

A Comparative Analysis of Fulfulde and Kanuri Sociopolitical and Symbolic Order in Northern Nigeria: A Cultural Semiotics Perspective

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Abstract- This study explores the symbolic sociopolitical structures of the Kanuri and Fulani peoples of Northern Nigeria. The study employs multiple qualitative data collection methods: Ethnographic fieldwork and Semi-structured interviews. Using a semiotic-structural approach, the study reveals that Kanuri authority is spatially ritualized and dynastically centralized, whereas Fulani symbolic order is dualistic combining emirate ceremonialism with the moral code of Pulaaku. The findings further, demonstrate how symbols like turbans, palaces, titles, and pastoral rituals serve not only as visual texts but as instruments of sociopolitical cohesion and historical continuity. legitimacy, and identity are constructed through ritual, architecture, regalia, and moral codes. The Shehu of Borno represents a dynastic embodiment of political-spiritual authority, while Fulani leadership particularly in the Adamawa and Gombe emirates emerges from the historical jihadist legacy of the Sokoto Caliphate, blending religious scholarship with governance.

Keywords: Symbolic, Socio-political, Culture and Identity

I. INTRODUCTION

Symbols play a pivotal role in human societies, serving as mediums for communication and identity formation. In the sociopolitical contexts of the Fulfulde and Kanuri peoples, symbols are deeply embedded in leadership structures, rituals, and cultural practices. This study explores the semiotic elements that define the sociopolitical orders of the Fulfulde and Kanuri, focusing on the roles of the Lamido and Shehu, respectively.

The Shehu of Borno as the embodiment of political and spiritual authority as well as the heart of Kanuri traditional governance, the Shehu of Borno is a figure who embodies both political leadership and spiritual guidance. Historically, the title "Mai" was used for

rulers, but with the advent of Islam, it evolved into "Shehu," aligning with Islamic principles that recognize Allah as the sole sovereign. This semantic shift signifies the integration of Islamic theology into Kanuri rulership (Brenner, 1973). The Shehu is expected to be well-versed in Islamic jurisprudence, serving as a judge, scholar, and leader. His public appearances, especially during festivals where he rides a horse, symbolize martial strength and divine endorsement. Such displays reinforce his legitimacy and the unity of the Kanuri people (Ayittey, 2012). The Shehu's attire, movements, and rituals are laden with symbolic meanings. For instance, the act of not shaking hands with the Shehu unless he initiates it reflects deep respect and the sanctity of his position. These practices serve to maintain social cohesion and reinforce the spiritual order within Kanuri society.

The Lamido and fulbe sociopolitical hierarchy, in fulbe society, the Lamido serves as a central authority figure, supported by subordinate leaders such as the Ardo'en and Jauro'en. The Lamido embodies "Pulaku," the Fulani code of conduct that emphasizes values like patience, self-control, and respect. This code is integral to Fulani identity and social organization (Hiribarren, 2013).

The Ardo is a leader among pastoral communities, guiding migrations and mediating disputes. To attain this position, one must own a Substantial herd, typically at least 300 cattle, and be recognized for integrity and wisdom. The Jauro'en assist in administrative duties, especially in larger districts, ensuring effective governance at the local level (Hiribarren, 2013).

These leadership structures are not only administrative but also symbolic. They reflect the

Fulani's pastoral lifestyle and their emphasis on communal values. The roles of the Lamido, Ardo, and Jauro'en are manifestations of the Fulani's commitment to maintaining social harmony and cultural identity. Both the Kanuri and Fulfulde societies integrate political and spiritual leadership, but their approaches differ. The Shehu's role is deeply intertwined with Islamic theology, serving as both a political leader and a spiritual guide. In contrast, the Lamido's authority is rooted in traditional Fulani values, with a focus on pastoralism and communal ethics.

While the Shehu's legitimacy is reinforced through Islamic rituals and symbols, the Lamido's authority is upheld through adherence to Pulaku and the effective management of pastoral communities. Both systems, however, utilize symbolic practices to maintain social order and cultural continuity.

