

# Shaykh Ismaila Idris (1937-2000), the Founder of the Izala movement in Nigeria<sup>1</sup>

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The *Jama'at 'Izalat al-Bid'a wa-Iqamat al-Sunna* (Association for the removal of innovation and the establishment of the Sunna), simply known as Izala, was established during 1978 in Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria by Shaykh Ismaila Idris b. Zakariyya. That organization has already received the attention of several researchers within the context of Islamic reform movements in West Africa as well within the context of the Sufi and anti-Sufi struggle over space in the religious field.<sup>2</sup> Izala is often associated with the charismatic personality of Shaykh Abu Bakr Mahmoud Gumi (1922-1992)<sup>3</sup>, the “father” of a reformist Islam with overtly anti-Sufi tones in post-colonial Northern Nigeria. In reality, Shaykh Ismaila Idris was the founder and architect of the Izala movement and an important part of the movement’s history and legacy must be credited to him. This article will provide a short overview of his life and work.

Shaykh Ismaila Idris was born in 1937<sup>4</sup> in Gwaskwarom, a small town in what is now Bauchi State in northern Nigeria. His grandfather belonged to the *Jahun* Fulani clan and was originally from Kano State. He came with his family to settle in Bauchi. In common with many Fulani, they were cattle herders. Shaykh Ismaila Idris’ father, Idris Zakariyya, was an Islamic scholar, imam, and preacher in his community. It was under his tutorage that Shaykh Ismaila made his first steps in Islamic education.

Recitation of the Qur’an and basic *fiqh* in the Maliki school were the main part of this education.<sup>5</sup> As a child, Shaykh Idris showed a thirst for knowledge, and was drawn to books more than anything else.<sup>6</sup> At the age of fifteen, he began to learn from other Islamic scholars in Bauchi. Among his teachers were Shaykh Mai Dajin, Shaykh Kansurawa, and Muhammed Bello. From them, he learnt Islamic law, theology and the Arabic language.<sup>7</sup>

While still learning Islamic knowledge, Shaykh Ismaila Idris started to work as a teacher in a local government school in Bauchi. He moved to Kano in 1963 to join the prestigious School of Arabic Studies (SAS). After graduating from there in 1967, he returned to Bauchi as a primary

school teacher. He then moved to Kaduna to work as a preacher and primary school teacher under the *Jama'at Nasr al-Islam* (Society for the Victory of Islam, JNI), an organization that had recently been founded by Abu Bakr Gumi, who would soon become Ismaila Idris’ most influential mentor. Shaykh Ismaila’s next position was that of imam in the Nigerian Army.<sup>8</sup> In the army, Shaykh Idris had to be transferred repeatedly because of the many controversies generated by his views on religious practices and education: from Kaduna he was sent to Ibadan (Oyo State), then Kontagora (Niger State) and then Jos (Plateau State). Finally, in the late 1970s the Shaykh was transferred to Potiskum (now in Yobe

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State; it was part of Borno State at that time). He would not remain long in this position, however, as he soon decided to leave the army and to devote his life to preaching and to the Izala organization.

Shaykh Idris' earlier teachers all belonged to the Maliki legal tradition that was almost universally professed in the region. Under them, Ismaila Idris studied classical Maliki books such as the *Mukhtasar*.<sup>9</sup> He was also exposed to basic books of Ash'ari theology as a student of Malam Mahmud in Bauchi.<sup>10</sup> These were the standard sources of Islamic knowledge for most Nigerian Muslim scholars at the time. Most of the controversies that saw Shaykh Ismaila Idris as a protagonist, however, can be attributed to the anti-Sufi tendency that he developed in the 1960s, mainly under the influence of his two teachers, Shaykh Abu Bakr Gumi and Shaykh Hassan Khalil, at the School of Arabic Studies in Kano.<sup>11</sup>

Shaykh Ismaila Idris' lack of satisfaction with the religious establishment and with the overall condition of Islam in Nigeria pushed him to preach his interpretation of Islam, which attributed most of the evils of contemporary Nigerian Muslim society to the purported 'innovations' (*bida'*) of the Sufis. Throughout his life, Shaykh Ismaila believed that it was his duty to address, publicly and uncompromisingly, those situations where he believed that the religion of Islam and its law were endangered. His decision to join the army during his time in Kaduna, for instance, was a reaction to a J.N.I. report according to which a mosque had been turned into a "beer parlour" by some soldiers.<sup>12</sup>

