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Doctrines and Activities of Ahlus-Sunnah Wal-Jamā'Ah (ASWAJ): A Critical Analysis of New Religious Movement in Iseyin, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the Study: This study critically examines the doctrines and activities of Ahlus-Sunnah Wal-Jamā'ah (ASWAJ), commonly known as Jamā'ah Kilometer 5 in Iseyin, Nigeria, within the context of New Religious Movements (NRMs). The study aims to assess ASWAJ's conformity to Islamic principles and its impact on the Muslim community.

Methodology: A historical approach and descriptive survey were employed. Data collection methods included observation, unstructured interviews, and documentary evidence.

Main Findings: The study finds that while ASWAJ exhibits some similarities with mainstream Islam, it also incorporates elements of syncretism and heresy. Members are often unaware of the manipulative practices used by their leaders. The doctrines and activities of ASWAJ contradict fundamental Islamic principles and negatively affect Muslim development.

Application of this Study: The study is conducted within the field of Religious Studies, focusing on Islamic movements in Nigeria, particularly in Iseyin, Oyo State.

Novelty/Originality of this Study: This study provides a critical analysis of ASWAJ as a New Religious Movement, highlighting its doctrinal deviations and socio-religious implications. It contributes to existing scholarship on Islamic movements by exposing how certain groups manipulate religious teachings to establish control over followers.

Significance: This study is beneficial to scholars of Religious Studies, Islamic scholars, policymakers, and Muslim communities by providing insights into the impact of NRMs on Islamic faith and practices, as well as informing strategies to address their influence.

Keywords: *Ahlu-sunnah Wal-Jamā'ah*, Iseyin, Islamic movements, New Religious Movements, Nigeria, religious sects, syncretism

INTRODUCTION

The assembly of Muslims for proselytization and moral guidance holds great significance in Islam. This is exemplified by the Prophet Muhammad's (SAAS) consistent encouragement for his companions to engage in *Da'wah* (calling others to righteousness). The Qur'ān emphasises this duty, stating (meaning),

"Let there arise out of you a group of people inviting to all that is good (Islam), enjoining Al-Ma'rūf (what is right) and forbidding Al-Munkar (what is wrong). And it is they who are the successful." (Qur'ān 3:104).

The Qur'ān further states (meaning),

"You are the best of peoples ever raised for mankind; you enjoin Al-Ma'rūf and forbid Al-Munkar, and you believe in Allah." (Qur'ān 3:110).

Thus, the formation of Islamic groups can be seen as an essential *Da'wah* effort aimed at inviting non-Muslims to Islam while retaining current believers. Historically, the early emergence of the *Muhājirūn* and *Ansār* laid a foundation for subsequent group formations in Islam. Consequently, numerous organisations have been established for various purposes, including social, ideological, spiritual, economic, and political endeavours. Among notable organisations are the Muslim Brotherhood, the United Muslims of America, and the Wahhabi Movement (Adeoye 2017, 2-3).

Moreover, a new category of organisations, termed New Religious Movements (NRMs), has emerged. Examples include Subūd, Ansāru Allah Community, and the Arica School. Many scholars argue that these NRMs arose from a perceived decline in traditional religion, increasing secularization, and a quest for spiritual support amid socioeconomic challenges (Adeoye 2017, 3).

In Nigeria, particularly in Oyo State, NRMs proliferate within the Muslim community with founders employing unconventional methods to 'heal' their members. The labels for these founders often reflect their unusual practices, such as *Alagbara Omi* (using water for healing), *Aworawo* (Star Gazers), and *Oko Oso Oko Aje* (the husband of witches). Organisations including Muslims in Light Organisation (MILOR) in Ibadan, *Ahlu-sunnah Wal-Jamā'ah* (ASWAJ) in Iseyin, and *Lailaha* Association (Egbe Lailaha) are notable examples. This research specifically focuses on ASWAJ, analysing its objectives, doctrines, and activities, and assessing conformity with Shari'ah principles concerning the formation of *Da'wah* organisations, along with syncretic tendencies and their implications for Islam and its adherents in the state.

NATURE AND FEATURES OF MUSLIM ORGANISATIONS

Islamic organisations arise for various purposes, including doctrinal, ideological, humanitarian, and spiritual reasons. Some organisations, such as the Shi'ites or Wahabiyyah movement, have doctrinal roots, while others focus on social or economic endeavours. Notable examples include the Muslim Council of Britain and the Islamic Society of North America and Canada.

Defining New Religious Movements can be quite challenging. Murtala (2013, 1) notes that NRMs do not fit into explicit definitions. He cites John A. Saliba's observation that many NRMs are not strictly new, often drawing on ancient teachings. Richard describes an NRM as "a small,

secretive religious group that represents either a new religion or a significant innovation of an existing faith" (2005, 365).

