CHAPTER 15

The Aminu Kano College of Islamic and Legal Studies: A Site for the Renegotiation of Islamic Law and Authority in Kano, Nigeria

Alex Thurston

Introduction

The Aminu Kano College of Islamic and Legal Studies (AKCILS) is a postsecondary institution located in Kano, the most populous city in Muslim-majority northern Nigeria. AKCILS offers Islamic education and training in other subjects, such as languages, civil law, and social sciences, to young men and women. Students attend the college either to obtain terminal degrees or to prepare for university education. In addition to its many Nigerian-trained faculty and staff, AKCILS has hired several Nigerian Muslim graduates of foreign Islamic universities. Foreign-educated faculty members at AKCILS maintain far-ranging professional and religious activities outside the college. These include directing their own Islamic schools, serving in state government bureaucracies, teaching in mosques, and publishing religious tracts. These faculty members often pursue additional postgraduate degrees inside and outside Nigeria. In this way, AKCILS serves as an institutional base for its faculty, from which they can continue to build profiles as scholars, professionals, and religious leaders. In other words, AKCILS has been one mechanism by which foreign-educated Northern Nigerian Muslim leaders have been reintegrated into their society. Drawing on interviews with staff members, speeches given at the college, and unpublished materials on AKCILS’s history, this essay examines interrelationships between AKCILS’s role as part of Kano’s shari’a system and its role as a professional platform for Arab-educated faculty members.
AKCILS can act as an institutional base for Arab-educated Nigerian scholars because it lies at the intersection of important developments in education and law. Since its founding in 1976, trends in Nigerian education have magnified AKCILS’s importance. Historically, Kano has been a center for commerce and Muslim scholarship. The city continues to act as a hub of religious education and preaching. In the mid-1970s, the Federal Government of Nigeria used oil wealth in an attempt to fund universal education, generating growth in primary, secondary, and tertiary education in Nigeria. Amid declining budgetary revenues in subsequent decades, the federal government retreated from the educational sector. New Islamic schools proliferated, and some of their graduates aspired to attend high-status, state-run Islamic colleges such as AKCILS. The growth of Islamic schools outside of the state education system has created opportunities for AKCILS staff members to found and manage their own private, for-profit schools—an endeavor for which they have the requisite skills.

Trends in Islamic law have also affected AKCILS and its faculty. After 1999, Northern Nigerian states began implementing legal codes that purported to establish “full shari’a,” or Islamic law, including all of the criminal penalties specified in the Qur’an—restoring, in a sense, the legal regimes that existed in parts of northern Nigeria prior to the British colonial conquest of 1897–1903. Kano State has stood at the forefront of experimentation with new kinds of state-directed Islamic bureaucracies (Thurston 2015). These institutions range from shari’a courts and committees to an office for managing zakat (purificatory tax) to special advisory posts in the state government. The expansion of Islamic bureaucracies fueled by the shari’a project has reinforced the state government’s enduring interest in Islamic education. Two of the foreign-educated AKCILS staff members profiled in this chapter held government posts relating to education during the tenure of Governor Ibrahim Shekarau (2003–2011), under whom Kano State’s government pursued a number of initiatives designed to enforce and promote conceptions of Islamic public morality. “Shari’a politics” in Kano have also affected AKCILS as an institution; one of the primary purposes of AKCILS is to help staff the shari’a judiciary, and the college played an important role in the movement to restore shari’a. As a potent institution within the city and a symbol of shari’a in Kano, AKCILS has also been an object of politicians’ efforts to define Islamic education and law in the state. For this reason, AKCILS’s future trajectory—and by extension the trajectories of its politically involved staff—may be heavily affected by the fate of the shari’a project as a whole.

Before turning to an examination of AKCILS’s history, political position in Kano, and faculty, this essay places the institution in a broader regional context, that of West Africa’s Muslim communities. One corollary to this essay’s argument about AKCILS’s role as an institutional base for foreign-educated faculty members is the contention that northern Nigeria offers Arabophone Muslim professionals greater opportunities for employment and religious leadership than are available in many majority-Muslim societies elsewhere in the region. Elaborating on this regional contrast emphasizes the features that make AKCILS an important “middle tier” employment possibility for Arabophones. In other words, this