In the army, Shaykh Ismaila was appointed to teach the children of soldiers, but he was also interested in preaching to civilians. In Ibadan, the Shaykh served as the imam of Muslim soldiers. Upon realising that enlisted soldiers had to pay *zakat* (alms) from their salaries to officers, Shaykh Ismaila issued a *fatwa* (legal opinion) condemning this.<sup>13</sup> Shaykh Idris also gained a reputation as a "trouble-maker" from his first day in Ibadan, due to his open criticism of the local imam for performing additional prayers and recitations after the *zuhr* obligatory prayer; this was common practice in most Nigerian mosques. Upon seeing this, Shaykh Idris reportedly

stood up and brought to the attention of the imam and the congregation that there was no proof of this practice in the Qur'an or in the *Sunna* of the Prophet Muhammad, inviting them to read the book of Usman Dan Fodio *Ihya' al-Sunnah* ('The revival of the Sunnah').<sup>14</sup> After only three months, and many other polemical engagements with the local imams, he was transferred to Kontagora.

Shaykh Idris continued preaching to soldiers in Kontagora. Civilians from the town also started to come to listen to him and they recorded many of his sermons and lessons. At that time, Abu Bakr Gumi's criticism of Sufism was starting to be aired by the radio stations of the country, and many listeners found that the teaching of Ismaila Idris resonated with that of his more famous mentor. In Kontagora, Shaykh Ismaila was also able to establish a Friday mosque in the military barracks. The mosque attracted many people from the civilian population of the area, but caused several problems with the local authorities.<sup>15</sup> In one instance, a conflict erupted between Shaykh Idris and an imam from the town who was a member of a Sufi order. The situation escalated to the point

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that Shaykh Abu Bakr Gumi had to intervene and organize a meeting between his former student and the local scholarly community of Kontagora. After the meeting, the Sufi imam left his Sufi order, followed by the Emir of Kontagora himself.<sup>16</sup> Loimeier interprets this incident as the first political and religious success for Shaykh Idris in Kontagora. It is certainly true that this event helped to galvanize, further, an already enthusiastic preacher.

The next important step in Shaykh Idris' life was his transfer to Jos, the capital of Plateau State. Jos is an especially strategic place because of its multi-ethnic and religious diversity, and it holds symbolic relevance for many Izala people today. Not only, in fact, was the Izala organization born in Jos, but it also succeeded in a milieu where missionary Christianity had been well-established since colonial times.<sup>17</sup> The rapid success of Izala in Jos convinced many young Muslims in Nigeria that the new organization was at the forefront of the defence and promotion of Islam in the country, succeeding where the 'traditional' scholars and the Sufis had failed. In Jos, Shaykh

Idris was under the supervision of Major Alhassan, who was aware of the emerging preacher's previous controversial activities. In an attempt to control his potentially controversial teachings, the Shaykh was immediately banned from preaching outside mosques. Shaykh Idris continued to preach in the Rukuda barracks and in his own house. Gradually, he also began to extend his activities to other areas in Jos, through gatherings organized in the houses of some of the influential people who were attracted to his message. Among those who allowed the Shaykh to preach in their houses in Jos were Alhaji Lawal Mai Suga and Alhaji Garba Pasali.<sup>18</sup> Eventually, his preaching activities extended to other areas of the town, such as Dogon Dutse, attracting more people and leading many to leave the Tijaniyya, which was the dominant Sufi brotherhood in Jos. As had already occurred elsewhere, there was an attempt to transfer Shaykh Idris, this time to Borno State, but on this occasion the attempt failed; this can be seen as evidence of a power shift on the national political arena from the traditional scholars of the Sufi brotherhoods to Gumi's reformism, and of the increased capacity of the latter to intercede for his followers.<sup>19</sup>

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reformism; Ismaila Idris became the leader of that body and Abu Bakr Gumi was entrusted with the role of official 'Grand Patron.' It is not clear whether Shaykh Ismaila resigned from the Nigerian Army or whether he was dismissed,<sup>20</sup> but he did leave his job to become a full-time leader of Izala in 1978.

