

LEADERSHIP, LEGACY AND TRADITIONAL GOVERNANCE IN NORTHEASTERN NIGERIA: A CASE STUDY OF (LATE) MAI UMAR MUSTAPHA ALIYU OF BIU EMIRATE, 1989 – 2020

BY

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Abstract

This study explores the life, leadership, and enduring legacy of Mai Umar Mustapha Aliyu, who served as the Emir of Bui from 1989 to 2020, situating his reign within the wider framework of traditional governance in Nigeria. Adopting a qualitative research approach, the study draws on archival materials sourced from the National Archives in Kaduna, alongside Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). It critically examines his role in promoting peacebuilding, preserving cultural heritage, and strengthening local governance structures in Borno State. The analysis places his leadership within existing scholarly discussions on the relevance of traditional institutions in Nigeria, with particular attention to his response to the Boko Haram insurgency. During this turbulent period, Mai Umar Mustapha Aliyu demonstrated notable resilience and strategic leadership, contributing significantly to community stability and cohesion. Findings from the study indicate that his reign was characterized by inclusiveness, adaptability, and a commitment to institutional development. His leadership style fostered unity among diverse groups while reinforcing the authority and functionality of traditional governance systems. Furthermore, his efforts in conflict resolution and cultural continuity underscored the vital role traditional rulers continue to play in modern Nigerian society. The study concludes that empowering and strengthening traditional institutions can significantly enhance grassroots governance, improve conflict management, and support sustainable peacebuilding efforts across Nigeria, particularly in regions facing security and developmental challenges.

Keywords: Governance, Legacy, Leadership, Emirate, Case Study

Introduction

Traditional institutions remain integral to governance in Nigeria, particularly in the northern regions where emirate systems continue to exert strong influence over socio-political organization and community life. Far from being symbolic relics of the past, these institutions actively contribute to leadership structures, dispute resolution, and the preservation of cultural heritage. As noted by scholars such as Afigbo (1972) and Yahaya (2008), traditional authorities maintain a functional relevance that complements formal state systems, especially at the grassroots level. Their enduring legitimacy often stems from historical continuity, cultural embeddedness, and their proximity to local populations. Within this broader national context, the Bui Emirate, located in southern Borno State, occupies a prominent place as one of the oldest and most historically grounded traditional polities in northeastern Nigeria. Deeply rooted in the traditions and identity of the Babur (Bura) people, the emirate has long served as a unifying institution that embodies authority, cultural values, and systems of indigenous governance. Over generations, it has functioned not only as a political entity but also as a custodian of social norms and communal cohesion, reinforcing its importance in the region's historical and contemporary landscape.

Mai Umar Mustapha Aliyu, who reigned as Emir of Biu from 1989 to 2020, represents a significant figure in examining both the continuity and transformation of traditional leadership in modern Nigeria. His tenure provides a compelling case study of how traditional rulers can adapt to changing political realities while preserving the core values of their institutions. Ascending to the throne at a time of shifting national dynamics, he inherited both the responsibilities of tradition and the challenges of a rapidly evolving state structure. His reign coincided with a critical period in Nigeria's history, marked by the transition from military rule to democratic governance, as well as escalating security concerns in the northeastern region due to the emergence of the Boko Haram insurgency. These developments posed serious challenges to governance, social stability, and community safety. In response, Mai Umar Mustapha Aliyu demonstrated a leadership style that balanced resilience with pragmatism. He engaged with formal government authorities while also leveraging traditional mechanisms to promote dialogue, mediate conflicts, and sustain community trust.

Notably, his leadership reflected an ability to integrate long-standing customs with contemporary governance demands. He maintained the cultural integrity of the emirate while also embracing collaboration with modern political institutions. This dual approach enabled him to remain relevant and effective, particularly during periods of crisis when local populations often relied on traditional authorities for guidance and reassurance. His efforts contributed to strengthening the role of the emirate as a stabilizing force within the region. This study, therefore, offers a comprehensive biographical exploration of Mai Umar Mustapha Aliyu, with particular emphasis on his leadership philosophy, key achievements, and enduring legacy. It seeks to highlight how his administration influenced governance practices, reinforced cultural identity, and contributed to peacebuilding efforts within and beyond the Biu Emirate.

