

EVOLUTION OF *TAFSĪR* IN ILORIN BETWEEN THE FIRST *MUFASSIR* AND THE FIRST *TAFSĪR* CIRCLE

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Abstract

Ilorin of the twentieth century witnessed a tremendous proliferation of *Tafsīr* circles that spring up during the month of *Ramaḍān* on yearly basis. Despite the existence of new approaches to *Tafsīr*, distinct from the ancient ones, a great number of old *Mufassirūn* and some newly emerged ones continue to uphold the traditional method with thoughtful emphasis on the events and the personalities behind the evolution of the traditional standard. This work aimed to investigate the events and persons surrounding the evolution of *Tafsīr* in Ilorin. The paper, which employed narrative and analytical methods, found no claim of existence of *Tafsīr* circle in Ilorin before the final arrival of Shaykh Ālimi, except the one of Imām Gambari's mosque, though no one was mentioned as the *Mufassir*. The research revealed the peculiarities of the two major events. The first being the Gambari *Tafsīr* circle which was conducted earlier by unspecified *Mufassirūn*, because different scholars were invited from different backgrounds for the purpose of *Tafsīr*. The second event was the *Tafsīr* circle that took place at Oke-suna, through which Shaykh Ālimi became recognised as the first *Mufassir* in Ilorin. Also disclosed in the work are the roles played by different personalities, such as Shaykh Ālimi, Shaykh Yusuf al-Malli, Shaykh B. Sani, Shaykh Abdul Mumin Dogo, Malam Olufadi and Malam Ibrahim Bako among others. The paper advocated proper documentation of events for accuracy in the future reference for the coming generations. It is also recommended that efforts of the personalities discussed in the work are emulated by subsequent generations for better spreading of Islam, uplifting of knowledge, and reforming of societies.

Keywords: *Tafsīr*, Scholars, Traditional, Generations, Knowledge

Introduction

The available accounts on the beginning and evolution of *Tafsīr* in Ilorin can be grouped under two major views. A group of researchers traces the origin of *Tafsīr* in Ilorin to the events that took place in the defunct Oke-suna settlement after the second arrival of Shaykh Sālihu Ālimi. These researchers recognize Shaykh Ālimi as the first *Mufasssīr* in Ilorin, because it is reported that the Shaykh was the scholar who brought a copy of the second half of *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* and taught it to the existing scholars at Oke-suna.¹ There are other researchers however, who consider the beginning of *Tafsīr* in Ilorin as better traceable to the *Tafsīr* session organized at the Imām Gambari mosque. The mosque is reported to have existed in the Gambari quarters before the reported event of Oke-suna and among the mosque activities that have been taking place from the inception was organization of *Tafsīr* session during the month of Ramaḍān.² It is therefore considered significant in this paper to apply narrative and analytic methods in evaluating the two available reports with the objective of substantiating the level of accuracy in each case and putting together the facts obtained from the various reports.

Shaykh Ālimi as the First *Mufasssīr* in Ilorin

As-Shaykh Ālimi, whose real name and genealogical account were Modibo Sālihu b. Ahmad Janta, b. Zubair, b. Muhammad b. Ahmadu Buka'i b. Ahmad b. Muhammad Hamman b. Iliasu b. Akabu b. Musa Jokolo, al-Fulānī, at-Tūrūdī, was born to a well learned Fulani family of Toronkawa in Tankara in 1156 AH/1740 CE. His father was born in Bunza, a western area of Sokoto State but presently under Kebbi State.³ Shaykh Ālimi, under the tutelage of his father and numerous notable scholars in Kebbi, Sokoto and Gwandu, had memorized the entire Qur'ān since he was about ten years old and had been well learned in the Jurisprudence of Imām Mālik School of Law, since the early stage of his life.⁴ This implies that he was well grounded in *Tafsīr* and other branches of Arabic and Islamic knowledge, before embarking on the strife towards spreading Islam and reforming societies.

