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Understanding the Status, Roles, and Functions of ‘Ulamā in Borno

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Abstract

The paper seeks out to examine the status, roles, and functions of ‘Ulamā in Borno from the seventeenth century to the twentieth century. The high ‘Ulamā in Borno were those who had an official position either in the learned orthodox hierarchy or in the Sufi mystical one. Being an ‘Ulamā is a prime status honor in the Borno. They also have considerable power and a great influence on most Muslims in the Borno society. Thus, they have played a significant role in the propagation, dissemination, and development of Islamic religious knowledge, both Qur’anic education, and Islamic sciences in West Africa in particular and Africa in general. They also serve as intelligentsia, preachers, Imams, teachers, and supernatural endeavors of the state.



1.1 Introduction

The ‘Ulamā, according to Prophetic tradition, are heirs and successors of the prophets and depositors of truth in the world who are continuing Prophet Muhammad’s work of establishing Islamic faith and propagating Islamic education in the centuries after his death.¹ Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti in the introduction of his chronicles titled *Ajaib al-athar fi’l tarajim wa’l Akhbar* gives self-image of the ‘Ulamā and their place within the Muslim ethos. According to his view, God created mankind in five distinct categories of descending importance. In the first category were the prophets and messengers who were sent to reveal God’s message to mankind and show the world the path of righteousness. The second category was the ‘Ulamā who are the heirs and successors of the prophets and messengers, below them in rank were the kings and other rulers, and below them in rank was the rest of mankind in the last two categories.² Such glorified image of the ‘Ulamā is rooted in Muslim ethics and serves to explain the special self-image position of the ‘Ulamā occupied in their society.

Throughout Islamic history, therefore, the ‘Ulamā are considered the purveyors of Islam, the guardians of its tradition, and the moral agents of the populace. They are also charged with the task of preserving the purity and integrity of the Islamic faith.³ Therefore, the ‘Ulamā are rated as powerful and highly respected, and distinguished due to their duties and the depth of their knowledge in Quran, Hadith, and other Islamic sciences. It can also be reasonably assumed that they formed the core of religious establishments and served as guardians of the high Islamic culture of scholarship and learning. Indeed, the sphere of influence of the ‘Ulamā in Borno was not restricted to merely teaching, learning, and preaching but embodied the entire facets of societal life. Being the spiritual leaders among the Muslim Ummah or societies as well as the watchdog of its affairs and guardians of its integrity. These glorified images, status, and positions of the ‘Ulamā have clearly and absolutely, portrayed the true role of the ‘Ulamā in the society. But in reality, the

¹ Brockopp 2017, i.

² Al-Jabarti 1882, 1-7; See also Gazali 2005, 34 and Laminu 1992, 18.

³ Gazali 2005, 33.



status or position of ‘Ulamā in any Muslim society depends on the status accorded them by that society. The ‘Ulamā in Borno, for instance, was an exceptionally privileged and powerful estate in the society and they occupied a special place and play a very significant role in society. It is against this background that this paper aims to examine the status and role of the ‘Ulamā in Borno in the context of northern Nigeria.

