

## NASFAT: A Modern Prayer Group and its Contributions to the Propagation of Islam in Lagos

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**Abstract:** *Nasrul-Fatih* Society of Nigeria (NASFAT) that has become an household name in Lagos, albeit the entire Nigeria as the leading Muslim prayer group or what others refer to as Muslim Pentecostal group started as a branch of another elitist Prayer group, Yusufullahi Society of Nigeria founded by a retired banker with its headquarters in Ibadan. This fact had been downplayed by other historians of NASFAT. This fact has been documented in this article. Its success is primarily based on the availability of its liturgy in such a manner that clergies are really not required to embark on its usual prayer as well as the seemingly miraculous efficacy of the prayers offered by the group which has accorded it the stead to gauge the conversion of Muslims into Christianity and has equally aided reversion of those hitherto lost back to Islam. The group equally has a number of challenges ranging from qualitative education for its members to economic empowerment of the jobless as well as making their impact in the socio-political spheres of the Lagos Society especially in the comity of Prayer groups. In a bold step towards overcoming the challenges, a number of education projects including scholarship schemes, grants and establishment of a full fledged University have been put in place while various halaal business companies including Tafsan Tours and Tafsan Beverages, the brewer of the NASMALT malta drink were started

**Key words:** NASFAT • Modern Prayer Group • Propagation of Islam • Islam in Lagos State • Da'wah Workers

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### INTRODUCTION

Prayer groups had been known in Yorubaland before colonialism and its consequent modernization effect. Christianity became a dominant religious tradition in Yoruba nation yet some Muslims and non-Muslims had on different occasions acknowledged the efficacy of Muslim prayers. Muslim and non-Muslim leaders alike had often employed the services of Muslim clerics to assist them in overcoming some difficulties using their spiritual powers. This was the kind of relationship that brought a close alliance between Gen. Yakubu Gowon and Shaykh Ibrahim al-kawlakh an-Nyasi [1]. Prior to independence as earlier noted, Sufi clerics had visited Lagos in good numbers and had not only founded Sufi convents (*zawiyyah*) but had equally shown the power of Islamic clerical activities. Alfa Nda of the Qadiriyyah fame did not only live in Lagos but also built a building that is till date the grand centre of Qadiriyyah in Ilasamaja area of

Lagos. Ibrahim Nyasi visited Lagos and instituted the Tijaniyyah order empowering such lieutenants as Shaykh Abdus-Salam Akosile, Muqaddam Lawal and Shaykh Hamzat Masha Eshinlokun. The offshoot of these orders is the *Asalatu* prayer group. Mainly, these groups were part of the *ratibi* mosques in Lagos and in some divisions; they all came together on Friday for special *Asalatu* prayers at *Jumat* mosques. A few of these groups operated beyond these two levels. Examples of such included the *Asalatu* of *Jama'at-ul-Suadai*, with headquarters at Kuti Mosque, Lagos. Muqaddam Adeniyi [d.1985], a student of Shaykh Ahmad Tijani Awelenje Shaki (1968) was the founder. All through the seventies and until the death of the *Muqaddam*, Lagos Muslims believed so much in the efficacy of prayers that were offered at this *Asalat* group. The prayer used to hold between 8:00 and 10:00p.m every Friday at the Kuti Mosque. The mosque was always filled to the fullest capacity.

Also in this category is the Lagos Central Mosque *As - Salatu* group that is still very strong up to date since it has been founded over fifty years ago. It has in its membership list of notable personalities including judges and top civil and public servants and professionals of different callings. It also has a vibrant youth wing and sometimes operates like the usual Islamic groups and movements. Another such notable *Asalatu* group is the Nurudeen *Asalatu* International founded by Alhaja Sikirat Atinuke Ogunyomi. This group operates from the Ikorodu division and its activities are felt all over Lagos and beyond. The *Asalatu Agbaye* group under the presidency of Alhaji Muse Alogba must not be left out in this category. In spite of the activities of these notable prayer (*As-Salatu*) groups, the sophistication of Christian evangelism by the fundamental Christian groups known as the Pentecostal and Charismatic groups in the early seventies with their characteristic claims to miraculous prowess reduced to the background, the various activities of these prayer groups. Two factors have been identified to be responsible for this, they are:

- The Agenda of salvation for all and sundry including the elites by the prevailing Pentecostal Christian Group.
- The non-availability of Muslim groups that propounded the theory of salvation especially to the elites-such that could introduce break-time, breakfast and other short time fellowship.