Typically, these groups revolve around a charismatic leader whose authority is often authoritarian. Adherents may develop a sense of exclusivity, believing their group holds the ultimate truth and perceiving themselves as persecuted. Group leaders may impose specific modes of dress and restrict personal choices, which can foster conformity and suppress dissent (Adeoye et al., 2022, 7). On the proliferation of these Movements in Nigeria, a source states, *"The proliferation of NRMs in Nigeria is attributed to global factors, national secular trends, and individual crises."* (Murtala 2013, 1).

THE EMERGENCE OF ASWAJ AS A NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENT

Ahlu-Sunnah Wal-Jamā'ah (ASWAJ), widely known as Jamā'ah Kilometre 5, was established in 1997 by Alhaji Yūnus Adefabi. He founded the group after leaving the Muslim Students' Society of Nigeria (M.S.S.N.), Iseyin Central Branch, Oyo State. The establishment of ASWAJ was rooted in a series of events, including leadership conflicts within M.S.S.N. and disagreements on handling external crises.

The tension began when M.S.S.N. Iseyin Central Branch protested against the Oro cult for violating their freedom of movement and worship. During this period, Adefabi was accused of instigating internal discord within the Society. He criticised the peaceful resolution methods of M.S.S.N. as a sign of weakness, which he claimed lacked the resolve for jihad. His persistent critiques eventually led to a split, as three members Wasiu Olatunbosun, Sulaiman Yūnus, and Abdul Rasheed Kolawole pledged allegiance (bay'ah) to Adefabi. This marked the beginning of ASWAJ, with Adefabi as its leader.

Initially operating from a house in the Koso area of Iseyin, ASWAJ soon relocated to a site five kilometres outside the town due to its growing membership. The relocation symbolized a desire to separate from the perceived sinful lifestyle of urban residents and establish a community dedicated to Islamic principles.

ASWAJ adopted a communal lifestyle where members' economic activities and resources were centrally controlled by the leader. Members worked collectively, and their earnings were appropriated by the leader, who in turn provided for their needs, including food. The group sustained itself through mechanized farming, including cocoa and palm tree plantations, as well as charcoal production. By 2017, their assets were estimated at approximately 60 million Naira.

ASWAJ's teachings and operations centred on absolute loyalty to its leader, Yūnus Adefabi. Members were required to swear an oath of allegiance (bay'ah), pledging unconditional obedience to the leader. This practice was reinforced by interpretations of Islamic texts and Ahādīth (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad), which emphasised submission to authority. For example, the following Hadīth was used to establish the leader's supreme authority:

كنا مع النبي، صلى الله عليه وسلم، وهو يأخذ بيد عمر بن الخطاب، فقال له عمر: يا رسول الله لانت احب الي من كل شيء الا من نفسي. فقال النبي، صلى الله عليه وسلم: لا، والذي نفسي بيده حتى اكون احب اليك من نفسك. فقال له عمر: فانه الان، والله لانت احب الي من نفسي. فقال النبي، صلى الله عليه وسلم: الان يا عمر.

Meaning, *"Umar bin Khattab said, 'O Allah's Apostle! You are dearer to me than everything except my own self.' The Prophet replied, 'No, by Him in Whose Hand my soul is, (you will not have complete faith) till I am dearer to you than your own self.' Then Umar said, 'However, now, by Allah, you are dearer to me than my own self.' The Prophet said, 'Now, O Umar (now you are a believer).'"* (Bukhari and Muslim)

Other Ahādīth emphasised the necessity of loyalty to the leader and the consequences of defiance, portraying the leader as infallible and beyond reproach. Members were forbidden from questioning the leader's authority, and any disobedience was equated with ignorance (Jahiliyyah).

ASWAJ discouraged Western education and careers, promoting *Hijrah* (migration from falsehood to truth) as a spiritual necessity. Members were instructed to burn their academic certificates, yet the group operated a nursery and primary school that followed a hybrid curriculum, blending Islamic studies with Western-style education.

Daily life within the community revolved around structured religious and educational activities. Members attended lectures after sunset (Maghrib) and night ('Ishā') prayers, focusing on Islamic movements and foundational texts. They also engaged in philosophical discussions after morning (Subh) prayer on selected weekdays and Saturdays. Friday evenings were dedicated to *Tafsir* (Qur'ānic exegesis) sessions.

Ahlu-Sunnah Wal-Jamā'ah (ASWAJ) represents a unique religious movement in Iseyin, characterised by its strict adherence to the teachings of its leader and a communal lifestyle. The group's practices reflect a blend of religious fervour, economic collectivism, and ideological separatism. Despite controversies surrounding its doctrines and leadership style, ASWAJ established itself as a notable religious entity in the region.