1.2 ‘Ulamā: Conceptual Clarification

The term “Ulamā” is derived from the Arabic verb “*Alima*” which means “he knows” or “he means.”⁴ The origin of both the singular and the plural terms comes from the Qur’an.⁵ ‘Ulamā is the plural of *Alim* which refers to ‘learned or scholars.’ ‘Ulamā therefore literally means “those who possess knowledge” or “community of learned men.” The term ‘Ulamā scholar has acquired, throughout the history of its usage, many political, religious, and social connotations which in some cases suggest to a group of orthodox religious scholars or jurists. The term is connected with the “idea of popular religion or holy men” after the emergence of Wahhabi ideology. Yet, within the ‘Ulamā class itself, there Sufi are different titles and subtitles used to distinguish the different specializations within their profession and Sufi orders. It is very common among the Muslim society to denote many terms for religious teachers, scholars, students, theologians (*muttakallimun*), cannon lawyers (*muftis*), judges (*qadis*), Qur’anic interpreter (*mufassir*), an expert in jurisprudence (*faqih*), and so on, who, whether in suffice or not, are well-versed theoretically and practically Islamic science. For example, in Kanuri and Kanembu dialect expert in Islamic science is called *Sayyidna* (pl. *sayyidawa*), an expert in Qur’anic studies is called *goni* (pl. *goniwa*), and an expert in Islamic jurisprudence is called *fugura*, and so on.⁶ In Hausa, the term *malam* (pl. *malamai*; fem. *Malama*) is used for the word “Ulamā.” Yet, in both Kanuri and Hausa, the term ‘Ulamā still retains its original sense, as it stands for the person who is well versed in Islamic religious knowledge or traditional Muslim scholar,⁷ and sometimes used to refer to scholars who have reached a high level of knowledge and social prominence or who occupied

⁴ Gazali 2005, 32.

⁵ The plural form, Ulama appeared twice in the Qur’an and many times in prophetic traditions.

⁶ Gazali 2005, 32

⁷ Hassan 1972, 6-7.



positions of importance in the educational or judiciary establishment. It is also used to refer to the totality of persons employed in such establishments regardless of their position in the hierarchy, or to persons who have been educated in establishment institutions.

The term is contextually used here to refer to these scholars as a class or the intelligentsia who have been the custodian's traditions in Borno sultanate as well as other parts of what is now known as northern Nigeria for centuries. The world of 'Ulamā in Borno is not predominantly male-oriented because many women were well versed in Islamic religious knowledge and achieved a firmer recognition and status in their respective communities. Some of the female 'Ulamā have established their schools and have taught other women and children. Both male and female, the 'Ulamā were the custodians of the conscience and social virtues in Borno. The aristocracy engaged the services of these 'Ulamā in the courts as royal advisers and scribes. There were, of course, others among them who remained independent of the state and concentrated on their scholarly pursuits which they considered religious duty while some were internet scholars who relied on the goodwill of the community for material support. The 'Ulamā of Borno' mostly operated the numerous rural and urban Qur'anic schools and advanced schools, and they comprise an important and highly visible social group.

1.3 The Status and Positions of 'Ulamā in Borno

There is huge literature exploring the status and position and roles of 'Ulamā in Borno Sultanate. Brenner 1973, Laminu 1992, Gazali 2005. From these sources, it can be taken as a fact that a key to understanding the position of scholars in Borno lies in the existence of two factors: First, the presence of a pyramidal socio-educational hierarchy in which the measure and criteria of respectability and status absolutely ranged from command of literacy alone at the base to full erudition at the pinnacle. Second, the status and position of 'Ulamā are gleaned from their profession, whether in a group or individuals; and is to view it within the context of the Borno community.

Borno has been traditionally a highly stratified city according to status groups and social classes; people lay great emphasis on status and authority. To begin with, the important distinction is between the ruling family, officeholders on the one hand, and the subjects on the other. The first



category exercises authority over the ruled and therefore has higher status. The ‘Ulamā are at the fence between the two categories. The ‘Ulamā form another group that was so heterogeneous as to defy any general ranking by status because they are drawn from different classes and strata of the communities in the city. Among the scholars themselves, it is nearly impossible to reconstruct fully the hierarchy of prestige, even in the most richly documented periods, because of the selectivity of the sources. Their social status is equal to that of merchants and second only to traditional rulers; they are closely associated with both groups and are very influential. Their individual and (occupational) group status is formerly understood (both by themselves and others) to be based on their role as educators; this role is legitimated by the long and difficult educational process they have undergone.

