

The Role of Ulama in the Past and Present in the Development of Sharia and Islamic Law in Pahang

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ABSTRACT

The development of the spread of Islam and the practice of Sharia and Islamic law in the Malay Peninsula was greatly influenced by the efforts of past *ulama*. However, specific studies on the role of *ulama* in the state of Pahang are still limited particularly in relation to the spread and practice of Islamic law. This article analyses the role of *ulama* in the past and the present in the development of Sharia and Islamic law in the state of Pahang. The study uses a qualitative approach based on document analysis of historical sources, legal materials, and academic writings that discuss the process of Islamisation, scholarly networks, the relationship between *ulama* and the sultanate and the evolution of religious administrative institutions.

The findings show that *ulama* in the past functioned as disseminators of knowledge and Islamic preaching, pioneers of Islamic education, advisors to the sultan on religious and legal matters and contributors to the codification of law through the *Hukum Kanun Pahang* which was based on Sharia principles of the Shafi'i school of thought. In the contemporary context, the role of *ulama* continues through the institutionalization of the positions of mufti and fatwa committees, the coordination of Sharia administration and state legislation, formal education, the preservation of the position of Islam within the framework of the state constitution and Islamic preaching integrated with social development. This article concludes that the transformation of the role of *ulama* from individual authority to a formal institutional structure does not weaken the continuity of their core functions as agents of knowledge, references in legal matters and guardians of the Sharia identity of the state.

Keywords: Ulama, Pahang, Sharia, Islamic law, sultanate, religious institutions.

INTRODUCTION

The development of Islam in the state of Pahang shows the important position of *ulama* as a key group in the spread of Islam, the formation of educational systems, the development of social institutions and the strengthening of Islamic law. Historical records show that Islam developed in Pahang through trade activities, intellectual connections with external centres of learning and the role of *ulama* who acted as educators and advisors to the rulers (Zurita et al., 2025).

At the same time, the evolution of state administration has changed the role of *ulama* from individual authority to a more formal institutional structure within the administration of Sharia and Islamic law. Therefore, this article examines the role of *ulama* in the past in the development of Sharia and Islamic law in the state of Pahang, the

role of contemporary *ulama* within institutional and modern administrative frameworks and the main differences in the role of *ulama* between these two historical phases.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative method through document analysis. Data were obtained from relevant primary and secondary sources including academic writings, books, journal articles, reports and historical studies related to the Islamisation of Pahang, religious educational institutions, the relationship between *ulama* and the sultanate, as well as traditional legal texts such as *Hukum Kanun Pahang*. The analysis process involved repeated reading, content coding, theme grouping and the organization of findings thematically in order to explain the forms of the *ulama*'s roles and their transformation across different periods.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Ulama as Disseminators of Knowledge and Strengtheners of Scholarly Institutions

In the early stage, the *ulama* played an important role in the process of Islamisation in Pahang through trade networks and *da'wah* activities. The arrival of Islam in Pahang occurred through trade connections and intellectual relations with other Islamic regions which also brought *ulama* as disseminators of religious knowledge (Rosele et al., 2018). Trade relations between the Arab world, Persia, India and China with the Malay world brought Islamic influence that eventually shaped Muslim society in Pahang (Nazarudin Zainun & Nasha Rodzaini Khaw, 2015). The *ulama* not only delivered religious teachings but also acted as intermediaries in intellectual connections between Pahang and major Islamic centers of learning such as Mecca and Aceh (Abd Jalil Borham, 2012). The relationship between the Sultan of Pahang and *ulama* from outside regions, such as Aceh and the Middle East, further strengthened the development of Islamic knowledge in the state.

In the early development of Islam, *ulama* functioned as intellectual figures who developed the tradition of knowledge, religious education and the study of classical Islamic texts within the Malay Muslim community (Rosele et al., 2018). The *ulama* also acted as preachers who spread Islamic teachings through religious instruction and by building the community's understanding of Islam. Their main role at that time was to teach the principles of *tawhid*, provide instruction in *fiqh* and Islamic ethics and guide the community in religious practices. This role contributed to the development of religious educational institutions that later became the foundation for the spread of Sharia in social life. It also shows that early *da'wah* activities in Pahang developed through educational approaches and social relationships within the community.