**Background to the Formation of NASFAT:** For the reasons stated above, Islamic identity in elitist circles was almost non-existent. It was in response to this, that a group of bankers came together on Saturday 28th July, 1984 to form a corporate prayer group that will cater for the spiritual needs of Muslims in Urban areas and reposing in them, the confidence that they could also attain their goals in life.

Alhaji Shaykh Murtada Akangbe [2], then thirty eight years old, who was at this time a senior banker at the WEMA Bank, Ibadan Zonal Office attracted so many Muslim elites that in no distant, participants were coming from Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Osun and Ekiti States to Ibadan every Saturday to partake in the prayer services. The fame of the group grew so high, that it became a threat to many new generation churches around Ibadan while some leaders of Muslim organisations showed resentment for the group.

The upsurge of members from the inception of the group led to the resolution that two different prayer sessions should be held. The first, for the men wing, which then used to hold on Saturdays at the mosque in the residence of Alhaji Shaykh Murtada Akangbe at Iwo Road, Ibadan. The session of the Women's wing used to hold on every Sunday inside the Mosque of Alhaji Shaykh Ibrahim Aliyy with Alhaji Sulayman Adebayo as the *Muqaddam*. This only lasted for a while as members of the group within a short time built a gigantic Mosque and Islamic centre at Orita Bashorun in Ibadan. The two wings moved into this place in 1990 and maintained their different period of prayers. Within a short time of moving into this centre and probably to decongest the increasingly growing number of participants at the sessions of the two wings, a youth wing was carved out. The youth wing was then assigned Sunday afternoon for its prayer session.

Initially, each wing of the group used to have up to six hours of rigorous prayer sessions because, in the word of the founder, the essence of the prayer meeting "is to be determined to please Allah (God) in order to be granted prosperity and salvation by Him". However, with the emergence of similar groups and their use of fewer hours, the Missionary Board proposed a reduction in the hours spent for the prayer meeting.

The Group eventually established many branches. They are situated in Oyo, Oshogbo, Ogbomosho, Ila, Abeokuta, Ilisan, Ede, Ilesha and Lagos. These branches were instituted in order to move centres for the prayer sessions closer to the people who come from all the places earlier mentioned. The branches also flourished for a long time. The Lagos branch became so advanced that it had two centres. A centre used to hold its prayer session on Thursday, in a Mosque very close to a WEMA Bank branch because the majority of the members affiliated to this centre were employees of the Wema Bank branch. Mukaila Abdul Azeez Ojo, who was the Chief Missionary (Imam of the Lagos Branch) was leading the other centre at Agege. It was desirable of members from all the branches to partake in prayer sessions at the Ibadan Headquarters once in a month and for a long time, this was the situation. Members from the Lagos branch who were with the WEMA Bank once proposed a merger of the two centres to avoid decadence. They thus moved to the Lagos (old) Secretariat Central Mosque and beyond their imagination, the upsurge of members increased tremendously. It dawned on the Lagos leading members

of the Yusrullah Association of Nigeria (YAN) that they could no longer go to Ibadan, for practical reasons. Besides they felt to pay obeisance to any higher authority at Ibadan would hinder the needed momentum for further modernisation of the activities of the group in Lagos because of the nature of Lagos as a highly urban settlement. They decided to rename the branch by funding a new organisation known as *Nasrul-Fathi* Society of Nigeria (NASFAT) and they moved to the New Lagos Secretariat premises for the prayer meeting. In less than four years, its membership strength had gone beyond one million and it has established branches beyond the South Western States of Nigeria. In Lagos alone, it has branches in all the Local Government Areas and each of these branches also record a very high turn out and this has not affected the activities of the Central Praying meeting at the New Secretariat Mosque. The first missionary and spiritual head of the group is Shaykh Mun'im Taiwo Tijani.