This suggests that every member of the group was required to swear allegiance to their leader, motivated by their love and loyalty towards him. Consequently, they neither questioned his authority nor challenged his commands. This notion is reinforced by a Hadīth that states:

من خلع يدا من طاعة لقي الله يوم القيامة ولا حجة له, ومن مات وليس في عنقه بيعة مات ميتة جاهلية.

Meaning, *"Whoever refuses to obey his leader will meet his Lord on the Day of Resurrection without any excuse, and whoever dies without pledging allegiance to a Muslim leader dies in a state of ignorance (Jahiliyyah)."* (Sahih Muslim, Kitābul-Immarah).

This Hadīth highlights the subordination of group members to their leader, mandating absolute loyalty and submission. The practice of allegiance draws inspiration from the oath given to the Prophet Muhammad by the people of Madinah during the early days of Islam. Another Hadīth emphasizes:

من كره من اميره شيئا فليصبر, فانه من خرج من السلطان شبرا مات ميتة جاهلية

Meaning, "*Whoever dislikes something from his Ameer (leader) should be patient. Whoever withdraws allegiance from his leader even by a hand span dies in a state of ignorance (Jahiliyyah).*" (Bukhari and Muslim).

This Hadīth highlights the leader's complete authority over followers, forbidding them from defying his commands under any circumstance. It implies a perception of the leader as infallible, with followers forbidden from questioning him, even in extreme scenarios. For example, Adeoye (2017, 128) mentions a case where one must remain silent even if witnessing the leader in a compromising situation.

The leader's authority was further validated by an event involving 'Umar when giving allegiance to Abu Bakr as the first Khalifah. 'Umar declared: "If you, as the Khalifah, control my religion, then you control my life. I place my life in your hands." These principles formed the foundation upon which the group operated, with members submitting to the leadership of Yūnus Adefabi without questioning the legality of their actions.

The group, Ahlus-Sunnah wal Jamā'ah, practised additional doctrines such as *Taqiyyah* (dissimulation), where leaders and members were encouraged to conceal truths and sometimes propagate falsehoods. They discouraged Western education and urged members to abandon careers for the sake of *Da'wah* (Islamic propagation), referring to this as *Hijrah*, symbolizing a migration from falsehood to truth. Members were forbidden from listening to outside lectures or participating in non-affiliated *Jumu'ah* services. They justified this using the Hadīth: "My *Ummah* (Muslim community) will never agree upon error (misguidance)" (Tirmidhi, 4:2167; Ibn Majah, 2:1303). They also refrained from greeting non-members who disagreed with their beliefs. The members of this group maintained a *Shūrā* (consultative committee), functioning as their decision-making assembly. Discussions within the *Shūrā* were strictly confidential, and members were prohibited from sharing any information discussed.

Yūnus Adefabi, the leader of the group, initially held a National Diploma in Accountancy from the Federal Polytechnic, Ilaro. However, he abandoned his degree studies at the University of Ilorin. He later instructed followers to burn their academic certificates, claiming Western education was inherently evil. Ironically, the group operated a nursery and primary school based on a Western model. In this school, the first three periods focused on the Arabic language, followed by lessons aligned with the Western education curriculum.

Aside from their communal farming activities, members attended daily lectures between *Maghrib* and *'Ishā'* prayers, focusing on global Islamic movements and studying Islamic texts. Philosophy discussions were held after *Subh* (morning) prayers until around 8:30 a.m., three times a week (Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, or Saturday), led by the founder himself. Members observed the five daily prayers and attended *Jumu'ah* services every Friday. On Friday evenings, the group held *Tafsir* (Qur'ānic exegesis) sessions between 5:00 p.m. and *Maghrib*. These routines reflected the group's intense commitment to religious practices and indoctrination (Adeoye, 2017, 130).

THE ROLE OF DA'WAH IN ISLAMIC GROUP FORMATION: EVALUATING ASWAJ'S LEGITIMACY

The *Da'wah* activities of *Jamā'ah* Kilometer 5 align with Islamic justification for forming groups dedicated to admonition and guidance. The admonition is a core tenet of Islam, and all Muslims are obligated, whether individually or collectively, to partake in it. The establishment of groups for this purpose is supported by the following Hadīth:

Meaning, "He who calls to guidance will earn a reward equal to the rewards of those who follow his call until the Day of Resurrection, without diminishing their rewards. Conversely, whoever calls to heresy will bear a burden equal to the burdens of those who follow his call until the Day of Resurrection, without reducing their own burdens." (Ahmad, 2007:63).

This principle gains further validation when viewed against the backdrop of pre-Islamic Arab history, which was marked by rampant vices such as tribalism, raiding, female infanticide, unlimited polygamy, oppression of the weak and widespread adultery. These societal ills caused deep concern among leaders of that era. The fervent efforts to address these issues culminated in a divine call to Prophet Muhammad, with the command to "arise and warn" (Qur'ān 74:2).

