

New Imaginations of Youth Agency: Boko Haram and the Innovative Gospel of Terror in Nigeria

Edlyne E. Anugwom

Abstract

The study is an empirical examination of the credentials of the Boko Haram as an innovative religious expression driven by socio-economic marginalization in the Northeast of Nigeria. It discovered that the Boko Haram is a youth driven sect which, even though embodying the rich history of Islamic fundamentalism in the North of Nigeria, has manifested innovative strategies for confronting the decadent Nigerian state and its political class. Prominent in this case is the ideology of *takfir* which has led the sect to kill fellow Muslims. The group has also pioneered the 'gendering' of Islamic fundamentalism through the use of women as active collaborators and suicide bombers in its later history. Strangely enough, the study discovered an ambivalence regarding the perception of the legitimacy of the sect with a good number of respondents seeing the group as Islamic both in its messages and methods. In conclusion, the study discovered that the Boko Haram has raised salient questions about the political economy of Nigeria that need addressing if resurgence of such conflicts is to be averted. Also, while de-radicalization came up as a means of tackling Islamic fundamentalism in Nigeria, there is need for a nuanced approach that builds on credibility and acceptance of those driving the programme.

KEY WORDS: Boko Haram, Insurgence, Northeastern Nigeria, Islam, Terrorism

Introduction

The study examined the extent to which the Boko Haram insurgence represents an innovative religious imagination of redressing perceived social exclusion and marginalization from mainstream socio-economic and political processes in Nigeria. Thus, in spite of a noted history of religious violence in Nigeria, the Boko Haram, which is highly populated by young people, may represent a new religious strategy for addressing perceived socio-economic privation in the larger Nigerian society.

While there is no doubt that events since late 2015 - especially in terms of a better coordinated military response - have undermined the capacity of the Boko Haram to inflict terror and greatly diminished its presence in the Northeast of Nigeria, it is still too early to categorically state that the Boko Haram has been totally vanquished. Perhaps nothing

underlines the above more than the spate of bomb attacks in such places as Madagali (Adamawa state) and the University of Maiduguri in January 2017¹. In fact, the ability of the Boko Haram to successfully strike and inflict carnage on a hitherto safe haven like the university calls attention to the proven capacity of the group to still cause mayhem in Nigeria. The insurgency has presented daunting challenges of nationhood and raised critical questions regarding both the political economy of Nigeria and the ambivalence of religion as a source of solidarity.

In spite of the constitutional provision which defines Nigeria as a secular state, religious diversity has often threatened this secularity. Thus, vertical religious differences have continually questioned the continued existence of Nigeria as a secular state. While there is no contesting the fact that Islam remains a slightly dominant religion in Nigeria, more than 40% of the citizens of contemporary Nigeria subscribe to Christianity and other forms of religion.

Although the Boko Haram episode in Nigeria has been rightly labelled an act of terrorism, there has been a tendency to gloss over the underlying or driving force of the insurgency. Therefore, while Boko Haram represents an affront to the corporate existence of Nigeria, there is no denying the fact that some of the issues that the group has adduced for its actions may be related to popular imaginations of justice and reprisals against a perceived unjust state.

Apart from the above, the wanton killing of known Islamic clerics and scholars by the Boko Haram in the last six years brings a new dimension to the need to understand the dynamics of the group especially as a prototype of Islamic fundamentalist groups in the North of Nigeria. It has been shown that a great gap in socio-economic status sponsors the belief that even rich Muslims are unbelievers as exemplified in the philosophy of the *Maitatsine* movement of the 1980s, responsible for perhaps the greatest number of Islamic religious conflicts in the history of Nigeria (see, Udoidem, 1997). In this case, religious conflict may become a metaphor for economic competition and the urge to violently establish an economic level playing field (see, Odey 2000; Anugwom, 2008).

The study tried to provide an evidence-based understanding of the extent to which the persistence and popularity of the Boko Haram are related to its perception as a tool for addressing both marginalization and social exclusion from the Nigerian state. Typically, the main members of the sect are youthful '*talakawas*' or commoners in the Northeast who may feel marginalized and totally deprived of socio-economic provisioning by both the state and central governments.

Given seeming resilience of the Boko Haram there is need for continuous interrogation of the nature and dynamics of the group both as an innovative religious sect and the embodiment of the imagination of improved socio-economic conditions. Beyond the euphoria of the likelihood of the vanquishing of the Boko Haram is the fact that it represents only a peculiar form of fundamentalism in the Northeast, hence the likelihood of other forms of even more fundamental violent groups emerging from the region remains very imminent.

¹ Unconfirmed estimates would show that there were more than ten successful and aborted bomb attacks by the Boko Haram in January 2017 alone in the Northeast. This number is really amazing given the narratives of the military on having totally emasculated the group.

It is imperative to state here that apart from mainly journalistic forays into the understanding of the Boko Haram (e.g. Walker, 2016), diplomatic overviews and what may be termed casual field interaction in the course of some other research assignments in the North of Nigeria (e.g. Last, 2009; Harnischfeger, 2015) there has not been any thorough-going empirical survey of the Boko Haram in the scale done in this study. Thus, this study may be seen as one of the earliest attempts to examine the Boko Haram from the perspective of a well-grounded field study.