Methodology

To achieve its objectives, the study employs a qualitative research design that integrates documentary analysis with field-based data collection. Archival and written sources provide historical and contextual grounding, while primary data were gathered through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). The KIIs involved carefully selected participants, including palace officials, district heads, religious leaders, and retired civil servants within the Biu Emirate. These individuals were chosen due to their close association with the Emir and their firsthand knowledge of his administration, ensuring informed and credible insights. In addition, FGDs were conducted with a diverse cross-section of community members, including youth, women, and elders from Biu, Hawul, and Kwaya Kusar. These group discussions offered a platform for capturing shared experiences and collective perceptions of the Emir's leadership and influence on socio-cultural life. By incorporating multiple perspectives, the study ensures a more nuanced and representative understanding of his role. The data generated from both KIIs and FGDs were analyzed thematically, with particular attention to issues of governance, peacebuilding, and cultural preservation. This analytical approach allows for the identification of recurring patterns and key themes that define the Emir's leadership. Overall, the study underscores the enduring importance of traditional institutions and highlights how effective leadership within such systems can contribute meaningfully to stability, cultural identity, and community development in Nigeria.

Results

Historical Background of Biu Emirate

The Biu Emirate traces its origins to the Babur/Bura ethnic group, whose political organization predates colonial rule (Meek, 1931). The emirate system was later integrated into the British indirect rule structure, which strengthened the authority of traditional rulers (Lugard, 1922). Scholars such as Abubakar (2006) argue that emirates in northern Nigeria serve as intermediaries between the state and local communities. The Biu Emirate exemplifies this role, particularly in maintaining order and preserving cultural identity. The Emirate and its traditional governance structures originated in the pre-colonial era and endured systematic colonial and post-colonial transformations. Our concern here is to give brief historical background of the emirate/institution up to the assertion of his reign in 1989. The Biu chief is traditionally called *Kuthli*, titles such as *Mai* and Emir came much later.¹ By 1989, when Mai Umar Mustapha Aliyu ascended the throne, these institutions had lost formal judicial and executive powers but retained significant continuity in cultural, advisory, and community-mobilization roles. This historical continuity provides the foundation for assessing their impacts during his 31-year reign.

Pre-colonial Kingdom (c. 1535-1918)

The Biu Dynasty was said to have been established since around ca. 1535 by Yamtarawala, a Kanuri prince from the court of Mai Idris Katagarmabe in Ngazargamu the ancient capital of the Kanem-Borno Empire. He conquered scattered Babur settlements at Miringa, Buratai and Diwar, establishing a new dynasty and initial capital at Limbur (or Dlimbur) (Bukar, 2015). However, he was unable to weld the communities he had defeated into one unified entity. Consequently, the defeated villages recovered much of their territory during the reign of his son the situation remained virtually that way until ca. 1670 when Mari Wabila Yamta secured the domain and officially made it a centrally-controlled kingdom. Administration followed a clear monarchical yet consultative hierarchy. The *Kuthli* stood at the apex, supported by the Biu Traditional Council (comprising elders and kingmakers responsible for succession and major decisions). Below this operated traditional title holders (assigned specific portfolios such as justice, military command, or resource management) and royal stewards. An administrative establishment and royal warriors handled day-to-day enforcement and defence. District and village heads often drawn from ruling clans such as Woviri (the primary royal clan), kidi and Gwagwa managed local affairs, including customary dispute resolution, in-kind taxation, and community mobilization. Over 127 clans (e.g., Dagal, Zuwaka, Balami) formed kinship networks that reinforced this structure while accommodating ethno-linguistic diversity.

Colonial Emirate (1918-1960)

British colonial engagement accelerated after 1904. Colonial officers encountered an established chieftaincy under Garga Kwamting who ascended the throne in 1891 whom they formally installed as "Chief of the Babur" with a third-grade staff of office in 1904 and advised to reside permanently in Biu. The creation of the Biu Division in 1918, as indicated in Government Notice No. 144, upgraded the ruler's status to second-class, effectively ending the designation of "District Head." In 1908, Mai Ari Dogo, the son of Garga Kwamting, became the *Kuthli*, and in 1920, he was officially recognized as the first Emir of Biu. This transition marked the shift from a kingdom to an emirate, necessitating a change in the name of the domain, which was no longer simply referred to as Biu Kingdom, it officially became Biu Emirate. The 1920 transition from Biu Kingdom to Biu Emirate was primarily a matter of

nomenclature and governmental approval. Biu has been a traditional state since 1535, and at the time his traditional office was renamed, Mai Ari Dogo was the 24th *Kuthli* of Biu. Explaining the circumstance of the change, in 1935 the Secretary of the Northern Provinces directed that the chief of Biu should be called *Mai*, Davies stated thus:

“Not long after Biu Division was constituted in 1918, the Chief of Biu was upgraded. He was a 3rd Grade Chief on his appointment on his appointment in 1908 and now, on September 12, 1918, he was appointed a 2nd Grade Chief...As a consequence of this he ceased to be called District head and was called a chief, or in Kanuri a *Mai* and later the Emir of Biu” (Davies, 1951)

With the British occupation of Northern Nigeria, the foundation of administrative policy was indirect rule. This concept was first articulated by Sir Fedrick Lugard, the first governor of Northern Nigeria. In this system of Indirect rule in Northern Nigeria, the emir held legal authority for local governance and was appointed as the head of Native Authority. He was supported by a group known as the Native Administration, which helped the Native Authority exercise power at the local level. This system allowed for decentralized governance by creating smaller units known as districts and villages. Each district had a District Head, who was responsible to the Native Authority. The Emir became the central figure in local governance, overseeing the administration of the people during British rule. (SNP6/NAK/BAUPROF, 2025). Under Lugard's indirect rule and the Native Authority system, Biu's traditional institutions were integrated into colonial administration without wholesale replacement. The Emir headed the Native Authority, exercising delegated powers over tax collection, law and, treasury management, and basic infrastructure (NAK/SNP6/116/1908). The Biu Traditional Council and title holders advised the Emir and implemented policies at the local level. The emirate was subdivided into five districts and later expanded, each administered by district heads appointed or endorsed by the Emir. These district heads mirrored pre-colonial village chiefs, maintaining grassroots linkages. In 1926, specific administrative changes were implemented within the Northern Provinces to improve control. Colonial reports indicated that during the reorganisation of the Northern Province Shani was transferred from Adamawa Province to the Biu Division of Borno Province. This marked a period territorial expansion of additional districts (Shani and Askira) (NAK/LOKOPROF/243/1926)

Post-Independence Evolution up to 1989

Independence in 1960 initially sustained the Native Authority framework in the Northern Region. Successive Mai Ari Il Gurgur 1935 – 1951, Muhammad Aliyu 1951 – 1959, and Mai Mustafa Aliyu 1959 – 1989 continued to wield influence through regional Houses of Chiefs and local governance. However, the January 1966 military coup and subsequent regimes progressively diminished formal powers, viewing traditional rulers as potentially partisan actors. The decisive transformation occurred with the 1976 Local Government Reforms under the Murtala/Obasanjo military administration (Guidelines for Local Government Reforms 1976). These reforms introduced a uniform, nationwide system of elected local government councils, explicitly stripping traditional rulers of executive, judicial, and prison authority. In Biu, native courts, prisons, direct taxation, and administrative control transferred to the newly constituted Biu Local Government Area. The 1979 Constitution formalized this shift, confining emirs to advisory roles within Emirate Councils. Despite these formal erosions, profound continuity characterized Biu's traditional institutions. The Mai remained the paramount hereditary ruler, selected through customary processes involving kingmakers from the ruling dynasty and ratified by state authorities. The Biu Traditional Council of Elders and title holders persisted as a recognized advisory body, addressing customary law, land matters, inter-communal harmony, cultural preservation, and informal dispute resolution functions often referred to the palace by modern

local government officials. Traditional title holders retained ceremonial and social portfolios, while district heads still appointed or endorsed by the Emir continued to liaise between the palace and elected councils, facilitating community mobilization for development projects, security, and festivals.

Early Life and Education of Mai Umar Mustapha Aliyu

Mai Umar Mustapha Aliyu was born on 9 November 1940 in Biu into the royal family. His upbringing was shaped by both traditional values and Islamic teachings, reflecting the socio-cultural environment of northern Nigeria. He attended Kwaya Kusar Junior Primary School (1947–1949), Biu Central Primary School (1950–1953), and Hausari Primary School, Maiduguri (1953–1955). Though his formal education was limited, his exposure to traditional governance structures provided him with the necessary skills for leadership.

A key informant noted:

“Mai Umar was trained more in leadership at the palace than in formal school. He understood people and tradition deeply” (KII, Palace Official, Biu, 2024).

Career and Rise to Leadership

Before ascending the throne, Mai Umar Mustapha held several administrative roles. He worked briefly as a veterinary attendant in 1958, reflecting early public service engagement. He later served as District Head of Biu from 1975 to 1989.

His tenure as District Head was marked by effective conflict resolution and grassroots governance. According to a community elder:

“As district head, he settled disputes with wisdom. People trusted his judgment” (KII, Community Elder, Biu, 2024).