The essence of *Da'wah* lies in pure intentions, as emphasised in the first Hadīth of An-Nawawī's collection, which states that actions must be grounded in sincere motives for the benefit of Islam. Based on the Qur'ānic and Prophetic evidence, it can be argued that the establishment of *Ahlu-s-Sunnah wal Jamā'ah* (ASWAJ) in Iseyin was valid. However, whether the group's objectives and activities align with the Islamic injunctions of enjoining good and forbidding evil remains a subject of scrutiny.

THE CONTROVERSY OF BAY'AH (PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE)

The requirement of *Bay'ah* (pledge of allegiance) as a condition for joining a group as practised by ASWAJ, is a contentious issue among Islamic scholars. The concept of oath-taking is relatively unfamiliar to many Muslims in Southwestern Nigeria, including Yoruba Muslims, which contributes to divergent views among Muslim clerics on its necessity.

Proponents of *Bay'ah* argue that its historical precedent lies in the Prophet Muhammad's acceptance of allegiance from the Yathribites at 'Aqabah. Conversely, others contend that this practice is specific to the Prophet and the Rightly Guided Caliphs, making it inapplicable in modern contexts (Adeoye, 2017:189). Islamic sources, however, affirm the importance of *Bay'ah*, as demonstrated in the Qur'ān:

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يُبَايِعُونَكَ إِنَّمَا يُبَايِعُونَ اللَّهَ يَدُ اللَّهِ فَوْقَ أَيْدِيهِمْ

Meaning, "Indeed, those who pledge allegiance to you [O Muhammad] are actually pledging allegiance to Allah. The Hand of Allah is over their hands." (Qur'ān 48:10).

The Prophet himself engaged in oath-taking and instructed his followers on its significance in validating leadership appointments. This is illustrated in a narration by Imam Muslim on the authority of Abi Hazim:

Meaning, "I accompanied Abū Hurayrah for five years, and I heard him narrate from the Prophet, saying: 'The children of Israel were governed by Prophets; whenever a Prophet died, another would succeed him. There will be no Prophet after me, but there will be many Caliphs.' The Companions asked, 'What do you command us to do?' He replied, 'Fulfill the Bay'ah to them, one after the other, and give them their due rights. Allah will hold them accountable for what He entrusted them with.'" (Khilāfah: n.d. cited in Toyib 2016, 69).

This Prophetic guidance highlights the importance of loyalty and order in leadership, but the context and application of *Bay'ah* in contemporary settings require careful consideration. One of the practices of ASWAJ in Iseyin is the doctrine of *Taqiyyah* (dissimulation), which involves members, especially leaders, concealing the truth and presenting falsehoods. According to Strothmann and Moktar (2013, p. 134), *Taqiyyah* means prudence, fear, and caution. It is an Islamic concept referring to the practice of concealing or denying one's religious beliefs and practices in the face of persecution. A related concept, *Kitman* (concealment), specifically refers to dissimulation through silence or omission (Stewart, 2014, p. 34). Esposito (2014) explains that the doctrine of *Taqiyyah* is particularly emphasised in Shia Islam, where followers are permitted to hide their religious beliefs when facing threats, mistreatment, or coercion. This doctrine was also observed as a practice among ASWAJ members in Iseyin.

In the case of ASWAJ, Iseyin, two former members of the group, 'Abd 'Azeez and Buniyamin Olaniyan, publicly revealed that one of the group's doctrines involves concealing the truth and spreading falsehoods. This practice was particularly evident in cases of abduction, where the group instructed its members to inform the parents of abducted individuals that they were unaware of their whereabouts. This was confirmed during a confession by Yūnus Adefabi, the founder of the group. At a general reconciliation meeting held on June 4, 2010, Adefabi admitted that some of the missing daughters and wives, previously declared wanted, were in his camp. This confession contradicted his earlier denials at prior meetings (Adeoye, 2017, 229).

Such practices are becoming increasingly common among some newly established Muslim groups today. When these groups' questionable activities are exposed, they often deny membership or any affiliation with the organisation. Ironically, many of these groups publicly preach against social and moral vices in their programmes, which starkly contradict the teachings of Islam. Allah rebukes the Jews for practising similar deceit against the early Muslims and condemns such acts as irreligious and immoral. Allah says in the Qur'ān:

أَتَأْمُرُونَ النَّاسَ بِالْبِرِّ وَتَنْسَوْنَ أَنْفُسَكُمْ وَأَنْتُمْ تَتْلُونَ الْكِتَابَ أَفَلَا تَعْقِلُونَ

Meaning, "Do you enjoin Al-Birr (piety and righteousness and every act of obedience to Allah) upon the people and forget to practice it yourselves, while you recite the Scripture (Tawrah)? Have you then no sense?" (Qur'ān 2:44).

