

The Council of Ulama and the Dynamics of Muslim Unity in Jigawa State

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Abstract

When it came to public knowledge that Governor Ibrahim Saminu Turaki (1999 – 2007) was going to constitute a council of *ulama* (Muslim clerics) to help facilitate a successful implementation of the newly promulgated *shari'ah* law in the state, the idea was simply dismissed as a political ploy to contain the pressure of the influential *ulama* class of the state. To be sure, this might be the real motive given the caliber of members appointed into the body and its rather nominally advisory role. Nevertheless, it could be contended that the council has managed to serve as a forum where prominent clerics representing all shades of opinion in the state come and work together and get to know one another better, a thing that was hitherto unthinkable. It is against this background that this paper is set to explore whether this symbolic unity is translated into mitigating acrimonious disputes and mutual distrust that often characterize the relationship between various Islamic groups. In achieving this, the paper relies primarily on relevant official documents and interviews with stakeholders.

Introduction

Jigawa state is geographically and politically situated in the north-west zone of Nigeria. It is one of the states created by the military regime of General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida (1985-1993) in 1991. As far as the history of the state is concerned 1999 was a landmark, for it saw the separation of Jigawa from Kano which gave the former the position of statehood in the federation. Demographically, majority of people who inhabit Jigawa are of Hausa-Fulani and Kanuri origin, and there are substantial chunks of ethnic minorities who occupy various communities across the length and breadth of the state. Jigawa state is predominantly Muslim, but there are pockets of Christians who mainly live in the midst of their host communities. They mingle and relate with Muslims peacefully and productively. There are two types of Christian communities in the state; the first category is the Christian communities of Southern Nigerian origin while the second category is indigenous, who were converted by the Christian missionary groups.

Jigawa state, being an extension of Kano society in many respects, is a concentration center of Islamic groups, which struggle to establish unique secondary identity perhaps different from others. The major groups include Qadiriyya, Tijaniyya and *Izalatul Bid'awa Iqamatus Sunna* (Society for the Removal of Innovation and Reinstatement of Tradition), popularly known as Izala. These groups compete for the control of the same religious public space, followership and influence. Each group has its *ulama*, followers and sympathizers. Furthermore, each one has semi-unique identity and structure different from others. It is pertinent to note that each of these groups strive to get more following in order to establish ascendancy and dominance on the religious geography of the state, which often result in skirmishes. They adopt different strategies and tactics to dominate

the religious public space and perhaps to deprive others from getting the same opportunity.

Conceptual Clarification

In this section an attempt is made to explain certain operational concepts as used in the paper. These concepts include unity and *ulama*; they have literal and technical meanings. In understanding the role of the Jigawa State Council of Ulama in promoting unity among Islamic groups, the technical conceptions of the two key words are employed in this paper.

Unity: Unity is the livewire that connects disparate human beings with different social background, worldview, beliefs, orientation, exposure and principles together. There are various definitions of the term unity, and it simply means the quality in individuals to do something as a unit without jeopardizing the individual interest in any way as far as the result of the work is concerned. It is the state of being united or together. It is the feeling of oneness, togetherness, and harmony for common goal¹. In the context and rubric of this paper, unity is seen as deliberate efforts and coming together of the Islamic scholars with distinct doctrinal background to pursue common goals on the religious space of Jigawa State. Unity is pivotal to the existence of any human society and organization². There is no society that can experience harmony and meaningful development without unity. That is why most of the organized religions of the world stress the importance of unity because it engenders peaceful co-existence. Islam is very particular and unequivocal in enjoining its adherents to cultivate the culture of unity. In the Noble

Qur'an, Allah says: "And hold fast all together to the rope of God, and never be divided"

(Q3: 103). Moreover, in Q8: 46 Allah says:

"And obey God and His Messenger, and do not dispute with one another, or else you may lose heart and your power and energy desert you; and remain steadfast. Surely, God is with those who remain steadfast."

Historically, one of the strengths of the most flourishing civilizations was unity which bred social cohesion and internal stability. Disunity contributed to the collapse of many human civilizations in different parts of the world³. Unity provides protection to society against external aggression and bellicosity.

