



## **The 'Ulamā in Borno: Their Status and Relationship With the State**

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### Abstract:

The place and status of 'Ulamā as a major factor in the history of Borno are beyond all question. It is impossible to discuss much of Borno's history, both past and contemporary, without paying attention to how 'Ulamā have contributed to the intellectual, political, social, and economic development of the polity. First, they contributed greatly to the Islamisation of various places and peoples within and outside the polity. Second, the 'Ulamā promoted literacy and scholarship. Third, some of the 'Ulamā had succeeded in rescuing and building states and encouraged learning. The 'Ulamā's blessing and prayer are also solicited in several individual rites of passage; and they are normally asked to preside over rituals related to naming ceremonies of newborns, marriage, and death. Yet, no research has been made on the status, position, and roles of the 'Ulamā in Borno as well as their relationship with the state. This study, therefore, is designed to fill in this existing gap. To achieve this objective, this study is set in a historical framework and the main source of data is written materials gathered mainly from public and private libraries.

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# The 'Ulamā in Borno: Their Status and Relationship With the State

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## Abstract

The place and status of 'Ulamā as a major factor in the history of Borno are beyond all question. It is impossible to discuss much of Borno's history, both past and contemporary, without paying attention to how 'Ulamā have contributed to the intellectual, political, social, and economic development of the polity. First, they contributed greatly to the Islamisation of various places and peoples within and outside the polity. Second, the 'Ulamā promoted literacy and scholarship. Third, some of the 'Ulamā had succeeded in rescuing and building states and encouraged learning. The 'Ulamā's blessing and prayer are also solicited in several individual rites of passage; and they are normally asked to preside over rituals related to naming ceremonies of newborns, marriage, and death.<sup>1</sup> Yet, no research has been made on the status, position, and roles of the 'Ulamā in Borno as well as their relationship with the state. This study, therefore, is designed to fill in this existing gap. To achieve this objective, this study is set in a historical framework and the main source of data is written materials gathered mainly from public and private libraries.

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<sup>1</sup> Hassan 1992, 220.



## 1.1 Introduction

The role of the 'Ulamā in Borno' has already been observed by Louis Brenner 1973, Laminu 1992, and Gazali 2005, in their contributions to the nineteenth-century intellectual history of the sultanate. Laminu discussed the prestigious position gained by Borno Sultanate, as an active and vibrant centre of learning, in Bilad al-Sudan's complex nature. Gazali, on the other hand, examined the migration and contribution of Borno 'Ulamā who migrated and settled in Nupe and Yorubalands, among other places in West Africa, long before, and during the colonial era. The 'Ulamā, according to him, established centres of Islamic learning and civilization wherever they settled. While the spiritual and mundane roles of Borno 'Ulamā are summarised by Louis Brenner in a statement when he said: "*Mallam filled numerous roles connected with religious activity, including teaching, leading in prayers, officiating at ceremonies, curing of illness, and acting as qadis.*"<sup>2</sup> The role and function of 'Ulamā in Borno' are treated in this paper as part of a social tradition that exerted a continuous influence upon the organisation and character of the city throughout the twentieth century. In their combined roles as rulers and learned elite, the 'Ulamā could marshal considerable resources and mobilise wide sectors of the city's population. This absolutely offered them a leading voice in both the internal and external affairs of their respective communities. Given the religiopolitical organization of Islam, their impact was strongly felt at the administrative level, spiritual, economic, educative, and political. The 'Ulamā carefully avoided conflict with the state and the state with somewhat less care adopted the same position. When a dispute did flare-up between 'Ulamā and the state, the matter was almost invariably resolved by the 'Ulamā's withdrawal or dismissal.

## 1.2 'Ulamā: Conceptual Clarification

The term "Ulamā" is derived from the Arabic verb "*Alima*" which means "he knows" or "he means."<sup>3</sup> The origin of both the singular and the plural terms comes from the Qur'an.<sup>4</sup> 'Ulamā is the plural of *Alim* which refers to 'learned or scholars.' 'Ulamā therefore literarily 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

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<sup>2</sup> Brenner 1973, 93.

<sup>3</sup> Gazali 2005, 32.