The leadership of the YAN received the metamorphosis of the Lagos Branch of the Asalatu group into NASFAT with mixed feelings but the National President of the Yusrullah exercised restraints and cautioned members of his executive committee. His caution was based on the fact that their main intention was to serve Allah and to encourage Muslims to do same and prevent the many distractions of the urban society from precluding them from participating in the weekly prayer. He thus hoped that if the primary aim of the organisation would be better achieved with the Lagos Branch changing its name, there should only be a cause to thank Allah and not to protest in any form. The leading foundation members of NASFAT, on their own were caught in remorseful mood and they felt that they had betrayed their mentor, the founder of the Yusrullah Association of Nigeria. Individually, some of them especially Mun'im Tijani and Abdullah Akinbode visited him and sought his exculpation. In the opinion of Shaykh Akangbe, he knew they required his blessings to ascertain that he was not angry. So when the Executive Committee of NASFAT wrote him, that they were going to send a delegation of leaders to plead for his blessings on the nascent group, he willingly obliged. A delegation consisting of Mun'im K. Tijani, Hajj Sarumo, Biodun Kosemani, Hajj Salahudeen and Hajj Yusuf visited him for this purpose at his Ibadan residence and in a very special prayer session, he blessed both the association and its leadership. He, however made a statement that could be

interpreted as a prophecy that in the manner that "NASFAT emerged from Yusrullah so shall other prayer organisations continue to emerge from it" [3].

**The Yusrullah Society Has a Number of Achievements, Which Include:**

- The reversion of Muslims who had gone into other faiths in search of salvation and prosperity to Islam.
- Encouraging elites to identify and participate in Muslim supererogatory prayers.
- The distribution of the Holy Qur'an and other Islamic materials free of charge.
- It has a welfare committee that identifies those in need and provides for them.
- Its educational committee besides, fashioning out educational programme also identifies, those in need of scholarship to pursue academic pursuit and recommend them for the Association's sponsorship.

**Da'wah Activities of NASFAT in Lagos:** The foregoing is an historical narration of how NASFAT came into existence and since the focus of this paper is Lagos, it is more apposite to study NASFAT as a Lagos based organisation which later spread to other parts of the country and beyond.

As earlier mentioned, since Sunday the 5<sup>th</sup> of March 1995 when a group of young educated Muslims started a prayer meeting in the house of one of them, Abdul Lateef Olasupo, the number of those attending swell progressively over a short period. The group moved its prayer headquarters, first to the old secretariat mosque of the Lagos State government and later, due to the phenomenal increase in attendance, to the new secretariat mosque where it now meets every Sunday between 8am and 12 noon. The attendance here is usually in thousands and its nettings sometimes exceed half a million Naira (about USD 5000). Its annual *Lailatul Qadr* which is often held towards the end of the Muslim fasting period of Ramadan has been a remarkable spectacle to behold in the last four years. When the main bowl of the National Stadium could not contain the participants at the all night event in the year 2000, the group moved to its open and undeveloped prayer land, NASFAT village, a wide expanse of land on the Lagos-Ibadan expressway. The nearly unmanageable number of participants in the 2001 and 2002 edition with its attendant logistic and humanitarian fallout forced the society to decentralize the

event in 2003 [4]. In addition to its regular and ceremonial prayer sessions, NASFAT also conducts monthly all-night supplications; Qur'anic lessons for business executives and others and provides formalized litanies which are in printed form and on audio cassettes. Membership cuts across the social, economic and political strata of the society. We cannot talk of denominational affiliation here as it exists in Christianity, although attendees at the various prayer sessions may equally belong to other religious societies. The Missionaries are a crop of young and highly educated individuals that are not necessarily graduates of Arabic and Islamic Studies. In fact the absence of curia hegemony in regard to the spiritual functionaries of the society ensures that any of the Missionaries could conduct the Sunday service in the absence of the Chief Missionary, who is frequently, if not regularly, invited by many of the other branches of the society. So, the leadership is not centred on an individual, but rather, one can talk of a "spiritual politburo" [5]. The Missionaries in NASFAT, as in other prayer movements, play the dual role of:

- Teaching the congregation the general aspects of Islam through lectures and other information dissemination techniques and
- Problem solving or healing through prayer ceremonials or devotional prescriptions which the members are required to carry out on their own.