The sociopolitical structures of the Fulfulde and Kanuri peoples are rich in symbolic meanings that reinforce leadership legitimacy and cultural identity. This paper will explore the sociopolitical of Fulfulde and Kanuri from semiotic perspectives which will foster understanding of these symbols which will provides deeper insights into the values and organizational principles that underpin these societies. The analysis will seek to answer: How do symbols (e.g., dress, architecture, titles, ritual objects) encode and communicate political authority? What are the cultural meanings attached to specific symbols in each society? And How do these meanings sustain sociopolitical order and group identity?

II. REVIEW

Semiotics is a dynamic and interdisciplinary field of study that explores the nature of signs, the processes of signification, and the production of meaning in various forms of human communication. The concept of semiotics, as a formal field of inquiry, has its roots in the works of Ferdinand de Saussure (1913/1916) and Charles Sanders Peirce (1931–1958), both of whom laid the foundational theoretical frameworks that continue to shape modern semiotic studies (Chandler, 2007; Sebeok, 2001).

At its core, semiotics examines how signs function, how they are interpreted, and how they operate within cultural, social, and communicative contexts. It goes

beyond the boundaries of traditional linguistics to analyze not only verbal language but also non-verbal signs including gestures, images, sounds, artifacts, fashion, architecture, rituals, and even spatial arrangements (Eco, 1976; Barthes, 1957). As Eco (1976) succinctly put it, “Semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign” (p. 7). A sign, in this sense, is anything that can stand for something else to someone in some capacity (Chandler, 2007).

Saussurean Semiotics: The Signifier and the Signified

Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist, conceptualized semiotics which he termed semiology as the study of the life of signs within society (Saussure, 1913/1916). He defined a sign as a dyadic entity composed of:

Signifier (*significant*): the form that the sign takes (e.g., a word, sound, or image).

Signified (*signifié*): the concept or meaning that the signifier represents.

For example, the spoken word “tree” is the signifier, and the mental image or concept of a tree is the signified (Sebeok, 2001). Saussure emphasized that the relationship between the signifier and signified is arbitrary; there is no natural connection between the sound “tree” and the concept of a tree it is established by social convention (Saussure, cited in Dweich & Al Ghabra, 2020).

Importantly, Saussure viewed language as a system of differences, where meanings are generated through relationships between signs rather than through inherent qualities of individual signs. Thus, meaning is relational and contextual.

Peircean Semiotics: Representamen, Object, Interpretant

Charles Sanders Peirce, an American philosopher, developed a more triadic model of the sign, comprising:

- a. Representamen: the form which the sign takes.
- b. Object: the thing or idea to which the sign refers.
- c. Interpretant: the understanding or meaning derived from the sign (Peirce, 1931–1958).

Peirce classified signs into three broad types based on the relationship between the representamen and the object:

1. Icon: resembles the object (e.g., a photograph).
2. Index: directly connected to the object (e.g., smoke indicating fire).
3. Symbol: linked to the object through social convention (e.g., words, traffic lights). (Peirce, 1931–1958).

Peirce’s model highlights the processual and interpretative nature of semiosis, the process through which signs convey meaning.

Barthes and Cultural Semiotics

Building on Saussure’s work, Roland Barthes extended semiotic theory to the analysis of cultural phenomena. In *Mythologies* (1957), Barthes argued that cultural signs operate on two levels:

1. Denotation: the literal, primary meaning.
2. Connotation: the secondary, culturally constructed meaning.

For example, a photograph of a soldier saluting may literally denote a military gesture, but it can also connote patriotism, discipline, or nationalism, depending on the cultural context (Barthes, 1957). Barthes introduced the notion of myth as a second-order semiotic system in which ideological meanings are naturalized and presented as common sense.

Barthes’ contribution showed that semiotics is not confined to language or communication per se but is integral to the way culture produces and circulates values, ideologies, and power relations.

Contemporary Semiotics: A Multidisciplinary Field Today, semiotics is recognized as a highly interdisciplinary field, influencing areas such as:

- i. Linguistics (Maman, 2014): explores the structures and functions of linguistic signs.
- ii. Media Studies (Chandler, 2007): analyzes how visual and textual signs communicate in media and advertising.
- iii. Anthropology and Sociology (Eco, 1976): examines how cultural artifacts and practices act as signs within communities.
- iv. Fashion Studies (Barthes, 1983): investigates how clothing communicates identity, status, and ideology.