At this point, it is important to clarify that Allah is not criticising the People of the Book for promoting righteousness. Encouraging good deeds is itself a righteous act and is an obligation upon scholars. However, a scholar must also practise and adhere strictly to the principles they preach to others. For instance, Prophet Shu'ayb said:

وَمَا أُرِيدُ أَنْ أُخَالِفَكُمْ إِلَىٰ مَا أَنْهَكُمُ عَنْهُ إِنِّي أُرِيدُ إِلَّا الْإِصْلَاحَ مَا اسْتَطَعْتُ وَمَا تَوْفِيقِي إِلَّا بِاللَّهِ عَلَيْهِ تَوَكَّلْتُ وَإِلَيْهِ أُنِيبُ

Meaning, "I do not wish, in opposition to you, to do that which I forbid you. I only desire reform to the best of my ability. My guidance is only from Allah. In Him, I trust, and to Him, I turn in repentance." (Qur'ān 11:88).

This highlights that both enjoining righteousness and practising it are equally necessary. One cannot negate the other, as affirmed by the majority of scholars among the *Salaf* (righteous

predecessors). Imam Ahmad reported that Abu Wa'il narrated the following *Hadīth* of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him):

يُجَاءُ بِالرَّجُلِ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ فَيُلْقَى فِي النَّارِ فَتَنْدَلِقُ بِهِ أَقْتَابُهُ فَيَدُورُ بِهَا فِي النَّارِ كَمَا
يَدُورُ الْحِمَارُ بِرَحَاهُ فَيُطِيفُ بِهِ أَهْلُ النَّارِ فَيَقُولُونَ: يَا فُلَانُ مَا أَصَابَكَ؟ أَلَمْ تَكُنْ
تَأْمُرُنَا بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَتَنْهَانَا عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ؟ فَيَقُولُ: كُنْتُ أَمُرُكُمْ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَلَا آتِيهِ
وَأَنْهَأَكُمْ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ وَآتِيهِ

Meaning, "A man will be brought on the Day of Resurrection and thrown in the Fire. His intestines will fall out and he will continue circling pulling them behind him, just as the donkey goes around the pole. The people of the Fire will go to that man and ask him, 'What happened to you Did you not use to command us to do righteous acts and forbid us from committing evil' He will say, 'Yes. I used to enjoin righteousness but refrained from performing righteousness, and I used to forbid you to perform from evil while I myself did it.'" (Bukhari and Muslim).

This *Hadīth* serves as a grave reminder that those who preach righteousness must also embody the teachings they promote. Both actions are indispensable and neglecting one while practising the other is unacceptable in Islam. Based on the above Qur'ānic verse and Prophetic traditions, it is clear that ASWAJ and any other Muslim group that adopts and practises the doctrine of *Taqiyyah* (dissimulation) to conceal the truth or mislead others about their activities and programmes is not Islamically justified.

ASWAJ'S STANCE ON WESTERN EDUCATION

Another concerning practice of ASWAJ is its encouragement of members to renounce Western education and abandon their careers for the sake of *Da'wah* (Islamic propagation). This stance contradicts the principles of Islam, which strongly advocate for the pursuit of knowledge, whether Islamic or secular, as long as it has a positive impact on society. Islam values education and views it as a means of benefiting individuals and communities alike. The first revelation to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) emphasises the importance of acquiring knowledge, particularly through the use of the pen. The Qur'ān states:

اقْرَأْ بِاسْمِ رَبِّكَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ خَلَقَ الْإِنْسَانَ مِنْ عَلَقٍ اقْرَأْ وَرَبُّكَ الْأَكْرَمُ الَّذِي عَلَّمَ
بِالْقَلَمِ عَلَّمَ الْإِنْسَانَ مَا لَمْ يَعْلَمْ

Meaning, "Read! In the Name of your Lord Who created. He has created man from a clot. Read! And your Lord is the Most Generous. Who has taught by the pen. He has taught man that which he knew not." (Qur'ān 96:1-5).

These verses highlight the origins of human creation and the honour Allah bestowed upon humanity by granting them knowledge. This gift of knowledge is what distinguished the father of humanity, Adam (peace be upon him), over the angels. Furthermore, Islam recognises education as a powerful agent of civilisation and socialisation. This is why the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) strongly encourages both teaching and learning. An example

of this is seen in the Prophet's instruction to the captives of the Battle of Badr, where they were granted freedom in exchange for teaching others (that is, Muslims) to read and write. This underscores the significant role of education in Islam, not only as a means of personal development but also as a tool for societal progress.

The founder of ASWAJ, Iseyin, was aware of the importance of education, having obtained a National Diploma from a polytechnic and attended university up to his third year before dropping out. However, his role as a group leader, with the ability to manipulate his followers, led him to discourage them from pursuing educational careers. This was likely because he understood that acquiring knowledge, particularly Western education, could expose his inadequacies and weaknesses. Such exposure could potentially lead to rebellion and the fragmentation of his group.