Shaykh Ālimi spent only a month during his first visit to Ilorin in 1804 and before his second coming to the town, he had visited a number of places which included Oyo-Ile, Ogbomoso, Ikoyi, Iseyin, Igboho, Saki and Kuwo where he was occupied with teaching, preaching, ransoming of slaves and assisting people spiritually through efficacy of the prayers he offered.⁵ Shaykh Ālimi's deep interest in the Qur'an and *Tafsīr* during his sojourn in different places could be noticed in his relationship which

started at Kobayi with Shaykh Yusuf, a Malian itinerant Fulani scholar. The Malian scholar loved the Shaykh for the many good qualities he had heard about him and the Shaykh loved him in return because, among other qualities, the Malian scholar was an expert in *Qirā'a* (art of recitation) and '*Ulūm-al-Qur'ān* (Sciences of the Qur'ān). This explains why Shaykh Yusuf later became, not only a reciter during *Tafsīr* session to support Shaykh Ālimi but also one who taught Shaykh Ālimi's children the art of recitation and *Tafsīr*.⁶

After a sojourn of ten years (1804-1814)⁷ in those places, Shaykh Ālimi returned to Ilorin and reunited with the scholars of Oke-suna who had, during his first visit, expressed to him their interest in the second half of *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* which was in his possession. Upon his return, Shaykh Ālimi presented the copy. The scholars of Oke-suna copied and studied the contents under the Shaykh. Hence, Oke-suna scholars became students under the Shaykh and nicknamed him Ālim or Ālimi, meaning the knowledgeable (teacher).⁸ However, it remains obscure the exact one of the two halves of the *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* that the Oke-suna scholars demanded and could not get till the long awaited return of Ālimi. It is clear though that a half of the Qur'ān covers from the beginning of *Sūrah al-Fātiha* and *Baqarah*, to verse seventy-four of *Sūrah al-Kahf*, while the other half starts from that point and ends at the last verse of *Sūrah an-Nās*. Al-Jawzī, pointing to the verse seventy-four of *Sūrah al-Kahf* where the two halves meet, with the word نكراً (*Nakran*) as confluence, asserts that the letter *Nūn*, as appears in the word, belongs to one half of the Qur'ān while the remaining letters (*Kāf*, *Rā* and *Hamzah*) belong to the other half.⁹ Unfortunately, the available records do not provide us with the exact part *vis-à-vis* the *Suwar* (chapters) contained in the half part brought by the Shaykh. It has also been observed that the availability of a half of the book, *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*, with the scholars of Oke-suna, presupposes that they were conversant with *Tafsīr* prior to the arrival of Shaykh Ālimi.¹⁰ The absence of the other half of the book among the scholars would not be unconnected to the general scarcity of writing materials during their time, rigorous effort that an individual would go through to copy a book and the fact that those who might have possessed it before, left their former places to Ilorin in such circumstances that did not permit them to take along all their possessions.

Similarly, some of the scholars, reported to have studied the second half of *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* under Shaykh Ālimi, might have done that to revise the knowledge or book they had dropped and almost forgotten since their departure from their former places of living. But

obviously, the scholars of Oke-suna acknowledged the superiority of Shaykh Ālimi in respect of his scholarly erudition and spiritual nobility that they desired regular attendance at his educational circles which was lively with various discussions on religious matters, particularly his commentary on the Qur'anic verses. This is in agreement with a report, which states that Shaykh Ālimi was often occupied:

باشتغاله بتعليم المبادئ الإسلامية وتفسير القرآن الكريم حتى تمشيخ
على يده عدة تلاميذ من علماء ربوة السنة وغيرهم

With his career of teaching the basics of Islām and *Tafsīr* of the noble Qur'ān until he had impacted in the academic growth of a number of his students among the scholars of Oke-suna and beyond.¹¹

This convergence of the scholars for the purpose of tutorials at the premises of the Shaykh later metamorphosed into *Tafsīr* session during the month of Ramaḍān. Hence, it was described as “the origin of *Tafsīr*, which is traditionally held daily, nowadays in the Emir's Palace during the month of Ramadan.”¹² For the fact that Shaykh Ālimi himself presided over the *Tafsīr* session that emerged at Oke-suna, it is expressly registered that Shaykh Ālimi was the first *Mufasssīr* in Ilorin and he remains recognized as such by all and sundry.¹³