The status of the ‘Ulamā in Borno, was like in any other Islamic society where they were highly respected.⁸ By the virtue of the depth of their knowledge and experience, they had great influence in shaping the life of the people to the right path, that is, according to the precepts of Islam. For that reason, the ‘Ulamā had achieved a firmer recognition and status under the *Mai/Shehu* (Borno rulers). The ‘Ulamā in Borno, as elsewhere in the Muslim world, were exceptionally privileged and powerful members of the city. They were exempted from taxation and military service, and never had the status of a slave of any sort through the issuance of *mahram*.⁹ By this, even their estates were not subject to confiscation by the state upon death, but indeed could be passed on to their heirs. Gazali has drawn attention to the evidence that the *mahram* is issued to ‘Ulamā by *Mai/Shehu* to also encourage and instil the culture of imparting knowledge to the Muslims.¹⁰

This power and influence, according to Adam Gambo Saleh and Hauwa Sadiq,¹¹ stem from two factors: The first factor stems from the ‘world’ they live in. The ‘world’ of the ‘Ulamā is a spiritual one. The ‘Ulamā lives within the confines of Islamic theology (*kalam*), within a denomination (*madhab*), and a sectarian congregation. The second factor is due to the roles they

⁸ See Bakar et al 2011.

⁹ Gazali 2005, 33.

¹⁰ Gazali 2005, 33.

¹¹ Saleh and Sadiq 2012, 80.



play in society. The ‘Ulamā play the role of a preacher constantly reminding Muslims of their faith; a counselor (*mustashir*) providing Islamic guidance because of his wisdom; as an administrator (*mudir*) he oversees the day-to-day affairs of the *madrassa*; and as a leader (*qa'id*) he controls, guides, and directs his followership.

1.4 The Roles and Functions ‘Ulamā in Borno

In Borno like the wider northern Nigeria and the entire Muslim world, social status determines the rights advantages and roles of an individual. Each status or position is expected in terms of a role. For that reason, for the ‘Ulamā to maintain such power and influence, they must continue to play these societal roles effectively and to achieve that the ‘Ulamā of Borno performed specific duties in almost all spheres of life of the people.

1.4.1 ‘Ulamā as intelligentsia and teachers of the state

The relevance of Borno Sufi scholars has manifested in the socio-cultural, economic, and political aspects of the city and countryside. Apart from other things, the ‘Ulamā have contributed to the growth of scholarship and intellectualism. There were Sufis whose main works is teaching people how to learn about reading and writing the Qur’an and Islamic sciences. They are naturally good at teaching and they do not move from one place to another. Mostly, this category of ‘Ulamā established schools with a large number of disciples from far and near areas. This kind of *madrassa* is locally referred to as *Sangaya* in Borno. Besides, they also function in some religious duties.

1.4.2 ‘Ulamā as Imam of the state

In Borno, like in any other Islamic state around the world, there are different types of prayers for which the services of ‘Ulamā and their *baraka* (blessing) are required and called upon. A typical example is the five daily ritual prayers, which are obligatory for all Muslims according to Muslim law, have formal times of performances, body movement, and particular verses and incantations that must be led by the Imam (‘Ulamā). There are other forms of ritual prayer, such as *nafilah*, less formal and voluntary prayer performed on certain occasions. These include *ṣalāt al-Istisqa’* (the rain prayer), *ṣalāt al-Janazah* (funeral prayer), and *ṣalāt al-Khawf* (fear prayer) among others which required the services of ‘Ulamā. As such, all *zāwiyas* or mosques in Borno had at least one Imam and *mu’adhdhin* or *ladani* determined the prayer time.



1.4.3 ‘Ulamā as Preachers in Borno

‘Ulamā are also conveyors of the ideals of Islam through popular teaching known as *tafsīr* (Qur’anic exegeses) circles. These are regular public events, in which an ‘Ulamā with the aid of a reader, essentially experts in the Qur’an, interprets the Qur’an for the public in the language of wider communication: Hausa or Kanuri. The *tafsīr* is normally conducted in the month of Ramadan (the month of fasting), in the morning, afternoon, or evening, and attended by many people. Many flocked to listen to the *tafsīr* and as a result, the ‘Ulamā had a great influence on people’s hearts and souls. There are again, yearly visiting *tafsīr* scholars who learned but rarely involved themselves in teaching students permanently. They are, however, noted as expert *mafassirun*. They are usually invited by a certain group of Muslims of a city in the region during the month of Ramadan fasting period to go and conduct the Qur’anic explanation called *tafsir* and give some religious enlightenment.

