, *Bombay Islam*, where he proposed a market analogy to understand the networks of exchange that circulated not only monetary and commodities but also spiritual concepts and rival religiosities. Such metaphors, according to him, are useful in explaining certain aspects of religious life, identifying systems of value that compete for consumers, and helping to reveal the spiritual, political, and economic underpinnings of power (2011).

Aside from the market space, motor parks, and social gatherings, among other spaces where Muslim clerics can be seen, the quest and search for spiritual culture and service is not limited to a few or specific people, places, or religions, as mentioned above. In other words, religious engagement, like most other forms of capitalist enterprise, can only thrive if it is centred on and caters for the spiritual needs of the people in the society. This is because the ability to effect change in human life is the very essence of the definition of power. But for the encounter to be considered efficacious, religious consumers must accept the spiritual performance grounded in the religious-cultural narrative.

However, for the sake of understanding how social processes shape relations and the context of religious patronage. The vignette below will be sufficient. While it creates a socio-religious culture for all, irrespective of their religious identity, the prayer's exciting and healing emotiveness comes at a price. A key informant interview with one of the itinerant Muslim clerics who bear his mind by describing and relating his experience with a religious consumer put it more succinctly, thus:

Iya Sikiru at the Agbeni market is one of my religious consumers and a close associate of our *Alfa* (leader or instructor). I started rendering petitionary prayers for her while learning at an Arabic school in Idikan area, Ibadan. I do go to her shop every Friday morning, with some other students (*Omo Ileken*) and she always provides *Akara* (bean cake) as gratification for the prayer offers (*Sara*) which we often take home to other *Omo-ken* at our Arabic school. She would also give us a token (cash) as a monetary exchange for the service rendered to her. We repeatedly conducted

and rendered these prayer litanies every week for close to three years without a break. After the second year of these spiritual engagements and paths, she confessed that her business has improved tremendously and transformed for the better. She then requested that the same petitionary prayer be held at her residence on Sunday morning. This was approved by Alfa, and we started it immediately. Her reason for this new prayer was for the benefit of her family and children. At this moment, they were living in a one-room apartment, but when Sonner started this prayer, her life storyline changed, and there was a drastic improvement in her business and life. No sooner than this, they moved to a room and parlour apartment. About a year later, the family moved to a three-bedroom apartment. Over time, her financial capability improved as her business was doing well, and she was able to accommodate some of her other siblings who came to town to stay with her to assist in managing the business effectively. Perhaps, she now has enough means and resources to take care of her family conveniently. Within the range of four years, the family was able to acquire landed property and completed the house that same year. She also went on a Hajj (pilgrimage) to the holy lands in Saudi Arabia.

However, as a partner in progress, she continually increases our emoluments and monetary benefits and compensates us accordingly because we are part of her success, and she always supports us whenever the time demands and we are still harvesting the seeds that I planted many years ago⁹.

Put differently, from these narratives and excerpts, one can see a wide spectrum of spiritual searching on the part of the woman as a religious consumer and the transactional relationship between her and the itinerant Muslim clerics who respond to her desires. In a way, both are producing a new form of religiosity that has inscribed itself in Nigeria's urban space. It also depicts ways in which people's spiritual, economic, and social well-being depends on their relationship with their religious adviser and leaders, in the face of the commodification of

⁹ Key informant interview with Alhaji Aremu Fieldwork, 2019 at Olaniba Compound, Ayeye Area, Ibadan

prayers, and in keeping with the capitalist marketplace of the cityscape, which continues to shape human endeavour and lifestyle in a contemporary context. Yet again, this portrayed Nigerians among the most extroverted religious people on the planet; religious identities are highly salient, religious groups and institutions are well organized and fulfill important social and political functions, as well as having a vital place in the structures and processes of their worldviews (Mustapha, 2020).