Ulama: The term *ulama* (sing. *alim*) is an Arabic word which denotes scholars of almost all disciplines. However, the term refers more specifically to the scholars of religious sciences who are considered as the guardians, transmitters and interpreters of religious knowledge, more especially Islamic doctrine and law. The term also embraces those who discharge religious functions in the community that require certain level of expertise in religious and judicial issues such as judges, preachers and imams of the mosques⁴. In the context of Jigawa, the *ulama* are the Islamic scholars who specialize in different branches of Islamic knowledge namely: *Fiqh*, *tafsir* (Qur'anic exegesis), *Hadith* (tradition of the Prophet) and many other areas⁵.

The Idea of "the Councils of Ulama" in Nigeria

The 1970s and 80s have been critical periods of Islamic groups in Nigeria, for Muslims experienced challenges from within and without. There were internal cleavages that led

to lots of contestation and conflicts among followers of one group and another. The Muslims that lived alongside Christians in different northern states faced the threats of ethno-religious crises. It was in face of these challenges that the Muslim intelligentsia started to think on the ways in which they could mend the cracks within Muslim community and at the same time contain the challenges thrown at them by their Christian counterparts. Loimeier affirms:

In the course of the efforts to overcome the conflicts between the *Yan-Izalah* and the *Turuq* and to establish a new and efficient umbrella organization for all Muslims, a Council of *Ulama* had been founded as early as 1979. During a conference on the topic of *Sharia* at the Centre of Islamic Legal Studies (CILS) at ABU Zaria the participants had set up a forum under the above mentioned name⁶.

The formation of this organization was meant to unify Muslim *umma* and eradicate the traces of misunderstandings and distrust that factionalized Islamic groups⁷. It was also aimed at resuscitating the activities of *Jama'atu Nasril Islam*. The organization was exclusively dominated by the scholars, therefore, the traditional rulers and politicians were not actively represented. The exclusion of these classes of people incapacitated the organization and, as a result, failed to make significant inroads into the Muslim communities. It also failed to achieve its stated objectives and disappeared from the religious space of northern Nigeria⁸.

In the 1980s, Muslims faced economic difficulties, due to the government policies, and constant challenges from the Christians. The attacks by the Christians forced an intermittent solidarity between the Islamic groups and scholars. The *ulama* who represented different groups met in Zaria and at Lake Tiga, Kano in November, 1986 to

work out the modalities on how to resuscitate the comatose Council of *Ulama* and use it as an avenue to counter the incessant Christians' opposition to the Nigerian membership of the OIC (Organization of Islamic Conference). The prominent scholars that participated in these meetings included Dahiru Bauchi (*Tijaniyyahh*), Nasiru Kabara (*Qadiriyyah*), Abubakar Gumi (*Salafiyya/Izalah*), Khalifa Isma'il Ibrahim (*Tijaniyyahh*) and Hassan Gwarzo⁹. The composition and doctrinal inclinations of the participants symbolized the intra-faith solidarity of a sort. The challenge faced by Muslims made leaders of various groups to come together, in spite of their difference, to face common problem. The outcome of these meetings was the re-establishment of the Council of *Ulama* in 1986 with Dr. Umar Bello as the pioneer national secretary and Muhammad Sadiq al-Kafawi as administrative secretary. The council established branches in many northern states including Kano from which Jigawa State was carved out.

The Establishment of Jigawa State Council of Ulama

The Jigawa State Council of Ulama also known as State Council of Ulama (SCU henceforth) was established by Governor Ibrahim Saminu Turaki (1999 – 2007) in 2001, following the recommendations made by a government-appointed committee headed by the then Deputy Governor Alhaji Ibrahim Shehu Kwatolo. The committee was assigned to look into how the *shari'ah* would be successfully implemented in the state. The Kwatolo-led committee had observed in its report the prevalence of ignorance and lack of adequate religious awareness among the masses who clamored for the implementation of the *shari'ah* in the state. Majority had little or no understanding what the *shari'ah* really meant. This problem, if care is not taken, would certainly lead to a disastrous outcome;

hence the need to have a special body whose role was to continually enlighten people about what the *shari'ah* was all about in order to ensure smooth implementation¹⁰.