1.4.4 ‘Ulamā and Supernatural Endeavours

The ‘Ulamā in Borno uses their knowledge of the Qur’an and the written word, to perform supernatural endeavours. They prepare charms, amulets on request for specific purposes, which are rarely religious. This type of role is considered by some people to be a low-level type of activity because their prayers, charms, and other supernaturally perceived items are subject to the empirical test and scrutiny of the people who use them. As Hassan concluded, ‘Ulamā may lose his credibility if some of his products prove faulty and do not work appropriately as prescribed and expected by the client.¹² For this reason, the ‘Ulamā might become a subject of people’s criticism and public scrutiny, like other stereotypical figures in any society.¹³ Louis Brenner remarked that: “A good portion of the malam’s training dealt with the manufacture of religious charms, which were employed in Borno with a multitude of intentions, some beneficial and some evil. Malams gained great fame from the efficacy of their charms and the depth of their learning.”¹⁴

About the above, the ‘Ulamā especially experts in Qur’an are usually invited on Friday evening or nights to the residences of the wealthy to recite chapters of the Qur’an. They are also

¹² Hassan 1992, 68.

¹³ Hassan 1992, 68.

¹⁴ Brenner 1973, 93.



invited to recite the Qur'an on other occasions, such as the opening of newly-built houses, successful return of traveling merchants, return of a pilgrim, or success in a profitable commercial transaction. Such recitations are organized for the entertainment of the guests, a form of blessing and thanksgiving prayers. An interesting phenomenon is the fact that 'Ulamā are sometimes commissioned by traders and businessmen to read the Qur'an for them for a day or two, to change their fortune. An example would be deciding about the best day astrologically to perform a task, such as rituals event, marriage, trading venture, or ensuring a new job. They are asked to perform rituals or prayers to exorcise spirits or remove curses on individuals which prevent them from achieving certain goals, such as becoming pregnant or bearing a male child.

Farmers, travellers, and traders consulted these scholars seeking a lucky day and success in their affairs. On an unlucky day, there might be a thief about, or some danger, or fire, or poor harvest. King and emirs also consulted these scholars, if they were going out to war. If there would be the unlucky situation for the situation, the Malam would then say better wait until tomorrow, and tomorrow better wait until the evening. Some people, if they were going to get married, and that sort of thing, they would consult 'Ulamā. While seeking advice or for consultation from the 'Ulamā, money is not required at all, but you might give a present in form of kola-nut or any other luxury as *Sadaka* to the 'Ulamā.

1.4.5 'Ulamā as Counsellors in Borno

The 'Ulamā mediates all events and sacrifices in the individual life cycle of the people of Borno: birth and naming, early schooling and education, marriage, personal problems, and the crisis of death and life. These are all sanctioned, guaranteed, or resolved by the 'Ulamā alike. 'Ulamā, therefore, are the social, moral advisors and problem solvers. Through their intervention, they promote communication, trust, and confidence. People consult with them over critical issues in their lives.



1.5 Conclusion

It is now clear that ‘Ulamā has acquired special status and position in Borno. They function as intelligentsia, preachers, Imams, teachers, and supernatural endeavors of the state. It is observed that the ordinary man from the village in the Borno could become learned and climb up the ladder to a position of ‘Ulamā, and command considerable influence in the intellectual and political systems of the state through learning and scholarship. The descendants of ‘Ulamā were in a better position to succeed the leadership of a *malamti* or *zāwiya* and inherit the title, given their added advantage of exposure to the constant and regular process of learning. At times, ‘Ulamā declined the offer and concentrate on their teaching, learning, and preaching activities. While others do accept the offer and become very close to the ruling class. This was a fundamental tradition of the ‘Ulamā throughout West Africa.



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