Shaykh Ismaila's life was marked by protest and rebellion.<sup>21</sup> The image that Izala rapidly gained among its admirers was that of a movement of Islamic revivalists inflexibly devoted to truth, while its opponents considered it as a sectarian crowd of 'trouble-makers' impudently challenging established religious authority; these perceptions owe much to Shaykh Ismaila Idris' charismatic personality.<sup>22</sup> His career as a public preacher started within the

army, but his influence rapidly expanded beyond the confines of the barracks. He was constantly under the supervision of the Nigerian Security Service and was interrogated and jailed on several occasions.<sup>23</sup> From his early years as an imam and public preacher, Shaykh Idris was outspoken and he openly criticised Sufism and the Sufis. He was the first scholar to utilize publicly the controversial teachings of Shaykh Gumi's book, *Al-Aqida as-Sahihah* (1972), and to preach its message to the congregation<sup>24</sup> at the Ahmadu Bello Mosque in Kaduna.

After the establishment of Izala, internal disagreement started to appear. After the death of the movement's Patron, Shaykh Abu Bakr Gumi in 1990, Izala split into two factions, one based in Jos, the other in Kaduna. Many, both inside and outside the movement speculated that the division was caused by Shaykh Idris' character. His opponents within Izala criticised his style of leadership, his harshness, and even doubted the depth of his knowledge of Islam. According to one of his early followers who later split from him, Shaykh Ismaila Idris had a strong, severe attitude, and his rigid personality

led many Izala followers to break with the organization.<sup>25</sup> On the contrary, his sympathizers and followers describe him as a dutiful scholar devoted to his students, and a humble person who respects the ulama but has the courage to speak the truth when necessary.<sup>26</sup>

In terms of his scholarly contribution, Shaykh Ismaila Idris was mainly a preacher

known for his vehement oral discourses, devoted to various topics related to the Sunna. He was known for rejecting Sufism in all its forms. He wrote also about 'aqida (belief) from a point of view sympathetic to the Salafi school, and he opposed anything that he believed to be an innovation in religion.<sup>27</sup> His *fatwas* (legal opinions) were often highly debated by scholars both within and outside the Izala movement. On certain points, he held views that differed from those of most of the Izala scholars. For instance, he affirmed that only the Prophet can deliver from the possession of jinns (invisible spirits) and therefore, any practice of exorcism is prohibited. In contrast to most Izala scholars, he had doubts about the concept of *ahl al-Kitab* ('people of the Book'; i.e.

Christians and Jews) and denounced their existence in our time. This pronouncement, along with other factors, contributed to an increased tension between Muslim and Christian communities in Plateau State. The leader of Izala also prohibited his followers from eating the meat of animals slaughtered by Sufis, as he considered them to be unbelievers. He also prohibited them from praying behind an imam affiliated to a Sufi order. These views, ostensibly practiced by his followers, were highly debated by his opponents, who often challenged him and questioned his legal views and his use of Islamic texts.<sup>28</sup>

Many still identify the Izala movement with Shaykh Abu Bakr Gumi. The role of Shaykh Ismaila Idris in shaping the religious identity of Izala, on the contrary, has not been fully recognized. As the leader of Izala, Shaykh Ismaila Idris infused the movement with his personality and his views. Unfortunately, he did not live long enough to witness the reunification of the two factions of Izala (Izala-Jos and Izala-Kaduna), which occurred at a historical conference held in the central mosque of Abuja in December 2011. Sheikh Ismaila Idris died in 2000, leaving behind four wives and ten children. While his fame might have been somewhat eclipsed by that of his charismatic teacher and patron Shaykh Abu Bakr Gumi, he remains an important figure when striving to understand the complex trajectory of a dynamic movement such as Izala in recent Nigerian history.

