

Mullah

Mullah (/ˈmʌlə, ˈmʊlə, ˈmuːlə/; Arabic: ملا‎, Azerbaijani: *Molla*, Persian: ملا‎ / *Mollâ*, Turkish: *Molla*, Bengali: মোলা) is derived from the Arabic word مَوْلَى *mawlā*, meaning "vicar", "master" and "guardian". However, used ambiguously in the *Quran*, some publishers have described its usage as a religious title as inappropriate.^[1] The term is sometimes applied to a *Muslim* man or woman, educated in *Islamic theology* and *sacred law*. In large parts of the *Muslim world*, particularly *Iran*, *Pakistan*, *Azerbaijan*, *Afghanistan*, *Eastern Arabia*, *Turkey* and the *Balkans*, *Central Asia*, the *Horn of Africa* and *South Asia*, it is the name commonly given to local Islamic clerics or mosque leaders.^[2]

The title has also been used in some *Sephardic Jewish* communities to refer to the community's leadership, especially religious leadership.^[3]

The term *mullah* is primarily understood in the Muslim world as a term of respect for an educated religious man.^[4]



A mullah praying in Imamzadeh Hamzah, Tabriz.

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Training and duties

Ideally, a trained mullah will have studied Islamic traditions (*hadith*), and Islamic law (*fiqh*). Such figures often have memorized the *Qur'an*. Uneducated villagers may frequently classify a literate Muslim with a less than complete Islamic training as their "mullah" or religious cleric. Mullahs with varying levels of training lead prayers in mosques, deliver religious sermons, and perform religious ceremonies such as birth rites and funeral services. They also often teach in a type of Islamic school known as a *madrasah*. Three kinds of knowledge are applied most frequently in interpreting Islamic texts (i.e. the *Quran*, *Hadiths*, etc.) for matters of *Shariah*, i.e., Islamic law.

Mullahs have frequently been involved in politics, but only recently have they served in positions of power, since *Islamists* seized power in *Iran* in 1979. In Syria, political militant groups supported by the West have taken root. The *Taliban* enforced Islamism in Afghanistan.

Usage

The term is most often applied to Shi'ite clerics, as *Shi'a Islam* is the predominant tradition in Iran. However, the term is very common in *Urdu*, spoken throughout *Pakistan*, and it is used throughout the Indian subcontinent for any Muslim clergy, *Sunni* or Shi'a. Muslim clergy in *Russia* and other former *Soviet Republics* are also referred to as mullahs, regardless of whether they are Sunni or Shi'a.

The term has also been used among Persian Jews, Bukharan Jews, Afghan Jews, and other Central Asian Jews to refer to the community's religious and/or secular leadership. In Kaifeng, China, the historic Chinese Jews who managed the synagogue were called "mullahs".^[5]

Outside of Eastern Arabia, which has a long Shiite tradition and numerous Shiite minorities, the term is seldom used in other Arabic-speaking areas where its nearest equivalent is often *shaykh* (implying formal Islamic training), *imam* (prayer leader; not to be confused with the imams of the Shiite world), or *ʿālim* ("scholar", plural *ulamāʾ*). In the Sunni world, the concept of "cleric" is of limited usefulness, as authority in the religious system is relatively decentralized.

The term is frequently used in English, although English-speaking Muslim clergy rarely call themselves mullahs. It was adopted from Urdu by the British rulers of India and subsequently came into more widespread use.

It is sometimes used in a derogatory and humorous form, to mock agnostically religious men.


Iran

Until the early 20th century, the term *mullah* was used in Iranian hawzas (seminaries) to refer to low-level clergy who specialized in telling stories of Ashura, rather than teaching or issuing fatwas. Today, the term is sometimes used as a derogatory term for any Islamic cleric. In recent years, at least among Shia clerics, the term *ruhani* (spiritual) has been promoted as an alternative to mullah and *akhoond*, free of pejorative connotations.^[6]


See also

- Allamah
- Marja'
- Maulana
- Maulvi
- Mullah Mohammed Omar
- Mullah Nasruddin
- Ulema

References

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- 4. Taheri, Amir (1985). *The Spirit of Allah: Khomeini and the Islamic Revolution* Bethesda, Md.: Adler & Adler p. 53. ISBN 0-917561-04-X
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External links

-  "Mollah". *New International Encyclopedia* 1905.
- International Imam Organization

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