- v. Architecture and Space (Eco, 1976): studies how built environments convey meaning.

According to Eco (1976), a sign can encompass “*terms, words, concepts, vocal expressions, and visual representations,*” with the central function of translating one object or concept into another (Chandler, 2007).

Semiotics and Culture

Semiotics plays a crucial role in uncovering the relationship between language, culture, and identity. It helps scholars and analysts understand how meaning is constructed and negotiated across different cultural contexts. For instance:

1. In traditional African attire, colors, patterns, and styles may signify social status or group identity.
2. In Nigerian tribal marks, specific facial scarification patterns can signify ethnic affiliation and ancestral heritage.
3. In political discourse, slogans and imagery are deployed to evoke collective emotions and ideologies.

As Atkin (2006) emphasizes, semiotics allows us to interrogate the “codes” that structure our perception of reality. These codes are often invisible but profoundly shape our understanding of the world.

Ultimately, semiotics provides a powerful lens through which to examine how meaning is produced, transmitted, and transformed across various modes of human expression. From the pioneering theories of Saussure and Peirce to the cultural critiques of Barthes and Eco, semiotics has evolved into an expansive and versatile discipline that bridges language, culture, and society. Whether analyzing traditional cultural artifacts, contemporary media, or everyday social practices, semiotics helps us to decode the signs that structure our world and to appreciate the complex interplay between signifier and signified, between representation and reality.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative comparative research design, employing cultural semiotics as its primary analytical framework. The aim is to explore and compare how sociopolitical and symbolic orders are constructed, represented, and interpreted within Fulfulde and Kanuri cultures of Northern Nigeria.

The study is rooted in an interpretivist epistemology, recognizing that meaning is socially constructed and contextually situated. The research is grounded in Cultural Semiotics (Barthes, 1957; Eco, 1976), with supporting insights from Anthropological Semiotics and Political Semiotics. It draws upon: Saussurean semiology (signifier/signified), Peircean semiotics (icon, index, symbol), Barthesian myth and connotation and Concepts of symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1991) and social symbolism (Turner, 1967)

3.1 Method of Data Collection

The study employs multiple qualitative data collection methods: Ethnographic fieldwork: including participant observation in Fulani and Kanuri cultural and political events (e.g., palace ceremonies, festivals, council meetings, traditional rites). Semi-structured interviews: with cultural custodians (e.g., traditional rulers, emirs, Shehu of Borno court officials, Ardos of the Fulani), elders, linguists, and scholars of Fulfulde and Kanuri history. Textual and visual analysis of traditional artifacts

(e.g., clothing, emblems, architecture), oral texts (e.g., proverbs, praise poetry), visual symbols, and official documents or publications related to governance. Archival research: examination of historical documents, photographs, colonial and postcolonial ethnographic reports on Fulani and Kanuri sociopolitical structures. A purposive sampling strategy is employed in selecting informants with deep knowledge of sociopolitical and symbolic practices within each group. Key participants include: Fulani Ardos, traditional elders, and scholars. Kanuri palace officials, traditional leaders, historians, and cultural practitioners.

Data Analysis: Data will be analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis, guided by semiotic theory: Identification of sign systems and cultural codes in both Fulfulde and Kanuri contexts, comparison of semiotic structures underpinning political and symbolic practices, interpretation of connotative meanings and their cultural significance. Cross-cultural comparison to highlight similarities, differences, and unique cultural logics.