It is inconceivable for a Muslim engaging in *Da'wah* (Islamic propagation) to lack the necessary knowledge to support their mission. Nevertheless, the founder of ASWAJ relied on manipulating four Ahādīth to maintain his influence over his followers. This approach enabled him to tighten his grip on the group, even as he undermined the importance of education. It is therefore highly problematic for a group claiming to be Islamic to renounce education, which is integral not only to the religion but also to humanity. The danger lies in the perception of ASWAJ, Iseyin, as an Islamic group, especially given the charismatic nature of its leader, which may mislead unsuspecting Muslims.

ASWAJ'S ISOLATIONIST AND SECTARIAN PRACTICES

Another doctrine of ASWAJ, Iseyin, was its prohibition of members from listening to lectures or *Jumu'ah* (Friday) sermons delivered by others. This is neither encouraged nor acceptable in Islam. Islam values congregational activities and promotes unity while discouraging disunity and unnecessary sectarianism. This restrictive policy may have stemmed from the leader's fear of counter-indoctrination by other scholars, who might dissuade his followers from continuing with the group. To further isolate his followers, the founder established a remote camp five kilometres away from the main town. This separation had significant implications. Members of the camp were likely to view the townspeople as unbelievers, which could have serious consequences for peace and order in the community.

The group's practice of segregating itself from society is fundamentally opposed to Islamic teachings. Islam emphasises cooperation, unity, and fostering a spirit of brotherhood while condemning all forms of disunity. The Qur'ān warns against division, stating:

وَلَا تَكُونُوا كَالَّذِينَ تَفَرَّقُوا وَاخْتَلَفُوا مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا جَاءَهُمُ الْبَيِّنَاتُ

Meaning, "And be not as those who divided and differed among themselves after the clear proofs had come to them." (Qur'ān 3:105).

The doctrines and practices of ASWAJ, Iseyin, are not only contradictory to Islamic teachings but also detrimental to societal harmony and cohesion.

There are numerous Ahādīth that emphasise the importance of adhering to the *Jamā'ah* (congregation of believers) and strongly discourage division. The Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) says:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَرْضَى لَكُمْ ثَلَاثًا، وَيَسْخَطُ لَكُمْ ثَلَاثًا: يَرْضَى لَكُمْ أَنْ تَعْبُدُوهُ وَلَا تُشْرِكُوا بِهِ شَيْئًا، وَأَنْ تَعْتَصِمُوا بِحَبْلِ اللَّهِ جَمِيعًا وَلَا تَفَرَّقُوا، وَأَنْ تَنَاصَحُوا مَنْ وَلَّاهُ اللَّهُ أَمْرَكُمْ. وَيَسْخَطُ لَكُمْ ثَلَاثًا: قِيلَ وَقَالَ، وَكَثْرَةُ السُّؤَالِ، وَإِضَاعَةُ الْمَالِ

Meaning, "It pleases Allah for you to acquire three qualities and displeases Him that you acquire three characteristics. It pleases Him that you worship Him Alone and not associate anything or anyone with Him in worship, that you hold on to the Rope of Allah altogether and do not divide, and that you advise whoever Allah appoints as your Leader. The three that displease Him are that you say, 'It was said,' and, 'So-and-so said,' asking many unnecessary questions and wasting money." (Ibn Kathir, 1992, 297)

The practice of segregation, as seen in ASWAJ, Iseyin, contradicts the principles of Islam. The Qur'ān discourages the act of self-purification and claiming superiority in piety or righteousness. Allah says:

لَا تُزَكُّوا أَنْفُسَكُمْ هُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِمَنِ اتَّقَى

Meaning, "So, ascribe not purity to yourselves. He knows best him who has Taqwa (piety)." (Qur'ān 53:32).

Islam's emphasis on congregation and cooperation is evident in the daily prayers performed in congregation, the *Jumu'ah* (Friday) service, the 'Id prayers twice a year, and the pilgrimage to Makkah, where Muslims from across the world unite at least once in their lifetime. A similar example of segregation can be seen in groups such as the *Salafi* or *Laa Jamā'ah*, whose practices deviate from mainstream Islam. Life in the ASWAJ camp, where the founder wields absolute authority over his followers, is a dangerous precedent. Such control could easily lead to the manipulation of followers to commit evil acts under the guise of religion, as seen in extremist groups like *Boko Haram*. This segregationist doctrine misleads Muslims away from the core tenets of Islam due to the wealth and charisma of the leaders. It also risks alienating them from mainstream Islamic practices.