Upon receiving the report of the committee, Governor Turaki welcomed the idea and without further delay constituted an initial twenty five-member council which was later enlarged to comprise seventy two members, representing all Islamic groups from all parts of the state. Shaykh Abdulwahab Tahir, a traditional title holder and former Grand Kadi, was appointed to serve as its pioneer chairman. The SCU began its work in early 2002 and received monthly emoluments for their service, but it was not signed into Law until April 20, 2004.

The composition of the SCU was designed in such a way that the government's interests would be fully represented and protected. Clerics appointed into its membership were mainly seen as pro-establishment or sympathetic to the administration; they were either personally handpicked by the Governor or nominated by his political associates¹¹. The law establishing the SCU clearly states that the following must be among its members:

- Chief Imams of all five emirates of the state.
- One representative from each emirate council.
- Attorney-General or his representative.
- The Chief Judge or his representative.
- The Grand Kadi or his representative.
- All former Grand Kadis.
- One representative each from the Nigeria Police Force and the State Security Service.

- Chairman, House Committee on Religious Affairs.

It is obvious that some of the above mentioned categories are not necessarily Islamic scholars. They can even be non-Muslims. Perhaps they were appointed into the SCU in spite of their apparent lack of qualification to stabilize it and ensure that overzealous members do not cross the line and unwittingly jeopardize the security of the state.

The primary objective of the SCU was understandably to guide the people of the state through a smooth *shari'ah* implementation process, which would not result in public unrest and instability. This is succinctly captured in its expressly stated functions:

- To promote the religion of Islam through constant reminder of the obligations of a Muslim adult toward his family and society in general;
- To offer informed opinion on issues, matters and questions that may be referred to it by the government, organizations or individuals;
- To advise the State Judicial Service Commission on suitable persons for appointment into the office of an alkali of the Shari'a Court or any other similar office;
- To monitor and assess progress in the area of proper shari'ah implementation and advise the government accordingly;
- To monitor and give informed opinion of Islamic law on contemporary issues, such as technological, modern trade and commerce, social vices and diseases;
- To make available literature on the provisions of the *shari'ah* in print, audio or video form for enlightenment of general public;

- To liaise with the State Advisory Committee on *Hisbah* on the proper implementation of the *shari'ah*;
- To offer advice to the appropriate authorities on the codified laws;
- To perform such other functions as the Governor may from time to time assign to it.

Paradoxically, the issue of promoting unity among adherents of Islamic faith, which is the main objective of the CUN, is conspicuously missing in the stated functions of the SCU. This and the composition of the SCU lead many critics to raise eyebrows and question the sincerity of Governor Turaki in constituting the SCU in the first place. They believe that he wanted to draw the powerful and vocal clerics closer to his government to help silence them and neutralize their criticism of his excesses. And the unity achieved by members of the SCU was a mere happenstance¹².

The Role of the SCU in Promoting Unity among Islamic Groups

The SCU has been playing central role in promoting unity among Muslim community in the state. The membership of the council was, and still is, all-encompassing and inclusive. The council has over seventy members who identify themselves with major Islamic groups of the state namely: Qadiriyya, Tijaniyya and Izala. Some of the members are unaffiliated and neutral. The ability of the council to assemble Islamic scholars with different doctrinal beliefs together symbolizes the level of religious cohesion in the state. The members came together as Muslims certainly not as Sufis or Salafis. They downplayed their secondary identity and gave emphasis to the root and primary identity (Islam). They meet, discuss, deliberate, travel and pray together not minding the

affiliation of the imam. This is very important because each Islamic group has its own mosques, imams and religious understanding. The adherents of each group, especially those who take extreme position, do not pray in the mosque or behind the imam that belongs to the opposing group. The members of the SCU have succeeded in obliterating this petty difference and work together as leaders of Muslim community¹³.

The SCU organizes seminars regularly to enlighten the religious authorities about their responsibilities in the society. There are different categories of seminars organized by this body. There are seminars for Imams, exegetes and general ulama whereby each group is sensitized on how to discharge its religious responsibility according to the teachings of Islam. The participants in the seminars represent various Islamic groups in the state; they come together and share views and knowledge. The resource persons are also derived from the different groups to show the extent of harmony and togetherness¹⁴.