Ulama also played an important role as pioneers of Islamic educational institutions in Pahang. The establishment of the first state religious school, Sekolah Agama al-Attas in Pekan in 1923 shows the efforts of *ulama* to develop a structured system of religious education that included the teaching of *fiqh*, *hadith* and the Arabic language (Ahmad Muda, 1995). This institution later produced many religious teachers who further expanded community-based religious schools throughout the state. This educational role demonstrates that *ulama* were not only transmitters of knowledge but also builders of Islamic educational structures within society.

Ulama as Advisors to the Sultan and Disseminators of *Da'wah*

In the traditional period, *ulama* played an important role as key advisors to the rulers in matters related to religion and legal issues. The close relationship between the Sultan of Pahang and the *ulama* enabled the principles of Sharia to be implemented in the administration of the state. The Sultan acted as the protector of religion, while the *ulama* served as the source of religious authority and legal guidance in the practice of Islamic governance (Rosele et al., 2018). The institution of the sultanate also became a major catalyst for the spread of Islam in Pahang. As the head of religion in the state, the Sultan relied on the *ulama* as advisors in religious and legal matters (Rosele et al., 2018). This relationship allowed *da'wah* activities to develop systematically because the *ulama* provided Sharia guidance to the rulers while the rulers offered political and social support for the spread of Islam. This situation made *da'wah* not only a community activity but also part of state governance. It shows

that the *ulama* were not merely preachers but also important references in ensuring that governance was carried out in accordance with Islamic principles.

Ulama as Contributors to the Formation of Islamic Law and the Strengthening of Sharia

In the legal aspect, *ulama* also played a significant role in the formulation and strengthening of the Islamic legal system. The development of *Hukum Kanun Pahang* in the 16th century shows how Islamic law was adapted based on Sharia principles according to the Shafi'i school of thought. This legal code contains elements of *hudud*, *qisas*, and the concept of the ruler's responsibility as a *khalifah* who implements *amar makruf nahi mungkar* (Ismail Hamid, 1985). *Hukum Kanun Pahang* demonstrates that *ulama* played an important role in integrating Islamic law into the administration of the traditional Malay government. This view is supported by the study of Ismail Hamid (1985), which states that the law was adapted to local needs while still maintaining its foundation in Sharia. *Hukum Kanun Pahang* is considered a continuation of *Hukum Kanun Melaka* but it was revised to be more consistent with Islamic principles. This development highlights the role of *ulama* in strengthening the legal structure of the state (Abd Jalil Borham, 2012). *Ulama* also played an important role in strengthening the understanding of Islamic law that formed the basis of this system (Rosele et al., 2018). Indirectly, this role also contributed to the spread of *da'wah* through the formation of a society based on Islamic law and the strengthening of Islamic identity within the system of governance. The development of Sharia in Pahang, with the existence of *Hukum Kanun Pahang*, serves as one of the clear examples of the application of Islamic values in the traditional administrative system.

Ulama as Drivers of Jihad and Spiritual Leadership

In the history of resistance against colonial powers, *ulama* also functioned as drivers of the spirit of jihad and as “meaning-makers” for resistance movements. They not only delivered religious sermons but also framed colonialism as a threat to religion, the dignity of the Muslim community and the sovereignty of the state. Through the teaching of *tawhid*, *fiqh al-jihad*, the concept of *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* and the emphasis on the obligation to defend the homeland, *ulama* provided the “moral energy” that united the community with the agenda of struggle. This role turned mosques, surau, and study circles (*halaqah*) into spaces of mobilization—places where shared narratives were strengthened, intentions were purified and spiritual discipline was reinforced before physical action in situations of conflict (Azizi, 2019).

Figures such as Tokku Paloh are often referred to as *ulama* who played a role in inspiring the spirit of Islamic struggle among Pahang fighters such as Tok Gajah, Dato' Bahaman and Mat Kilau when facing British colonial forces (Azizi, 2019; Riduan Mohamad Nor & Mohd Fadli Ghani, 2007). In this context, the influence of *ulama* was based on their authority in knowledge and spiritual charisma. They were able to calm anxieties, restore motivation when the movement was under pressure and maintain the psychological resilience of the fighters. The advice of the *ulama* also functioned as an “ethical compass” to ensure that resistance did not lead to extreme actions. The struggle was guided by considerations of Islamic law, proper conduct and the limits set by Sharia. Therefore, the spiritual leadership of the *ulama* balanced courage with wisdom, and strategy with principle.