The foregoing account represents an analysis of evolution of *Tafsīr* in Ilorin. It is around this backdrop that a group of researchers presumed that the position such as *Mufasssīr* was not in Ilorin before Shaykh Ālimi came in contact with his hosts at Oke-suna. There was actually no commonly recognized leadership in Ilorin as at then, but there were Imāms who led each of the isolated patches of the amorphous Muslim community in the town; the Gambari settlement for example, had an Imām.¹⁴ It is equally on record that shortly after the inception, the Imām Gambari mosque had its *Tafsīr* session concurrently; a reason why there exists another perspective to evolution of *Tafsīr* in Ilorin. It would be appropriate before discussion on the second perspective, to examine the methodological approach of Shaykh Ālimi's *Tafsīr* session.

Methodology of Shaykh Ālimi's *Tafsīr* and its Impact on Ilorin Emirate

The method applied by Shaykh Ālimi in the *Tafsīr* session which took place during Ramaḍān was slightly different from the *Tafsīr* classes

he had outside Ramaḍān. While the latter involved exclusively the students and scholars who possessed elementary and advanced knowledge, respectively, the former setting involved the public including the new converts who ran with their new faith to get shelter at Oke-suna and those who just embraced Islām and followed Shaykh Ālimi after getting the guidance through him at their respective places.¹⁵ Therefore, unlike the private classes which method was either teaching or revision, during the Ramaḍān *Tafsīr* session, Shaykh Ālimi was occupied with rigorous explanation of verses of the Qur'ān with an approach that was eventually described as effective and sustainable.

During the *Tafsīr* session, Shaykh Ālimi engaged the services of two renowned scholars in recitation. The first reciter was Shaykh Yusuf al-Mallī (al-Malawy), an elderly Fulani Malian who was reported to have joined the Shaykh from Kobayi and continued to relate passionately with him after their arrival in Ilorin. The second reciter was Shaykh Ahmad b. Sāni, a Fulani scholar who later arrived from Birni Kebbi together with Abdus Salām, the first son of the Shaykh. The two reciters were very popular Islamic scholars and both rendered the services sincerely as the first and second *Ajanasi* respectively.¹⁶ The procedure of Shaykh Ālimi's *Tafsīr* could be noticed from the successors who inherited the activities. Shaykh Ālimi would start the *Tafsīr* session by reciting the verses to be covered for the first round (*Thumnu*) and one of the reciters would recite all the verses in the same manner to the hearing of the audience. At this point, the second reciter would recite in piecemeal; in verses, phrases and words. The reciter would pause at every point to allow the Shaykh to elucidate in details, the portion that has just been recited. The similitude of what these reciters did with Shaykh Ālimi was what Mujāhid b. Jabr (d. 104 AH), a reciter among the *Tābi'ūn* did with his teacher, 'Abdullah b. 'Abbās. Mujāhid said:

عرضت القرآن على ابن عباس ثلاث عرضات، أقف عند كل آية،
أسأله فيم نزلت، وكيف كانت؟

I repeated the study (of the meaning) of the Qur'ān before Ibn 'Abbās three times in which I paused at every verse, asking him why and how it was revealed¹⁷

Accordingly, the *modus operandi* remained the same in the second and subsequent rounds, as the *Tafsīr* session continued. But after each round (*Thumnu*), the two reciters would exchange functions in terms of

reciting the whole verses and reciting in piecemeal. This procedure would continue on daily basis, starting on the first day up to the 28th or 29th day of Ramaḍān every year.¹⁸ It is important to clarify the size of each round (*Thumnu*) in the recitation and interpretation of the verses of the Qur'ān during Shaykh Ālimi's *Tafsīr* session. What is referred to as a round here is one eighth (*Thumnu*) of a *Ḥizb*. It is noteworthy that according to Uthmanic Qur'ān arrangement, the Qur'ān is divided into thirty equal parts, each is *Juz'* and plural *Ajzā'*. Each *Juz'* is made up of two *Ḥizb*, the plural of which is *Aḥzāb*. This indicates that there are sixty *Ḥizb* (*Aḥzāb*) in the glorious Qur'ān. Each *Ḥizb* however is subdivided into two halves, each is *Nisf*. When the half (*Nisf*) is further divided into two, each is a quarter (*Rub'*); a half of one quarter (*Rub'*) is referred to as *Thumnu*.¹⁹ In other words, a *Thumnu* is one-eighth of a *Ḥizb*. Notwithstanding, the time consumed to explain the contents of each *Thumnu* would determine the number of *Thumnu* to take during a session of Shaykh Ālimi's *Tafsīr*. Every audience with a copy of the Qur'ān would be aware of the number of *Thumnu* taken in a particular day as the points of *Thumnu*, (one eighth) *Rub'* (quarter) and *Nisf* (half) of each *Ḥizb* were indicated in the copies of the Qur'ān used during the period of Shaykh Ālimi. However, in the contemporary *Mushaf al-Masjid al-Ḥaramayn* which is the most popular copy of the Qur'ān in circulation, *Thumnu*, (one eighth) of *Ḥizb* is no more indicated but *Rub'* (quarter) and *Nisf* (half) of each *Ḥizb* can still be vividly sighted.