One of the most important role that SCU plays is mediation between conflicting Islamic groups in the state. There were many instances of conflicts which involved two or more opposing groups or individuals. Whenever such conflict erupted, the SCU would delegate its members to mediate and ensure harmonious relations. The government of Jigawa State recognized and appreciated the role that the SCU has been playing in the management of intra religious conflicts; this explains why whenever two parties are involved in skirmishes, the state government through the Directorate for Special Duties delegates the council to mediate. The SCU normally meets the warring parties, investigate, mediate and write a report for the consideration of the state government. For example, the SCU mediated the conflict between the members of Tijaniyya and Izala in Killa, Gwaram Local Government over the ownership of a newly renovated mosque. The SCU also

heard and resolved the misunderstanding between imam and muezzin as well as the conflict over the ownership and control of mosques in different parts of the state. According to Shaykh Abdulwahab Hassan, the SCU managed series of intra-religious crises in many places among which were Gumel and Garki¹⁵.

The Muslims in the state hold the SCU in high esteem listen to its leaders whenever they speak. The support and goodwill of public that the SCU enjoys gives it power to manage conflict and ensure peaceful coexistence. Based on the available information, there was no any embattled individual or organization that protested against the judgment and mediation of the SCU. Perhaps, the level of impartiality and the people that the council assigned to promote peace process is the reasons behind the acceptance of its mediation processes.

In an effort to expand its outreach, the SCU advised the government of **Ibrahim Saminu Turaki** (1999-2007) to establish Religious Committee in each of the twenty seven local government areas of the state. The Governor heeded the advice and directed the local government authorities to set up religious committees to aid the SCU in discharging its statutory responsibilities. The committee comprised of fourteen members who represented major Islamic groups, the traditional institution, the State Security Service and the Police. The committee performs important functions in every local government area as overseer of intra-Muslim relations and regulates the activities of the *ulama* in its area of jurisdiction. Whenever an Islamic scholar makes inflammatory statement or hate speech, members of the committee would meet and advise him accordingly¹⁶. In some instances, a district-head (Hakimi) of the local government concerned would be involved to calm the situation. The council also organizes Tafsir sessions and public lectures to

address some burning and topical issues that militate against the harmony of the society. In most of the public lectures organized by the council the issues of peace and unity are normally emphasized. The public lecture series is a powerful avenue of communicating with followers of different Islamic groups. Through the organization of these public lectures, adherents of disparate creeds are brought together to share the same religious space, time and listen to the same speaker. The followers are sensitized and enlightened about the fundamental teachings of Islam and the essence of mutual respect.

From the establishment of the council to date only two people headed the institution. The pioneer chairman of the council was Shaykh Abdulwahab Tahir who was neutral in the sense of doctrinal affiliation. He did not identify himself with any of the Islamic groups but yet, he related closely with their leaders without any sense of discrimination. The neutrality of Tahir, coupled with charisma, had helped him to earn the trust and respect of the members of the council irrespective of their doctrinal affiliation. He created an atmosphere whereby the representatives of all the Islamic groups believed that he was fair and non-partisan. Therefore, he served as a bridge-builder. When Tahir died, Barrister Bashir Birnin Kudu was appointed to succeed him. Birnin Kudu was also neutral and unaffiliated; he tries to maintain the legacy of his predecessor. He related with his members freely and suppressed sectarian approached to issues¹⁷.

The Challenges Faced by the Council

Every organization that is formed and managed by a group of people has its strength and limitations due to inherent shortcomings, ambition and attitude of human being. There are people who are focused and goal-oriented, and there those who are naturally weak.

Human being has an insatiable need that is why it is very difficult for some people to be contented. Being an organization formed by human being, the SCU has series of programs that require resources for successful implementation.

The SCU, as a religious institution, faces a number of challenges, which hinder its effective operation in every nook cranny of the state. Lack of sufficient funding is the major problem that impedes the activities of the council. The activities of the SCU cover the entire twenty seven local government areas of Jigawa; it deals with a lot of issues ranging from the implementation of the *shari'ah*, tafsir, public lectures, to coordination of the activities of the religious committees.

The SCU also supports the distressed *ulama*, orphans and the physically challenged. The philanthropic enterprise of the SCU earns it respect and recognition of the general public. These activities require huge resources which are not available at the disposal of the council. The council relies heavily on the government for the monthly remuneration of its staff and funding of its activities. The linear source of income tends to constitute an obstacle for the smooth running of the council. The government reduces significantly the funding of the council perhaps due to economic recession, which affects all sectors of the society.