IV. DATA PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION

Symbolic category	Kanuri (borno)	Fulani (Adamawa & Gombe)
Supreme Leader Title	<i>Shehu</i> (formerly <i>Mai</i>); represents both political and religious authority.	<i>Lamido</i> / Emir; represents caliphate-era jihadist authority under Sokoto.
Moral/Ethical System	Guided more by palace rituals and spiritual office than a codified moral code.	Governed by <i>Pulaaku</i> virtues like <i>semteende</i> (modesty), <i>munyaal</i> (patience), <i>dimde</i> (wisdom).
Ritual Symbols	Turbanning ceremonies, Friday music, Durbar festivals, peacocks/antelopes as aesthetic symbols.	Durbar parades, regalia, Qur'anic manuscripts, spear, and turban display, often linked with Jihadic identity.
Architectural Signifiers	Palace in Maiduguri with sacred trees, segmented chambers, historic Bulamari site.	Gidan Sarki (Emir's Palace) in Gombe, Yola structured around Islamic hierarchy and administrative symbolism.
Title Inclusivity	Non-indigenes (e.g., MKO Abiola, Atiku Abubakar) honored with royal titles.	Emirate includes multi-ethnic groups under Islamic leadership.
Female Authority Role	<i>Ya Maira</i> a maternal spiritual advisor with ceremonial authority.	Women uphold <i>Pulaaku</i> within families; limited formal palace authority.
Pastoral Symbolism	Fauna within palace reflects aesthetics and cultural heritage.	Cattle (<i>nagge</i>) symbolize purity, wealth, and spiritual autonomy among nomads.
Ceremonial Language	Palace rituals conducted in Kanuri and Arabic.	Rituals and moral instruction often in Fulfulde and Arabic.

Cosmic Hierarchy	Structured through over 300 symbolic titles, turbans, and scepters.	Layered from Sultan to Emir to Ardo; symbolizes divine order and social stratification.
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Discussion

The Kanuri and Fulani societies share a deep entanglement of Islamic political thought and traditional authority but differ in how symbolism structures their sociopolitical imagination.

Central Sovereignty & Religious Authority

Kanuri: Shehu of Borno: The Shehu embodies a hybrid leadership model a blend of political dominion and spiritual stewardship. The shift from *Mai* to *Shehu* signals a theological command: only Allah is sovereign, and the Shehu acts as His vicegerent. He is expected to exemplify *hikma* (wisdom) and *shujaa'a* (courage), supported by his studious knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence and judicial acumen. Public equestrian displays during Durbar festivals are not merely pageantry, but potent rituals that embody martial strength and divine sanction.

Fulani: Lamido & Emirates: In contrast, the Lamido's of Adamawa and the Emirs of Gombe represent the embodiment of the Sokoto Caliphate's jihadist and reformist ethos. Founders like Modibbo Adama and Buba Yero were motivated by Usman dan Fodio's religious renewal mission, implying their authority was spiritually ordained (Last, 1967; Hiskett, 1973; Brenner, 2001) Their roles spanned spiritual guardianship and civic rulership across ethnically diverse territories, extending the Caliphate's influence across national boundaries.

Spatial Authority & Architectural Symbolism

Kanuri Palace (Maiduguri): Built in 1907, the Shehu's palace is a "living monument" to dynastic resilience. Its architecture segmented courtyards, reception chambers, and inner sanctums communicates social hierarchies and lines of authority. Sacred baobab and tamarind trees, along with the old Bulamari residence, serve as ancestral anchors, threading past sovereignty into present governance.

Fulani Saare Lamido: The palaces of the Lamido and Emir (e.g., in Yola and Gombe) reflect the administrative design inherited from Sokoto. These palaces house the corridors of power where officials like the Galadima, Waziri, Alkali, and Ajiya convene

showing that spiritual legitimacy is spatially institutionalized.

Regalia, Rituals & Sonic Symbols

Kanuri Semiotic Performances: Court rituals such as Friday sessions in the Kundairam and nightly performances by the royal band serve as sonic affirmations of authority. The integration of peacocks and antelopes in palace grounds enhances visual symbolism grace and royal order. The annual Durbar, replete with horses, turbans, and regalia, dramatizes rulership as a performative spectacle.

Fulani Pageantry: Similarly, Durbar festivities in Fulani emirates feature horseback parades, Qur'anic recitations, turbans, spears, and colorful robes. These rituals underscore the Emir's role and maintain visible linkages to the Caliphate, reaffirming collective authority and continuity.

Hierarchy, Titles & Moral Codes

Kanuri Titles & Gendered Authority: Kanuri court has over 300 roles Shettima, Yerima, Galadima each loaded with semiotic and genealogical meaning. The Ya Maira, a senior female royal, exemplifies maternal counsel and lineage continuity, wielding a symbolic silver-bound staff.