Nonetheless, beyond the popular understanding of prayer patronage shaped by spirituality and religious beliefs, it is also a tool shaped by materialism and social, political, and economic processes. Its values and pragmatic-oriented result influenced their level of dependency and attachment to the cleric's petitionary prayers, which also create a sense of meaning and belonging. Thus, this social and cultural relationship is thought to have facilitated the personalization of religious authority in some Muslim clerics today, to whom many ordinary people have turned and relied heavily on to make ends meet for themselves in a precarious society like Nigeria. In other words, this search and quest for spiritual meanings operate through the circulation of capital – economic, political, and spiritual or symbolic- giving them the visual manifestation of their social reality.

Putting this narrative in a broader context, life is about uncertainties, and the embedded nature of everyday life is imbued with the need and desire for spiritual power and a quest for spiritual rejuvenation and fortification. Particular attention is given to the interplay of demand and supply, and how a new cadre of suppliers is redefining religion in experimental ways, and providing the popular categories, now used in thinking about spiritual well-being, especially within religious agency. In other words, the making of meanings in this context is expanding, spiritually driven, and consumer-oriented. It demonstrates how a class of religious actors and clerics navigate the marketplaces, seemingly offering

petitionary prayers and spiritual services in the domain of market men and women. This, according to Janson and Akinleye (2015), explains how religion has grown into a world-making force that acts as a builder in rendering meaningful the unstable and chaotic flux in Nigeria. While the monetary exchange functioned as a powerful tool in organizing symbol, exerting a magnetic force on a whole field of discourse about social values, achievements, aspirations, and relationships. Thus, these clerics deliberately deployed the prayer activities to foster reflection about hope and possibilities and to provide leverage over human circumstances.

Conclusion

This study has examined the practice of lived Islam in Yorubaland as a dynamic everyday experience within a religious marketplace. It demonstrates how itinerant Muslim clerics commodify petitionary prayers to meet the spiritual and existential needs of religious consumers in contemporary urban Nigeria. These practices, while embedded in Islamic tradition, reflect a hybrid form of religiosity shaped by Yoruba cosmology, economic precarity, and the spiritual aspirations of the populace. Public religious performances now take place in unconventional spaces—markets, parks, garages, and public gatherings—signifying a transformation in how religiosity is spatially and culturally enacted. Rather than being confined to orthodox frameworks, these practices represent pragmatic strategies for navigating social realities, shaping meaning, and negotiating well-being through spiritual intervention. The clerics, often labelled as “mercantile Muslims,” reflect the tensions within the Muslim community between spiritual authenticity and material exchange, yet they also offer a symbolic reordering of power and value within the religious economy.

Putting this narrative in a broader context, life is marked by uncertainty, and the embedded nature of everyday existence is infused with the need and

desire for spiritual rejuvenation and protection. In this context, the dynamic interplay of demand and supply has led to the emergence of a new cadre of Muslim clerics who reinterpret Islam in experimental and consumer-driven ways. Their services offer not just prayers, but access to hope, survival, and purpose for people whose lives are shaped by economic strain and social insecurity. As Janson and Akinleye (2015) suggest, religion in contemporary Nigeria has become a world-making force, organising symbols, aspirations, and relationships into meaningful systems that help stabilise chaotic realities. The monetary exchange inherent in petitionary prayer creates an expressive space through which individuals understand success, value, and resilience.

Ultimately, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of contemporary West African Islam by illuminating how religious actors and consumers reshape spiritual life in response to changing socio-economic and cultural conditions. The vernacularization and commodification of prayer by itinerant Alfas exemplify how Islam is not only lived and embodied but also performed and traded in urban spaces. This phenomenon illustrates how the intersection between Yoruba cosmology and Islamic belief continues to evolve within global modernity, sustaining religious relevance while offering new spiritual pathways. As such, everyday religious practices in Nigeria must be read not through binaries of conflict or orthodoxy, but as flexible responses to lived realities—responses that provide individuals with frameworks for meaning, negotiation, and spiritual agency.

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