In recent time, the meddling into the affairs of the council by politicians is increasingly becoming routine. The leadership of the council was changed and new set of people were appointed basically based on political consideration. It seems like the politicians have keen interest in the affairs of the council because of its closeness to the general public. The leadership of the council commands enormous respect of the common man. Another

challenge of the council is lack of sufficient means of transportation which can facilitate effective supervision in all the local government areas. In terms of landmass, Jigawa is very vast, hence, there is a need to have as many vehicles as possible to pay regular visit to remote areas of the state to communicate with the leaders of various religious committee.

Conclusion

SCU is one of the important religious institutions established in Jigawa to steer the implementation and application of *shari'ah*. The SCU has its stated objectives and functions and the issue of unity is inadvertently missing on the list. The pivotal and latent role that the council plays is constant promotion of unity among different/competing Islamic groups in the state. The SCU adopts many strategies to foster unity among which are organization of public lectures, seminars and visitation of *ulama* of various persuasions. The SCU mediates crisis between religious groups and individuals. It settled conflicts over the possession of mosque between Izala and Sufi groups. The SCU also runs philanthropic activities to assist the poor, the physically challenged and orphans. One of the most potent strategies of the SCU to expand its outreach was the creation of powerful networks through the establishment of religious committees in all the local government areas of the state. It has been observed that the activities of most organizations concentrate in urban areas, but SCU covers both urban and rural areas, especially through the instrument of the religious committees.

In spite of the role played by SCU in promoting unity and philanthropic activities, yet it faces myriad of problems among which are financial constraint, lack of political will on

part of some leaders and, at times, political meddlesomeness in its affairs. The fact that it is controlled by the government undermines its independence and exposes it to public suspicion. Admittedly, the SCU could not have achieved what it has achieved without the support and strong backing of the government.

Endnotes:

¹ <https://www.importantindia.com/22484/meanng-of-unity>

²² The essence of unity in human society makes scholars, both Muslim and western, to give it special attention in their writings and discourse. One of the Muslim scholars that talk about unity and group feeling is Ibn Khaldun in his Muqaddimah. For more on this, see Ibn Khaldun, Abdurrahman. *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. 1978.

³ Ibn Khaldun, Abdurrahman. Op cit. pp. 109 – 117.

⁴ *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Vol. X, Leiden-Brill, pp. 801-802

⁵ Council of Ulama (Establishment) Law, Law No. 3, 2004, p. 2.

⁶ Loimieir, Roman. *Islamic Reform and Political Change in Northern Nigeria*. Evanston. Northern University Press. 1997. pp.293-294

⁷ The Constitution of the Council of ‘Ulama of Nigeria, Article V No. 1. p. 4.

⁸ Ahmed, Muhammad Nazifi. “A History of Kano State Council of Ulama: 1986 – 2013.” A B.A Dissertation presented to the Department of History, Bayero University, Kano, 2016, p. 53.

⁹ Loimieir, Roman. Op cit. p. 292.

¹⁰ Mukhtar, Muhammad Sani. “The Shariah Implementation in Jigawa State and Its Role in Reforming the Society.” A PhD Thesis Submitted to the Department of Islamic Studies and Shari’ah, Bayero University, Kano. 2017. pp. 107 – 108.

¹¹ Interview with Malam Mukhtar Shu’aibu Ringim, a member of the SCU on 17th November, 2017.

¹² Interview with Malam Mukhtar Shu’aibu Ringim.

¹³ Interview with Shaykh Abulwahab Hassan Kafin Hausa, Chief Imam of Kafin Hausa Central and Vice Chairman of the Jigawa State Council of Ulama, 17th November, 2017

¹⁴ Interview with Malam Yusha’u Abubakar, former Secretary of the Jigawa State Council of Ulama, 17th November, 2017

¹⁵ Interview with Shaykh Abulwahab Hassan Kafin Hausa.

¹⁶ Interview with Imam Abdulhamid, the Chief Imam of Birniwa Central Mosque and member of the SCU, on 17th November, 2017.

¹⁷ Interview with Malam Yusha’u Abubakar.