The use of relaying men was part of the method adopted by Shaykh Ālimi during his *Tafsīr* session. The relaying man played two important roles during the session. He spoke louder than the Shaykh and allowed the Shaykh to rest for some moments while he relayed what the Shaykh had earlier said. He also interpreted into a language different from that of the Shaykh who happened to be the *Mufassir*. The available account reveals that part of Shaykh Ālimi's approach while facing his audience was sensitivity to the differences in their levels and languages of understanding. Therefore, after recitation of the verses by him and his reciters, the Shaykh would read the Arabic contents of the *Tafsīr* book; he would then interpret it in Hausa and Fulfulde respectively.²⁰ At this point, the relaying man who understood both mother tongue of Shaykh Ālimi and Yoruba language would be engaged to relay in Yoruba language to the group of audience who understood neither Hausa nor Fulfulde. The most prominent interpreter cum relaying person engaged by the Shaykh was a Fulani Mallam called Olufadi; he was the head of the Fulani

pastoral farmers residing at Gaa Olufadi, now referred to as Balogun Fulani area.²¹

Shaykh Ālimi relied heavily on *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*, written by the duo of Jalālud-Dīn Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Maḥallī (d.864 AH) and Jalālud-Dīn Abdur-Rahmān b. Abibakr as-Suyūṭī (d. 911 AH). The contents and the approach used in the book influenced to a large extent the method of the *Tafsīr* session conducted by Shaykh Ālimi, because it was a copy of this book and its duplicates that the Shaykh, who was the *Mufasssīr*, and the audience, who had successfully copied it, respectively held during the *Tafsīr* session. This is evident in the report that reveals how the Ilorin *Tafsīr* session has been squarely synonymous to *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* from the onset.²² There are more related reports with indications that the Shaykh employed *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* significantly during his *Tafsīr* session.

In the study of categorization of the books of *Tafsīr*, some books are categorized as purely based on narration; an example is *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Aẓīm* by Ismā'īl b. 'Umar b. Kathīr (d. 774 AH). Some books of *Tafsīr* are categorized as based on a scholar's exercise of personal effort (*Ijtihād/Ra'y*); an example is *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb* by Muḥammad b. 'Umar Fakhru ad-Dīn ar-Rāzī (d. 606 AH). Some books of *Tafsīr* are categorized as simply based on hidden meaning (*at-Tafsīr al-Bātinī*); an example is *Nafḥāt ar-Rahmān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān* by Muḥammad b. Abd ar-Raḥīm an-Nahāwandī (d. 1371 AH). Other books of *Tafsīr* discovered in the course of the study were considered to be of advanced scientific approach, linguistic approach, and thematic approach, among others. Incidentally, none of the sources consulted categorized *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* under any of the above.²³ This may not be unconnected with the fact that *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* strikes a balance among other books of *Tafsīr*. It may also be traceable to the fact that *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*, rather than getting engrossed by issues considered to be inconsequential, the authors of *al-Jalālayn* concentrated on fundamental issues such as piety, worship, truthfulness, brotherhood, among other concepts, considered to be central and generally significant. Hence evidence of the fact that the approach of the book influenced the *Tafsīr* method of Shaykh Ālimi, and can be established from a source that itemizes Shaykh Ālimi's areas of focus thus:

فإن موضوع، الإسلام وقواعده وأركانه،... والأمر بالمعروف والنهي
عن المنكر ومكارم الأخلاق، وطلب العلم لمعرفة الله، والتقوى والزهد
والورع كلها هي أماكن دعوته الرئيسية

The theme (of Shaykh Ālimi's *Tafsīr*) was al-Islām; its principles and pillars, commandment to the virtues and forbidding from the vices, high morals, searching for knowledge to know Allah, piety, asceticism and godliness. All of these are his (Shaykh Ālimi's) areas of focus of preaching in most cases.²⁴

Shaykh Ālimi was consistent both in his familiarity with *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* and areas of focus during preaching, particularly during his *Tafsīr* sessions. At every point during the *Da'wah* activities of the Shaykh, the highlighted method yielded the desired results. This is buttressed by an ancient document thus:

وهم يجتمعون عند هذا العالم وهو يامرهم بالمعروف وينهاهم عن
المنكر ويهديهم طريق الهدى ويعد لهم عن طريق الهوى ويامرهم
بالإسلام فيسلم من أراد الله إسلامه بيده

And they (the crowd) use to gather around this Ālimi while he was enjoining them on righteousness, forbidding them from immoralities, guiding them to the right path, dissuading them from the path of fantasy and directing them to Islām. Thus, those whom Allah destined to embrace Islām through him did embrace.²⁵

Having established the role of the book, *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* in the *Tafsīr* sessions of Shaykh Ālimi, it is imperative to state that the domineering status of *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* was based on Shaykh Ālimi's choice and not due to the absence of alternative. Though it was not impossible that published books, including those of *Tafsīr*, were not as readily available, during the nineteenth century that the Shaykh lived, as available in the present era, two other *Tafsīr* books were said to be in the possession of Shaykh Ālimi when he arrived at Ilorin: *Ghāyah al-Amānī fī at-Tafsīr al-Kalām ar-Rabānī* by Aḥmad b. Ismā'īl al-Kawrānī (d. 893 AH.) and *al-*

Jawāir al-Hisān fī Tafṣīr al-Qur’ān by Abdur-Rahmān ath-Tha’labī (d. 875 AH.). According to the source, *al-Mudawwanah al-Kubrā* of Imām Mālik b. Anas (d. 179 AH.) as narrated by ‘Abdus-Salām at-Tanūkhī Saḥnūn (d. 240 AH.) was a notable book of *Fiqh* with the Shaykh. Other prominent books indicated to be in the possession of Shaykh Ālimi while in Ilorin included *al-Itqān fī ‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān*, by ‘Abdur-Rahmān Jalāl ad-Dīn As-Suyūtī (d.911 AH.), *‘Uqūd al-Jumān fī ‘Ilm al-Ma’ānī wa al-Bayān*, by ‘Abdur-Rahmān Jalāl ad-Dīn As-Suyūtī (d.911 AH.), *al-Kawkabu as-Sāṭi‘i Nazmu Jam‘i al-Jawāmi‘*, by ‘Abdur-Rahmān Jalāl ad-Dīn As-Suyūtī (d.911 AH.), and *Mutnu al-Waraqāt fī Usūl al-Fiqh*, by Imām al-Ḥaramayn Abu al-Ma‘ālī al-Juwaynī (d. 478 AH.).²⁶

From the foregoing, it is revealed that the *Tafṣīr* sessions conducted by Shaykh Ālimi, in line with his applied method, had great impact on the people of Oke-suna and by extension, the entirety of Ilorin City. The new converts discovered the beauty of Islām; that after few years of emergence of *Tafṣīr*, Islam became the major identity markers in Ilorin.²⁷ Both students and scholars achieved academic growth; that prior to the arrival of the British in 1910, the *‘Ulamā’* in Ilorin were more than one thousand.²⁸ Robust brotherhood was established as the community life was standardized with improved knowledge about Allah, high moral standard and piety.²⁹ Above all, the effective and sustainable nature of the method of Shaykh Ālimi’s *Tafṣīr* sessions caused it to be inherited by the succeeding generations of scholars who had always continued with his approach up to the present time.