The role of *ulama* as spiritual leaders was also evident through their function in uniting social support. *Ulama* builds community solidarity by encouraging logistical assistance, providing protection for fighters and developing support networks that sustained the continuity of the movement. In the Malay-Islamic tradition, the legitimacy of a struggle was often strengthened through the relationship between *ulama*, the governing institutions and society. In this context, *ulama* acted as a bridge between religious authority and collective action. As a result, *ulama* emerged not only as religious scholars but also as strategic actors who defended religion and the sovereignty of the state through the strength of knowledge, moral discourse and deep spiritual leadership (Azizi, 2019).

The Role of Ulama in the Present Era: Transformation into Formal Institutions

The development of modern administration has brought changes to the role of *ulama*. Roles that were previously individual-based are now carried out through religious institutions such as state religious departments and

Islamic educational institutions. This change aligns with the post-independence development of a more structured and systematic Islamic administration (Ahmad Redzuwan Mohd Yunus, 2008). The position of the Sultan as the head of Islam in the state has led to the creation of a religious administrative structure involving the mufti, fatwa committees and religious institutions in the implementation of Islamic law (Rosele et al., 2018). This demonstrates a shift from the traditional system based on individual authority to a more organized religious bureaucracy. The role of *ulama* shows a transition from charismatic individual power to structured bureaucratic authority within religious institutions.

In the modern context, *ulama* now serves as Sharia experts who assist state administration in issuing fatwas, providing legal advice, coordinating religious administration and strengthening state Islamic law. This role continues the traditional functions of the *ulama* but is carried out through formal institutional structures in a more professional manner (Rosele et al., 2018).

Ulama today plays a key role in the development of formal Islamic education through religious secondary schools, higher education institutions and professional religious training. Islamic education has expanded through organized institutions supported by the state administration to produce qualified religious personnel (Abd Jalil Borham, 2014). In addition, the appointment of muftis and members of state religious committees demonstrates the professionalization of the *ulama*'s role in the management of Sharia.

Ulama also assists the sultanate in maintaining Islam as the state religion. This role is carried out through religious advice, monitoring the implementation of Sharia and coordinating *da'wah* activities in line with state legislation (Rosele et al., 2018). It demonstrates the continuity of the *ulama*'s traditional functions but in a more professional and structured form. The sultanate together with the *ulama* ensure that Islam remains preserved within the framework of the Constitution and state laws. Today, *ulama* assists the Sultan in maintaining the Sharia identity of Pahang through religious institutions and formal legal administration (Rosele et al., 2018).

According to Rosele et al. (2018), the role of *ulama* today has transformed as *da'wah* is now carried out through the structure of state religious institutions. *Ulama* no longer function solely as individuals but operate within formal organizations such as religious departments, fatwa institutions and Islamic administrative bodies.

The modern *da'wah* approach includes structured religious education programs, management of religious institutions, issuance of fatwas and legal guidance as well as the social development of the Muslim community. For example, *da'wah* programs for the Orang Asli community in Pahang illustrate how religious institutions use social, educational and economic development as a medium for modern *da'wah* (Ahmad Redzuwan Mohd Yunus, 2008). This approach differs from the past because *da'wah* is now implemented in an organized manner and through cooperation between multiple agencies.

The role of *ulama* in the past was more traditional and based on personal influence within the community, whereas *ulama* today operates within the framework of formal institutions and modern administration. In the past, *ulama* focused on the dissemination of knowledge, the development of law and the struggle to defend religion. Today, *ulama* carries broader responsibilities that include formal education, institutional administration and the social development of the community (Abd Jalil Borham, 2014).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the role of *ulama* in the development of Sharia and Islamic law in the state of Pahang has evolved in line with changes over time. Overall, the study by Rosele et al. (2018) shows that the contribution of *ulama* to the spread of *da'wah* in Pahang has continued from the traditional period to the modern era. In the early period, *ulama* functioned as educators, religious disseminators and advisors to the Sultan on matters of Sharia. In the modern era, these roles continue through more organized and professional formal institutions.

This change reflects the evolution of the *da'wah* approach while maintaining the *ulama*'s position as a central pillar in the development of Islam in Pahang. Although the form of implementation has changed, the core role of *ulama* as guardians of Sharia remains crucial in shaping the Islamic identity of the state. Rosele et al. (2018)

also note that the development of Sharia and Islamic law in Pahang demonstrates a symbiotic relationship between the sultanate and the *ulama*.

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