These experiences positioned him for eventual ascension to the emirship.

Ascension to the Throne

Mai Umar Mustapha Aliyu became the Emir of Biu in June 1989, succeeding his father. His ascension represented continuity in the royal lineage and was widely accepted by the community.

His reign began during a period of political transition in Nigeria, marked by military rule and subsequent democratization. Despite these changes, he maintained stability within the emirate.

Leadership Style and Governance

i. Inclusive Governance

Mai Umar Mustapha was known for inclusive leadership, accommodating diverse ethnic and religious groups within the emirate. This aligns with Yahaya’s (2008) argument that effective traditional rulers promote unity in plural societies.

FGD participants emphasized:

“He treated everyone equally, whether Muslim or Christian” (FGD, Youth Group, Hawul, 2024).

ii. Conflict Resolution

Conflict resolution was a central aspect of his leadership. He mediated disputes related to land, chieftaincy, and inter-community relations.

iii. Administrative Reforms

He strengthened the emirate council system and supported the creation of new districts to improve governance efficiency.

iv. Role During the Boko Haram Insurgency

One of the most defining aspects of his reign was his leadership during the Boko Haram insurgency. While much of Borno State experienced violence, Biu remained relatively stable.

Scholars such as Zenn (2015) highlight the importance of local leadership in countering insurgency. Mai Umar Mustapha’s efforts included:

- Collaboration with security agencies
- Community sensitization
- Promotion of vigilance groups

A KII respondent stated:

“He encouraged unity and cooperation with security forces. That is why Biu was safer than many areas” (KII, Security Official, 2024).

v. Socio-Cultural Contributions

As a custodian of tradition, the Emir played a vital role in preserving the cultural heritage of the Babur/Bura people.

vi. Promotion of Culture

He supported cultural festivals and traditional ceremonies, reinforcing community identity.

vii. Religious Harmony

He promoted peaceful coexistence between Muslims and Christians, a critical factor in the stability of the region.

FGD participants noted:

“We celebrate together. The Emir made sure religion did not divide us” (FGD, Women Group, Biu, 2024).

viii. Economic and Developmental Contributions

Although traditional rulers have limited formal economic power, Mai Umar Mustapha influenced development initiatives by:

- Supporting education
- Encouraging agricultural activities
- Facilitating government-community relations
- His palace served as a center for mobilization and advocacy for development projects.

Personal Life and Character

Mai Umar Mustapha was known for humility, wisdom, and accessibility. He maintained close relationships with his subjects despite his royal status. He had a large family, reflecting traditional royal household structures. His personal qualities contributed significantly to his legitimacy and effectiveness as a leader. He passed away on 15 September 2020 at the age of 80. His death marked the end of over three decades of leadership. Following his death, his son, Alhaji Midala Mustapha Umar, succeeded him, ensuring continuity in leadership.

Legacy and Significance

Mai Umar Mustapha Aliyu's legacy is multifaceted:

- Peacebuilding: Maintained stability during insurgency
- Institutional Strengthening: Enhanced traditional governance structures
- Cultural Preservation: Promoted indigenous identity
- Social Integration: Fostered unity across ethnic and religious lines

As noted by a respondent:

“His legacy is peace. That is what we remember most” (FGD, Elders Group, 2024).

His leadership supports the argument by Afigbo (1972) that traditional rulers remain relevant in modern governance.

Conclusion

Mai Umar Mustapha Aliyu's reign demonstrates the enduring importance of traditional institutions in Nigeria. His leadership combined cultural legitimacy with practical governance, enabling him to navigate complex challenges effectively. He played a crucial role in maintaining social stability within the Biu Emirate. His functions align with structural-functional theory, which emphasizes the importance of institutions in sustaining societal order. Both FGDs and interviews reveal that traditional rulers enjoy high levels of trust and legitimacy, often surpassing formal institutions in rural communities. This study highlights the need to integrate traditional rulers into formal governance frameworks, particularly in conflict-prone regions. His legacy provides valuable lessons for leadership, peacebuilding, and community development in Nigeria and beyond.

Recommendations

1. Government should formally recognize and integrate traditional rulers into local governance.
2. Capacity-building programs should be organized for traditional leaders.
3. Traditional institutions should be supported in cultural preservation efforts.
4. Strengthen constitutional roles of traditional rulers
5. Enhance collaboration with government agencies
6. Promote cultural education among youth
7. Improve security support for traditional institutions
8. Encourage development partnerships
9. Further research should explore comparative roles of traditional rulers across Nigeria.

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