Imām Gambari Mosque as Venue of the First *Tafṣīr* Circle in Ilorin

The account of the beginning and evolution of oral *Tafṣīr* gatherings in Ilorin can neither be complete nor accurate without a reference to the events that took place, prior to the nineteenth century, at the Imām Gambari mosque. Therefore, a brief history that reflects the arrival of the progenitor of Imām Gambari’s family, establishment of his mosque and emergence of its *Tafṣīr* Circle, is very imperative at this juncture.

Composition of Gambari quarters of the migrants who arrived from Northern parts of Nigeria (Hausa, Nupe, Gwari, Kanuri, etc.) and the eminent status with leadership that gave Mallam Ibrāhīm Bako the recognition with the title of *Sarkin* Gambari, from time immemorial, was part of the background of the *Tafṣīr* Circle that emerged at the Imām Gambari mosque. Among the scholars that arrived in Ilorin before Shaykh Ālimi was the progenitor of Imām Gambari’s family. He was Shaykh

Abdul-Mūmin Dogo, a Kanuri (Kannike) by descent but regarded as Nupe in Ilorin because he migrated to Ilorin from Bukani near Bida (Nupeland). Shaykh Abdul-Mūmin was the Imām for the Gambari settlement before and during Shaykh Ālimi's Era.³⁰ According to another source, Shaykh Abdul-Mūmin and his elder brother, Shaykh Amīnuullah Nda, who later joined him in Ilorin, migrated together from Egypt through Kano to Bakano (now Bukani) before ending their journey in Ilorin. Upon his arrival, Shaykh Abdul-Mūmin was hosted by the *Sarkin* Gambari, Mallam Bako, who earmarked for him a piece of land that later became the residence where his descendants and those of his elder brother have lived till date.³¹

Shortly after Shaykh Abdul-Mūmin's arrival, the people of Gambari saw in him the interest and ability to spread the valuable knowledge of the Qur'ān and basics of Islām which he obviously possessed. Both the young and the old in the Gambari area congregated around him in multitude to gain from his knowledge. His residence therefore became a sort of knowledge fountain.³² This implies that the historical school of Imām Gambari was in existence alongside the educational centre of Oke-suna which was said to date back to about forty years before the coming of Shaykh Ālimi and referred to as the first centre of Islamic scholarship in Yoruba speaking areas.³³ This does not deny the existence of few Yoruba cities with appreciable Muslim population around that time and possibility of available Islamic Scholars with Islamic Centres.

The persistent increasing number of attendants in the residence-turned-school of Shaykh Abdul-Mūmin persuaded him to propose to the *Sarkin* Gambari the need to erect a befitting mosque in the community which would not only serve as school but primarily as a rallying point, where all the residents of the Gambari community would converge for the purpose of observing regular prayers and other permissible activities capable of strengthening the bond of brotherhood among the Muslim *Ummah*. As soon as the approval to use a piece of land next to the Shaykh's residence was given by the *Sarkin* Gambari, the settlers of Gambari and the traders who travelled down from far and near to Gambari international market came together with the support of the *Sarkin* Gambari and erected a mosque with attachment of a space reserved as Islamic school which, at the time of completion, was ranked by many as befitting.³⁴

Consequently, Shaykh Abdul-Mūmin became the first Imām of the mosque and the first grand teacher, managing the attached Islamic school.

The Imām Gambari mosque was multipurpose from the onset. Beside its use for the five daily prayers and as school, it was also used for the purpose of Friday *Jum'ah* prayer and the annual *'id al-Fiṭr* and *'id al-Adḥā* prayers.³⁵

In the beginning, Shaykh Abdul-Mūmin held his educative interaction with the students both outside and during *Ramaḍān* in the new mosque. It was after about two years that the decision to reserve the month of *Ramaḍān* for exclusive study of the explanation of the Qur'ān was reached. In the subsequent years, the arrangement for *Ramaḍān Tafsīr* session was made. Shaykh Abdul-Mūmin, who had always been in contact with his associates who were knowledgeable scholars of note at Bukani, did not want to shoulder all the activities alone. He therefore enlisted scholars who were specialists in the field of *Tafsīr* at Bukani as well as neighbouring Nupe towns and villages. The Shaykh used to invite a *Mufassir* and hosted him for the complete month of *Ramaḍān* annually. The succeeding years witnessed different *Mufassirūn*. The available information indicates that some of these exegetes were invited repeatedly. Though the number of years could not be ascertained, it is certain that at the end of this system, four of such exegetes were hosted by Shaykh Abdul-Mūmin with the support of the *Sarkin* Gambari.³⁶ It was around this period that Shaykh Ālimi arrived at Ilorin for the second time.