In this regard, we can see that the possession of mysterious powers often considered a property of the savage can now be accessed by the common people when so intellectually or mentally conditioned. In other words, once a devotee can recite or perform the prescribed recipes or litanies, he becomes his own therapist. So we can talk of a spiritual rejuvenation in regard to NASFAT that the legitimate procedure for the individual to access power and experiment with the truth is achieved not through the tenacity of the master-disciple relationship as found in Sufi organisations [6], but through a guided leadership of a missionary authority.

NASFAT as well as other new Prayer groups are providing the Muslims response to the Pentecostal healing and evangelical technique of the Christian Missionary groups especially the new generational Pentecostal churches. But the competition for souls and

the struggle for the retention of those already within the fold have never been as fierce and intense between the champions of Christian Pentecostalism and the exponents of Islamic prayer organisations. For instance, the 105km Lagos -Ibadan expressway is dotted on both sides by "prayer cities" of both Pentecostal Christian and Muslim movement [5], thus, we have the prayer camps for the Deeper Life Christian Church, the Mountain of Fire and Miracle Ministry, the Taborar- an Aladura group where prayers literally "go on 24 hours a day" and the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) at which Retreat and Convention, President Obasanjo of Nigeria kept the night between 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> of December 2003 [6]. Of the Muslim representatives in the phenomenon of prayer cities on the Lagos-Ibadan expressway, we may mention NASFAT, *Sa'adat Abadiyya*, *Dawah* Camp, Islamic Prayer City and permanent site of the MSS-B zone- Islamic Vacation Course.

An interesting issue, which is better investigated in another work entirely is the connection between the use of religion for healing purposes and fundamentalist Puritanism for which tele-evangelism has served as a formidable medium, especially in the United States whose charismatic and tele-evangelism programme is notable, as depicted for example in Billy Graham (b.1918) and Pat Robertson (b. 1930) both of whom have served as models for Nigerian practitioners [7]. That the Nigerian exponents of Pentecostalism have also been using the print and electronic media to celebrate their spiritual power and miracle healing is no more news, some are even known to be exploring or using the facilities of the Information Superhighway Technology to launch sites on the world wide web. Muslim prayer groups are not lagging behind, too, in the appropriation of these facilities and there is no lack of plan for the establishment of an Islamic Television Network [5]. But it must be admitted even now, that with the very high level to which NASFAT and other prayer groups are going, they still require great efforts to meet up with Pentecostal groups such as Oyakhilome's in tele-evangelism as well as the Winners' Chapel that owns the Covenant University and the Redeemed Christian Group, the owners of Redeemers' University [7]. What however must be admitted is the fact that the NASFAT group has recorded many successes and is equally ready to face contemporary challenges. Other groups are also engaged in healthy rivalry which had enabled them all to record lots of achievement within a short period of their existence.