Fulani Hierarchy & Pulaaku: Fulani emirates mirror Sokoto's pyramid, Sultan → Lamido/Emir → Ardo/District Heads. Beneath this is *Pulaaku*, an ethical code featuring *semteende* (modesty), *munya* (patience), *hakkille* (wisdom), *ngorgu* (courage), and *neddaaku* (dignity) Adherence to *Pulaaku* functions as a legitimacy filter transgression result in ostracism or fines, with clan leaders (Ardos) expected to manifest these virtues.

Pastoral Symbolism & Identity

Kanuri Aesthetic Fauna: Rather than pastoral, Kanuri palace fauna symbolizes royal elegance aesthetic expression of order and harmony.

Fulani Pastoral Ideals: Among the nomadic Mbororo'en, cattle are symbolic pillars of identity. Losing cattle is psychologically devastating cattle are treated as symbolic identity tokens that must be preserved to maintain *Pulaaku*.

Inclusivity, Cultural Diplomacy & Humor

Kanuri Court Openness: The Shehu's court extends titles to non-Kanuri dignitaries e.g., MKO Abiola, Atiku Abubakar and acknowledges ethnic community leaders. Humor, especially friendly jesting with the Fulani, is used as cultural diplomacy reconciling historical trauma through ritualized social exchange.

Fulani Integration Through Islam & Morality: Fulani emirates integrate ethnically diverse groups under Islamic governance. While *Pulaaku* binds, it also negotiates assimilation. However, strict pastoral adherence may hinder deeper sociopolitical integration.

Contemporary Relevance & Media Semiosis

Kanuri Resilience: Despite colonial and democratic transitions, the Shehu remains a central figure. The palace retains cultural relevance, and festivities continue to anchor communal identity and symbolize inter-ethnic dialogue with Fulani groups.

Fulani Media & Moral Continuity: Modern Fulani leadership sustains traditional authority via institutions. Lamido Muhammadu Barkindo of Adamawa launched *Pulaaku* FM in Yola to broadcast in Fulfulde, reaffirm *Pulaaku*, and mediate farmer herder conflict.

In summary, Kanuri tradition, centralization of authority is paramount. The Shehu's palace functions as both a spiritual sanctuary and a visual grammar of governance. Rituals such as the Durbar parade and Friday royal music articulate cohesion through performance. Every component of the Shehu's environment trees, animals, robes, and turbans act as a semiotic vessel, transmitting the values of unity, heritage, and spiritual continuity. The integration of outsiders into the royal structure (e.g., MKO Abiola) suggests a cosmopolitan dimension grounded in the Islamic notion of *ummah* (community), but the Kanuri structure is essentially dynastic and spatial.

In contrast, Fulani emirates like Adamawa and Gombe draw symbolic authority from their Jihadic lineage founded by disciples of Usman dan Fodio. While they share architectural rituals and regalia with the Kanuri, they also possess a moral-symbolic code *Pulaaku* that transcends formal structures. It enforces leadership through personal virtue rather than palace

ritual alone. The pastoral Fulani, especially the nomadic *Mbororo'en*, act as symbols of untainted Fulani values, challenging modernity while preserving cultural purity.

The palace vs. pastoral binary distinguishes both groups. Kanuri symbolic authority is sedentary and palatial, built into space and performance. Fulani symbolic authority is moral and mobile, encompassing both emirate ceremonialism and the austere virtues of nomadic identity. Yet, both converge in the use of symbols turbans, horses, Qur'anic texts, and hierarchical titles to maintain sociopolitical cohesion and spiritual relevance.

V. CONCLUSION

This comparative analysis reveals that both Kanuri and Fulani sociopolitical systems use symbolism not merely for aesthetic display but as instruments of governance, identity, and historical continuity. The Kanuri Shehu embodies a spatially anchored, dynastic authority, where rituals and architecture enact a legacy of centralized kingship. The Fulani emirates, while similarly steeped in Islamic tradition, offer a dual-symbolic order: an emirate-based ceremonialism and a pastoral ethical code (*Pulaaku*). This blend allows the Fulani system to balance modern administrative governance with ancestral cultural values. Both traditions despite differing in moral philosophy and spatial organization achieve similar ends: the legitimization of authority, social cohesion, and cultural preservation in a rapidly evolving Nigerian state. Their continued relevance in modern governance and identity politics attests to the enduring power of symbolic systems in African polities.

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