Available records indicate that after the second arrival of Shaykh Ālimi in Ilorin, there were occasions when he attended the *Jum'ah* prayer and *Tafsīr* session at the Imām Gambari mosque.³⁷ This implies the existence of a very cordial relationship between Shaykh Ālimi and Shaykh Abdul-Mūmin. It also negates the claim that the Imām Gambari mosque was built around the seventeenth century or earlier. This impression might be due to the obvious fact that Shaykh Ālimi and Shaykh Abdul-Mūmin were contemporaries who came across each other on several occasions. The fact that Shaykh Ālimi arrived Ilorin not earlier than early nineteenth century (1804 precisely) infers that the coming of Shaykh Abdul-Mūmin and building of his mosque could not have been earlier than the eighteenth century. However, the reports in some works written around the year 2010 are logical as they indicate that the Imām Gambari mosque was built only a few more than two hundred years ago.³⁸

Method of the first *Tafsīr* Circle and its Impact on Ilorin

The first *Tafsīr* circle in the Imām Gambari mosque was unprecedented and there are clear differences between this historical circle and the later developed *Tafsīr* circle which remains in existence in the

same mosque till the present time. The most significant difference has to do with citizenship and residence of the scholars that conducted the *Tafsīr* sessions. The first *Tafsīr* circle featured commentators who were neither native nor residents of Ilorin. They conducted the *Tafsīr* session at a time when no method was available to emulate in the entire City.³⁹ In other words, both the *Tafsīr* session and method were new brands to the targeted audience.

The methods of the *Tafsīr* conducted by the four invited Nupe exponents were similar with negligible differences. The similarity lies first in their language of communication. Every *Mufassir* arrived along with his own reciter. The *Mufassir* would recite the part of the Qur'ān he intended to explain and the reciter would do the same afterwards. The reciter assisted the *Mufassir* by reciting in piecemeal and pausing to allow the *Mufassir* explain all the necessary details of the part.⁴⁰ The *Mufassir* gave the commentary in Nupe language. On every occasion, somebody among the Nupe natives of Gambari quarters would be available to interpret the *Mufassir's* explanation in Hausa language.⁴¹ It should be noted that at that time nobody was appointed as substantive interpreter as different people carried out the function interchangeably. It is also remarkable that Hausa language was considered as *lingua franca* of the Gambari residents as nobody was reported to have questioned why the interpretation was only made in Hausa against other languages of communication during the *Tafsīr* session.⁴²

Another important point to note was the inconsistency in both the *Mufassir* and the parts of the Qur'ān treated each year. Each of the *Mufassirūn* was at liberty to select the chapter (*Sūrah*) or verses (*Āyāt*) he preferred to benefit his audience with, within the period of one month. However, it was gathered that each of the *Mufassirūn* encouraged the scholars in attendance who might be in possession of the book, *Tafsīr Jalālayn* to bring it along to the gathering for maximum benefit from the *Tafsīr* session.⁴³ This is an indication that the *Mufassirūn* made use of the book and made the book more popular among the people of Gambari quarters.

The impact of the first *Tafsīr* circle that took place at the Imām Gambari mosque should not go unmentioned. *Ramaḍān* period has been specified for *Tafsīr* sessions in Ilorin where a *Mufassir* usually recites and explains portions of the Qur'ān within some hours either daily or weekly throughout the month of *Ramaḍān*. Some *Tafsīr* sessions were similarly held at night after '*Ishā*' prayer.⁴⁴ The earlier indigenous exponents who were of Nupe origin continued the use of Nupe language to conduct the

Tafsīr session, at the Imām Gambari mosque for some time.⁴⁵ The method was of remarkable impact that the use of an interpreter continued even when the exegetes conducted the *Tafsīr* session in Hausa language, which was the common language among the people.⁴⁶ This researcher found that appointment of an expert who interprets from Hausa to Yoruba language, which began around the early twentieth century, was not because the people of Gambari were not Hausa speakers but because the appointment was considered important to maintain the tradition of interpretation and relaying.⁴⁷ The appointment was also apparently to encourage Yoruba speakers who might be attending from outside the Gambari quarters.