**We May Also Itemize the Followings as Evidences of Nasfat's Achievements [8]:**

- Weekly *Asalat*: Here recitation of a prayer book, which contains selected *dua`* from the Holy Qur'an, prayers of the Prophet [*SAW*] and other forms of supplication.
- Economic Empowerment: the NASFAT secretariat by this programme seeks employment for unemployed Muslims from various companies using the connection of its members. Within this programme, it also gives soft loans to members who have been inducted on the floating of small scale industries. The Cooperative Society of the group also finances genuine Local Purchase Orders [LPOs] under this scheme.
- Fiqh session: The group also has a regular *fiqh* session where basic tenets of the Islamic faith are usually extensively discussed.
- Public Lectures: NASFAT organises public lectures at regular intervals. Members of its missionary group mostly handle this. It also invites guest lecturers from Institutions of learning from home and abroad in some cases.
- Qur'anic Tutorial Classes: This is organised mainly for professionals in the group with the task that they must learn the recitation of the Qur'an. It is on record that as at the end of 1426 A.H. [2005/06], 480 professionals had successfully learnt through this class, the correct recitation of the Qur'an with *tajwid* [science of correct recitation of the Qur'an].
- Children Classes: Various classes are usually organised for children in the recitation of the Qur'an, Hadith and inculcating the Islamic culture and value in them, especially during long vacations.
- Media *Da'wah*: NASFAT engages its Missionaries and other Imams on *da'wah* programmes in the media, especially on Radio and Television.
- Professional Group Meetings: NASFAT organises this to create meeting for members of the same profession and occupation to meet, network and collaborate on relevant professional issues for the progress of Islam.
- Zakat Fund: NASFAT has a *zakat* fund into which all eligible members pay. It is administered according to the Islamic injunctions on Zakat.
- Scholarship Award: NASFAT has instituted scholarship awards to assist indigent Muslim students in primary, secondary and tertiary institutions from its Zakat Fund.

**Beside the Above, Nasfat Also Has the Following Annual Programmes:**

- Children Holiday Camping
- Women's Week
- Youth Week
- National Qur'anic Quiz Competition.

**Projects of the Association Currently Include:**

- NASFAT Village: It is a project being planned to be located on its newly acquired 40 acres of land on the Lagos-Ibadan Expressway. It is being projected as a *dar-us-salam*- abode of peace, a model city for the Muslims.
- Hajj and *Umrah* Operations: The group has procured a license for this exercise and had concluded successfully two *umrah* and two *hajj* operations. The name of the group's outfit managing this project is Tafsan Tours and Travels Ltd.
- School Projects: NASFAT has successfully built three standard Nursery/ Primary schools and another three are in the pipeline. Plans are equally underway to construct secondary schools as well.
- Thrift and Cooperative Society: The group is running a zero interest cooperative group and it has above fifty-five thousand depositors/members.
- Tafsan Community Bank: The above cooperative group is being planned to transform into a community bank in the name of Tafsan Community Bank. The Bank will be based on Islamic Banking principles.
- Tafsan Beverages Limited: NASFAT has also successfully inaugurated a beverage company. The company has successfully commenced the production of a malt drink known as 'Nasmalt'. The objective of creating more employment opportunity for the Muslims and enhancing the finance of *Da'wah* activities by its formation is already being achieved by NASFAT.
- Fountain University: A private University that had commenced academic activities in the 2007/2008 academic session has been established by the organisation. It is envisaged that the University will favourably compete with such Universities funded by Christian Missionary groups, a few of which had been mentioned earlier.

Apart from the achievements listed above, the growth of NASFAT in Lagos attests to the rapid development of post independence Lagos. From just one location in

Lagos for all its activities in the first five years of establishment [1995-2000] to forty five branches in 2006. This is in addition to the fact that no single branch has ever recorded a number less than two thousand in its register. Beyond that, it has also spread to all the nooks and crannies of Nigeria. It has also got branches in the republic of Benin, Ghana, United Kingdom, in USA, Coted'Ivoire and Togo. All these efforts are centred on the passion of NASFAT in educating people especially in this global era. No doubt that globalization has its own impact [9] and at the same time has something to offer when it comes to religious matter.

### **CONCLUSION**

In this short article, we have been able to highlight the achievements of NASFAT as an emerging Prayer Movement in Lagos. Especially on the manner it organises Prayer fairs that are well patronised in such a systematic manner that the recitation of Prayers can be done by all and sundry without the agency of a clergy. Beside, the groups have also been seen to have provided a counter balance to further infiltration of the Christian Pentecostal groups into the territory of the Muslims while providing some social needs of its members and the Muslims in general.

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