<sup>4</sup> The plural form, Ulama appeared twice in the Qur'an and many times in prophetic traditions.



subtitles used to distinguish the different specialisations 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 the 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.<sup>5</sup> 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,<sup>6</sup> and sometimes used to refer to scholars who have reached a high level of knowledge and social prominence or who occupied 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 Classification of 'Ulamā in Borno

The 'Ulamā can be divided into two categories: establishment and

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<sup>5</sup> Gazali 2005, 32

<sup>6</sup> Hassan 1972, 6-7.



non-establishment. Establishment 'Ulamā is the 'Ulamā within the state bureaucracy. These 'Ulamā have given their endorsement of, and support for, the ruling family. While the non-establishment 'Ulamā is outside the state bureaucracy and acted as a voice of opposition to the ruling family, to the extent of challenging the ruling family.<sup>7</sup> This category of 'Ulamā was the group whose members were on their own, without association with any ruler in terms of appointments or participation in court administration. They did not accept any political appointments. They strongly believed that their absolute submission to, or association with any ruler or powers would undermine their respected position as a body, with a responsibility to teach and preach the dogmas of Islam and the philosophy of good government.<sup>8</sup> Some of the 'Ulamā at times, as mentioned earlier, preferred to be away from the rulers, hence settled in outskirts or nearby villages and cities and founded their settlements, for teaching and learning. This settlement is popularly known as *mallamati*.<sup>9</sup> Gazali argued that this category of 'Ulamā ' was more committed to the general public. They encouraged scholarship and learning in society. In Borno, the 'Ulamā, as in other parts of northern Nigeria, are politically powerful.

#### 1.4 The Status and Place of 'Ulamā in Borno

The status and place of 'Ulamā in Borno history can also be ascribed to traditional and religious values which made them almost a sacred personage whose spiritual state is linked in the popular imagination with the temporal fortunes of the city and individuals in it. The 'Ulamā were highly respected by society and the leaders due to the services they rendered to the society. They are ranked by their immediate community of other scholars and their students, in terms of their scholarly achievement, the number of students enrolled with them, their ability to attract clientele, and their supernatural qualities believed in by their community.<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, however, the sacred status of the 'Ulamā is symbolised even in their clothes. They wear a simple dress, turban, and shoes. Elaborate rituals, emphasising the absence of social distance between them and every man surrounding their conduct. Great 'Ulamā who become powerful and wealthy and adopt the style of life appropriate to the high status which is like that of the aristocracy. The nature of their residence and their domestic arrangements further mark their status. When they enter their houses, all stand. In their households, no man must greet him while standing.

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<sup>7</sup> Ismail 2016, 18.

<sup>8</sup> Gazali 2005, 42.

<sup>9</sup> Gazali 2005, 43.

<sup>10</sup> Hassan 1992, 65.



The status and position of 'Ulamā in Borno are plausible due to the centralization of the state and the introduction of theocratic principles, Islamic law, and morality which established a firm basis for 'Ulamā influence on the state and society. The crucial offices of the vizier, *Imam* and *muezzin*, *Qāḍī*, advisor, and various other political, military, and religious offices fell to them. Within Borno itself, being the spiritual leader of the Umma, the 'Ulamā tower overall in a class by themselves. Therefore, 'Ulamā is now ranked second in Borno above the dynasty pool, office-holding or not, the rest of the aristocracy and nobility and the business aristocracy. This high status and power are a function in the first instance of the traditionally prestigious status of learning and the scholar in Islam, from their undoubted intellectual superiority over all others and from the monopoly and control of scholarship which flows from this. In terms of their interaction with society, it is a function of their role as religious and moral guides and ritual experts. Over and above these it is a consequence of their role as mediators in temporal and secular affairs and from their control over extensive networks along which economic rewards are gathered and redistributed and information and influence channelled.