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## Notes

- 1 This biography is based on material taken from the author's PhD dissertation entitled "The Izala movement in Nigeria: Its split, relationship to Sufis, and perception of Sharia re-implementation." The dissertation was submitted in 2011 to BIGSAS, University of Bayreuth, Germany.
- 2 The following are some of the studies on the Izala movement in Nigeria: Umar 1983; Umar 1988; Loimeier 1997a; Kane 2003. The Izala movement was also studied in other contexts, especially in Niger Republic. See Gregoire 1993; Alidou 2005; Sounaye 2009; Masquelier 2009. In many universities in northern Nigeria several BA and MA dissertations address the Izala movement.
- 3 For his biography see Loimeier 1997b; see also his autobiography: Gumi & Tsiga 1992.
- 4 In some BA and MA dissertations, 1936 is given as the year of birth of Shaykh Idris. A few publications produced by the headquarters of the Izala organization in Jos mention 1937 as his year of his birth.

- 5 Muhammed 2001: 4.  
 6 Gurama 2000: p. 49.  
 7 Loimeier1997a: 211.  
 8 Adam 2005: 19-20. See also Aliyu (n.d.): 11-17.  
 9 For centuries, the *Mukhtasar* of Khalil b. Ishaq (d. 1365) has been a standard reference for the study of Maliki law, in Nigeria as elsewhere.  
 10 Muhammed 2001: 6-7.  
 11 Loimeier 1997a: 211.  
 12 Muhammed 2001: 9-11. See also Aliyu (n.d.): 17. The author confirmed the event that led Sheikh Idris to join the Nigerian Army.  
 13 The JIBWIS Journal 2005, 1(3), p. 8 and 12. See also Loimeier 1997a: 211.  
 14 Muhammed 2001: 13-14.  
 15 Ibid.: 16-17.  
 16 See Loimeier1997a: 51, relying on Umar 1983.  
 17 During his field research in 2006, 2007, and 2008, the author of this article spoke to many Izala followers in Jos, who stressed the success of Shaykh Idris in that town, where many followers of Sufi orders, Christians and 'Pagans' were and still are present.  
 18 Muhammed 2001: 18-19.  
 19 See Loimeier 1997a: 213.  
 20 Loimeier (1997a: 214), mentions that Shaykh Idris was dismissed from the Nigerian Army on 7<sup>th</sup> April 1978; according to Muhammed (2001: 22-23), Shaykh Idris decided to resign in order to found the J.I.B.W.I.S and to devote himself to preaching.  
 21 Loimeier1997a: 212.  
 22 In Kano city, where the Sufi brotherhoods are still dominant, Ismaila Idris is still known by the nickname of 'Benjamin Netanyahu,' which he gained thanks to his purportedly ruthless personality and his inflammatory speeches in which he used to target the Sufis as *kafirai* (unbelievers).  
 23 Ibid.: 214; among others, Shaykh Idris was jailed in Kano after preaching on the radio against Sufism. He was also jailed in Cross River (see Muhammed 2001: 23-26).  
 24 See Gumi & Tsiga 1992: 145.  
 25 Interview, 12<sup>th</sup> December 2006; name withheld.  
 26 anghei 2003: 66-67.  
 27 During his field research in Nigeria, the author had no access to any of Shaykh Ismaila Idris' writings. In fact, it was not clear to him whether these were published, copied and circulated among followers, or sold in bookshops. The cassettes of the Shaykh are much more widely distributed than his writings. His book entitled *al-'Aqida al-sahiha khayr min al-shahada al-'alamiyya* ('Having a correct belief is better than having an international degree') is mentioned in Adam (2005: 3), as well as by Sanghei (2003: 66). Shaykh Idris has also to his credit a book in Hausa entitled *Littafin Musan Gaskiya da bataakan Huja* ('The book to recognize truth and falsehood, and their proofs'); see Sanghei 2003: 66.  
 28 For more details about the legal opinions of Shaykh Ismaila Idris see Sadis 2003: 62-81; for an Izala internal debate between the two factions (Jos and Kaduna) over the legal opinions of Shaykh Ismaila Idris see the unpublished book by Muhammad Ibrahim Jallo (n.d.), *Risalatan Maftuhatan Ila za'im al-Jama'a al-Isma'iliyya, al-Shaykh Thani Yahya Jingir* ('Two open letters to the leader of the Jama'a al-Isma'iliyya [i.e. the faction of Izala founded by Shaykh Ismaila Idris], Shaykh Sani Yahya Jingir').