It is interesting to note that the interpreter used in the *Tafsīr* session of Imām Gambari mosque was later emulated in the subsequent *Tafsīr* circles created across and outside Ilorin. Even where both the *Mufassir* and the audience speak Yoruba language; an individual, who speaks louder and clearer, is appointed to relay what the *Mufassir* says.⁴⁸ In other words, most of the *Tafsīr* circles created in Ilorin in the nineteenth or early twentieth century appointed an interpreter, a relaying person or someone who carried out the two functions concurrently.

However, the closeness of the period of this *Tafsīr* circle and that of Shaykh Ālimi *Tafsīr* circle at Oke-suna makes it rational to accept that the two *Tafsīr* circles have jointly influenced the subsequent *Tafsīr* circles in Ilorin and its environs, particularly in accelerating the use of *Ajanasi* (reciter), *Arowasi* (relayer/interpreter) and popularity of *Tafsīr Jalālayn*, a book of *Tafsīr*, commonly embraced by Shaykh Ālimi, the first *Mufassir* and the Nupe scholars, the invitees who presided over the first *Tafsīr* circle.⁴⁹

Conclusion

The arrivals of Shaykh Ālimi in Ilorin, in the first and second times are well documented. Different authors narrated how the Shaykh related with the people of Oke-suna and the circumstances that led to his being their teacher on different fields of knowledge, particularly *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* during the month of Ramaḍān. There is no controversy in the recognition of Shaykh Ālimi as the first *Mufassir* both in Oke-suna, his *Tafsīr* location and in Ilorin as an extension. However, concerning the second event, the *Tafsīr* Circle that has been taking place at the Imām Gambari mosque before the final arrival of Shaykh Ālimi did not attract enormous attention of early writers. Names and other relevant details of the *Mufassirūn* that were invited from Nupeland were not documented. The later historians were only able to trace and document details about the

subsequent exponents, from the period of Emir AbdulSalam (1820 to 1836) to date, because the *Mufasssirūn* were indigenes and their families have continued to remain available and accessible in the Gambari quarters of the Ilorin Emirate. It is logical therefore to juxtapose the two events as a combination and thus continue to acknowledge Shaykh Ālimi as the first *Mufasir* in Ilorin, while the Imām Gambari mosque is considered as the venue of the first *Tafṣīr* Circle in the ancient City.

Certain personalities played significant roles, worthy of study, in the history of evolution of *Tafṣīr* in Ilorin. Shaykh Ālimi devoted his entire life to the spread of Islām and promotion of its scholarship. Shaykh Yusuf al-Malli and Ahmad Bī Sani were the reciters to Shaykh Ālimi. The duo and Olufadi, who interpreted Ālimi's speech to non-Fulani speakers, assisted him tirelessly in the cause of Islām and dissemination of the message of the Qur'ān. Not only that Shaykh Abdul Mumin Dogo founded the Imām Gambari mosque since time immemorial, he ensured that the mosque has all the required facilities and benefits the people in all possible ramifications. The virtues of good leadership are apparent in the role played by Malam Ibrahim Bako, the first *Sarkin* Gambari, who was a great benefactor of the early Gambari Muslims through his contribution towards the historic mosque. It is therefore obvious that such individuals are worthy of being role models to the coming generations.

The limitations of this study included impossibility of naming the *Mufasssirūn* invited to the Imām Gambari mosque from Nupeland for the purpose of annual *Tafṣīr* and uncertainty of the number of years covered with that system, due to lack of records. These facts, therefore, necessitate the call for proper documentation of events, highlighting their genesis and developments in chronological order, for certainty and accuracy for future references by the coming generations. It is also recommended that the efforts of the personalities discussed in this work be emulated by subsequent generations for better spread of Islam, uplifting of knowledge and reforming of societies.

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