Furthermore, ASWAJ's activities have the potential to create conflicts with mainstream Muslims. Differences in ideology and confrontational lectures directed at others often provoke animosity and can escalate into religious crises. This fosters sectarianism, confusion, and division within the Muslim community. The Prophet (peace be upon him) warns:

وَسَتَفْتَرُقُ هَذِهِ الْأُمَّةُ عَلَى ثَلَاثٍ وَسَبْعِينَ فِرْقَةً، كُلُّهَا فِي النَّارِ إِلَّا وَاحِدَةً

Meaning, "And this Ummah (Muslims) will divide into seventy-three groups, all of them in the Fire except one." (Bukhari and Muslim, n.d).

When asked about the one successful group, the Prophet replied: 'It is the group that adheres to what my companions and I uphold' (Ibn Kathir, 1992, p. 311). This underscores that any group promoting sectarianism and disunity cannot be considered Islamic. The rise of

sectarianism is one of the reasons for the proliferation of New Religious Movements. As John and Ken (2005) observe:

"New Religious Movements have spread across the globe, each with diverse origins, distinct creeds, varying sizes, methods of recruitment, behavioural patterns, and attitudes toward other religious groups and society. Despite the appearance of secularization and a perceived decline in religion, many such movements have emerged..." (p. 505)

ASWAJ'S CRIMINAL ACTIVITIES

Another alarming practice of ASWAJ, Iseyin, was abduction. Islam unequivocally forbids abduction in the name of religion. In 2006, the founder of ASWAJ faced accusations of over twenty-one different offences. These offences were not only religious but also posed significant threats to the peace and order of the community. These offences include:

1. Abduction of both males and females;
2. Enforced slave labour;
3. Forced marriages without parental consent;
4. Persuading children to rebel against their parents;
5. Engaging in illicit relations with female members, including married women.
6. Maltreatment of young children leading to death; and
7. Forcing members to live in the camp indefinitely.

The issue of abductions reportedly began in 2003, with no fewer than seven households reporting cases of missing children or wives who were later found at the group's camp (Adeoye, 2017, p. 217).

INTERVENTION AGAINST ASWAJ

The numerous complaints against Yūnus Adefabi prompted an investigation by the Federation of Ahlus-Sunnah Organisations in Nigeria (FASON), of which Adefabi's group was initially a member. This first intervention took place in Ibadan on July 4, 2010. During the meeting, after all parties involved presented their cases, Adefabi was given the opportunity to respond to the allegations. However, his defense was deemed unconvincing. Consequently, FASON reached the following resolutions:

1. All individuals held in the camp must be released;
2. Members should be allowed to attend lectures from their respective homes;
3. All camp activities must be conducted transparently;
4. A meeting should be convened with key stakeholders, including the Aseyin of Iseyin, the Chief Imam of Iseyin, and the parents of abducted individuals;
5. The group's activities must strictly adhere to the teachings of the Qur'ān and authentic ahādīth; and
6. The group was required to submit a written document confirming its continued membership with FASON or its withdrawal (Adeoye, 2017, p. 220).

Adefabi's refusal to comply with the decisions from the first meeting, as well as his continued inappropriate actions, necessitated a second intervention by FASON. This meeting was led by a high-level delegation, including the then-Minister of Communication, Barrister Adebayo Shittu. The meeting was held on August 4, 2010, at the NYSC Orientation Camp in Iseyin. It was attended by representatives of the Aseyin of Iseyin, Oba Dr. Abdul Ganiyy Adekunle Salaudeen, the Chief Imam of Iseyin, Alhaji Imam Abdul Ganiyy Olayiwola, and other dignitaries. After all

affected parties presented their grievances, Adefabi was asked to respond to the allegations. During this meeting:

1. He admitted that some of the missing daughters and wives were present in the camp but denied abducting or forcing anyone to join his group;
2. He justified taking another member's wife by claiming it occurred after the couple had a conflict that resulted in divorce;
3. He denied locking erring children in cupboards but admitted that a boy nicknamed "omo zamfara" died during a punishment for theft; and
4. He argued that the group's disciplinary actions were intended to address waywardness and rebellion among members (Adeoye, 2017, p. 222).

Based on its structure and practices, ASWAJ, Iseyin, can be categorised as a world-rejecting group. Wallis (1976) defines such groups as follows:

"World-rejecting groups operate similarly to conventional religions, as they maintain strict ethical codes and are highly critical of the materialistic, external world. In addition, they demand significant personal change from their members through intense communal activities" (p. 123).

The administration of ASWAJ aligns with these characteristics, given its isolationist practices, authoritarian leadership, and focus on controlling its members. This categorisation raises concerns about the group's potential for harm, not only to its members but also to the broader community.

Adeoye (2017) observes that during their deliberations on the matter, members of the reconciliation delegation from FASON expressed their belief that the man in question was likely a liar and an impostor. They suspected he might be using charms to hypnotise his followers. They also argued that he was unfit to serve as a community leader, citing his polygamy he reportedly had more than four wives at the time and warning that his actions and statements had the potential to spark a serious intra-religious crisis, as some might defend him based on his appearance without fully understanding his actions.