In practical spiritual, educational, and economic terms, the status of the 'Ulamā is often linked with wider religious activities. Their prime positions in leading congregational prayer mark them as religious leaders. Investment in its maintenance and repair enhances its reputation. They also teach and train both children and adults in a school: simple Qur'anic, *Islamiyya*, and *Ilm*; and support for their activities in the community and investment in them similarly enhances reputations. Families in the community are linked with numerous 'Ulamā who officiate at their life crisis rituals and who offer individuals mystical assistance in times of calamity and prayer for success and protection. Investment in their livelihoods, moral support for the activities, and good relations with them elevate their standing. The 'Ulamā's status and influence are due to their economic power or influence on the business class in Borno and other parts of northern Nigeria. Hassan argued that:

*Members of the business class are known to be aligned to one or the other of the major Sufi sects in Kano and maintain a form of permanent client relationship with a powerful Malam. This is believed to be beneficial to the business. Malam's prayers and blessings are sought for successful transactions. It has also been a tradition among the malams to combine trade with scholarship and operate in the market through their clients and ex-students.<sup>11</sup>*

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<sup>11</sup> Hassan 1992, 66.



This is the same situation in the twentieth century as most successful merchants and traders are the heaviest investors in religious institutions, in the activities of the brotherhoods with whom they are closely identified and, in the service offered by the 'Ulamā. Merchants rely heavily on the concept of *Baraka* (grace), and the capacity of the *Baraka* of one person to affect the fortunes of his associates. Yet again, there are also permanent links between 'Ulamā, aristocrats, and the merchants. This ritual-spiritual links with merchants and come to have stable affinal links appear to have played a significant part in the subsequent fortunes of both. 'Ulamā's support consisted chiefly of prayer for success, protection, and advice for the aristocrats and the merchants. From them, they obtained amulets and *asiri*. For instance, the 'Ulamā must be consulted by the merchants for success and protection when they want to travel and made it impossible for the merchants to disobey their command. The merchant listens to only him (his *Ṣūfī* master).

## 1.5 Relationship between 'Ulamā and the State

The relationship between the 'Ulamā and the rulers was characterised generally by mutual respect, support and understanding, and cordiality but sometimes they criticised the authority of both the rulers and the court 'Ulamā when they went wrong. They were mostly engaged in intellectual pursuit and strongly adhered to reformist positions. They persistently advocated for saintly and reform in the society in general and the leadership in particular.<sup>12</sup> An example in the eighteenth century was Shehu Mohammed Ajirambe in Borno Sultanate, popularly known as Shehu Ajirami, who was said to compose a poem entitled *Shrub al-Zulal*. Some of the extracts of the poem read as follows:

- (a) The rulers of Borno were tyrannical and corrupt.
- (b) The rich withheld food items at famine time in the hope of making a profit.
- (c) There were illegally slaughtered and unclean meat sold.
- (d) Judges accepted gifts as did the Governors.
- (e) There was illegal taxation.
- (f) Tobacco was an item of trade.<sup>13</sup>

This poem clearly shows the type of relationship that existed between the rulers and the independent or 'Ulamā. They always moved away from the rulers and shunned or rejected political appointments. It is worthy of note that even though there was a bitter relationship between the rulers and the 'Ulamā, the rulers still

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<sup>12</sup> Gazali 2005, 42,

<sup>13</sup> Gazali 2005, 43.



respected them and sought their cooperation and understanding, and continued to encourage their participation in the development of Islamic scholarship and learning in society. Hassan who wrote about the status and position of 'Ulamā in Kano, which is very close to Borno, has reported that many political parties and political leaders have sought endorsements of the 'Ulamā who are 'Ulamā, and their sects, particularly during electoral campaigns and political disputes.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps, the 'Ulamā's political power is in most cases a result of their influence on the grassroots level.

## 1.6 Conclusion

In this paper, we have examined in detail, the status, position, roles, and relationships of the 'Ulamā in Borno. We have found out that the status, position, roles, and influence of being a 'Ulamā persist despite major socio-economic changes that have transformed Borno, despite the rise of Wahhabi and Shia intelligentsia and elites due to their charisma as typical "organic" intellectuals. They represent the ideal folk heroes to whom the masses aspire. In their lifestyle and behaviour, 'Ulamā represents most of the classical ideals of the city. Among these ideals, most cherished are patience, courtesy, proper verbal, and gestural greetings, generosity, modesty, wisdom, and honesty. The 'Ulamā's success depends on their relationship with the authority and their ability to translate these ideas and personify them, in their formal and informal personal behaviours.

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<sup>14</sup> Hassan 1992, 65.





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