In light of these concerns and the substantial evidence against him, the delegation unanimously resolved that:

1. He must immediately release the inmates that day to prevent further conflict;
2. The camp should be dismantled without delay;
3. He must contact the parents of the individuals he married without their consent to facilitate proper reconciliation and address any grievances;
4. A robust implementation committee comprising the imams in council, the police, local chiefs, and the state security service (S.S.S.) should be constituted to enforce these resolutions;
5. He should fully cooperate with the committee to ensure the dissolution of all other locations affiliated with his group; and
6. Due to the heightened tension in the town surrounding this issue, he should be transferred to Ibadan under police protection that same day (Adeoye, 2017, p. 223).

The situation eventually drew the full attention of the police, who raided the camp, arrested Yūnus Adefabi, and charged him with multiple offences. After a court trial, he was found guilty and sentenced to two years in prison. Following his release, his followers rejected him, forcing

him to relocate from the town. Given the doctrines and practices of ASWAJ in Iseyin, it can be concluded that the group represents one of the New Religious Movements in Islam, as evidenced by the following observations:

"In this regard, some groups impose strict regulations on their members, dictating their modes of dress, hair length, permissible personal adornments, and, at times, even their choice of marriage partners. Others engage in peculiar rituals and repetitive, mindless chanting while focusing on secondary issues and minor theological points. New Religious Movements are remarkably diverse in their beliefs, practices, organisational structures, and levels of societal acceptance. They are often highly syncretic, blending various spiritual techniques and perspectives." (John and Ken, 2005, p. 507).

Considering these observations, one might conclude that the spread of groups like ASWAJ in Iseyin, Oyo State, has the potential to distort the true image of Islam. This is because individuals who witness the misdeeds and controversial actions of such groups may mistakenly associate them with Islamic teachings. Furthermore, in cases of religious misunderstandings, conflicts, disagreements, or intra-religious crises, media coverage often portrays these events in ways that disadvantage Islam, reinforcing misconceptions and biases.

Furthermore, the activities of this group have the potential to deter individuals who might otherwise be interested in embracing the religion, while also discouraging existing adherents from openly practising or professing their faith. It is important to note that the challenges posed by ASWAJ in Iseyin are not entirely unexpected, as they align with Bowker's description of similar groups and their behaviours. Bowker characterises such movements as 'highly authoritarian, rigid, demanding, and communalistic... diverging from the mainstream of dominant religious traditions and culture while adopting an oppositional stance that may be elitist and exclusionary in nature' (1997, 37).

CONCLUSION

The examination of the activities and doctrines of Ahlus-Sunnah wal-Jamā'ah (ASWAJ) in Iseyin, Oyo State, highlights the significant influence of New Religious Movements among Yoruba Muslims. A critical analysis of the group's practices, which include oppression, unrestricted polygamy, self-imposed oaths of allegiance, *Taqiyyah* (dissimulation), renunciation of Western education and careers for *Da'wah*, prohibiting members from attending external lectures, abduction of individuals, slave labour, forced marriages without parental consent, manipulative tactics to alienate children from their parents, sexual exploitation of female members (including married women), abuse of young children leading to fatalities, and confining members to the group's camp for life, paints a troubling picture. Such activities suggest that if groups like this are not regulated to align with the principles governing the formation and operation of organisations in Islam, there is cause for serious concern.

The unchecked existence of these practices risks fostering sectarianism, potential conflicts with mainstream Muslims, disunity, the erosion of brotherhood and cooperation, and the escalation of both intra- and inter-religious crises in Nigeria. One of the reasons behind the growing call for government regulation of religious groups in Nigeria is to ensure their strict adherence to existing laws governing religious practices. Such regulation is particularly important in a country where freedom of religion is considered sacrosanct. However, any attempt by the Nigerian government to monitor or control the activities of these groups might be perceived as an infringement on their fundamental rights to worship and assembly. This concern may

explain why several agencies established for this purpose in the past failed to meet expectations. A notable example is the Federal Government Committee on Inter-religious Affairs (NIREC), established in the early 2000s.

The rapid proliferation of various New Religious Movements and the atrocities committed by some of their leaders in the name of God across the two dominant religions in the country, Islam and Christianity alarming. Reports of adultery, sexual assault, involvement in fetish practices, and human rituals are just a few of the vices often associated with these groups. Such actions blatantly contradict the principles of religion and the moral guidance provided by the Qur'ān and Prophetic traditions.

This study concludes that the objectives, doctrines, and activities of Ahlus-Sunnah wal-Jamā'ah (ASWAJ) in Iseyin, Oyo State, are fundamentally incompatible with the tenets and spirit of Islam. Moreover, these practices pose significant challenges to the growth and development of Islam in various respects.

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