The study was conducted between March and August 2016 in Borno State, Northeast Nigeria where incidentally the activities of the Boko Haram have been largely concentrated. However, the study purposively selected two Local Government Areas (LGAs) viz. Maiduguri and Gwoza as the study locations. The choice was premised on the concentration of Boko Haram activities in the LGAs and the relative security in these LGAs. The study depended on information gathered from a total of ninety-two (92) respondents (i.e. 48 from Gwoza and 44 from Maiduguri including 12 focus group discussion (FGD) participants in each of the two LGAs). The respondents, which included men and women (about a third of the sample) and youth and older members of the communities (early 20s to over 60 years), were selected using a combination of the snowballing and purposive methods. In addition, the study utilized three methods in gathering data: from documentary sources, the Key Persons Interviews (KPIs), and the FGD. Interestingly, the information from these three sources proved adequate and generated good information for the study.

State of the Knowledge: Islamic Fundamentalism, Sharia and the Boko Haram

Quite a good volume of literature has emerged in the last decade focusing on the Boko Haram (see, Adesoji, 2010; Onuoha, 2010; Cook, 2011; Loimeier, 2012; Aghedo, 2014; Perry, 2014; Campbell, 2015; Comolli, 2015; Walker, 2016 etc.). Interestingly, these materials discuss the insurgence of the Boko Haram largely through information pieced together from the media, documents and insights gained through journalistic endeavours in the North of Nigeria. As good as some of these accounts have been, they have not benefitted from a thorough-going empirical investigation of the Boko Haram.

It is often the case that religious insurgence like the 'Boko Haram' is interpreted as the reflection of a Nigerian state battling with the challenges of nationhood and where socio-economic privation make citizens easy prey to the antics of religious fundamentalists (see, Danjibo, nd; Loimeier, 2012; Adesoji, 2010; Aghedo, 2014; Asuelime and Ojochenemi, 2015). However, the Boko Haram has, in spite of later metamorphosis, anchored its unique proselytization on the acute need to return to what it sees as pure Islam and unadulterated Sharia. It rejects both mainstream Islam in Nigeria and disavows the Sharia in practice in about twelve states in Nigeria.

Be that as it may, the extant literature has been inundated with the view of the dynamic and conflict-prone nature of religion, even in the present era of modernity where the influence of religion is expected to have waned. As Ellis and ter Haar (2004:17) argue, 'western-trained thinkers largely failed to foresee the resurgence of religion because they had made a series of wrong assumptions about the place of religion in regimes of modernization'. Therefore, religion, especially in the form of fundamentalism, has become a phenomenon with which some modern nations, including Nigeria, must contend even as new forms of individualism and anti-religious orientations take root globally. One

critical issue in religion in Nigeria is the Sharia question. As Kukah (1993) contends, the Sharia project, which can be traced back to the pre-colonial jihad of Usman dan Fodio, aims at ultimately building a state in which politics and governance would be determined by the rules of Islamic religion in Nigeria.

The Sharia law's transformation from a peculiarly customary law for Northerners to a criminal law applicable to all people was driven by the example of Zamfara state, which adopted the Sharia first in 2000 (Anugwom, 2008). After Zamfara, other states of the North quickly followed suit in adopting Sharia, which became a watershed in the history of Nigeria's secularity (Anugwom, 2008). Apart from the multiple effects of the Sharia adoption on the socio-political system and inter-ethnic and religious relationship in the country, its negative impact on collective life was very instructive (Anugwom, 2008; Odey, 2000).

Historically the Sharia was created as a response to the need to generate a set of laws that could be uniformly and strictly applied to all Muslims, especially in the context of the emergent Islamic empires that brought together large numbers of people from diverse backgrounds under one religious and political umbrella (Kukah, 1993; Khuri, 1990; Komonchak, Collins and Lane, 1993). Incidentally the brouhaha about the Sharia was further exacerbated in the context of Nigeria's political system, in which ethnic politics and ethno-regional rivalries seem rife (Anugwom, 2008; Obasi and Anugwom, 2002; Ejobowah, 2000).

The quest for Sharia is anchored in the belief that it represents the pure and correct Mohammadan order. Therefore, in spite of the struggle for political power after Mohammad's death, which led to the first split in Islam between the Sunni (those loyal to the Umayyad Dynasty founded by Mu'awiyah) and Shia (followers of the fourth Caliph, Ali) and complicated the practice of inseparability of religion and politics, orthodox Muslims want to establish the ideal Muhammadian order (Ayoob, 2008; Choueiri, 1990; Khuri, 1990). Ostensibly the elites, who are the drivers of Islamic fundamentalism in Nigeria, are basically motivated by the desire to emulate Usman dan Fodio (Ali, 2003; Kukah, 1993; Anugwom, 2008). Perhaps like him, these elites see the control of socio-political structures and leadership of Islamic faithful within a Sharia context as critical prerequisites to the unadulterated practice of Islam (Kukah, 1993; Williams, 1997; Anugwom, 2008).

The overriding goal of the Boko Haram was to replace the Western-style state, its governance and its values with those derived from pure or unadulterated Islamic tenets. In the views of a popular Nigerian news magazine: "The mission of the sect was to establish an Islamic state where "orthodox Islam" is practiced. Orthodox Islam according to Muhammed Yusuf, leader of the sect, frowns at western education and working in the civil service because it is sinful' (Tell, August 10, 2009:34).

However, the extent to which this orientation is still explicitly the goal of the Boko Haram and its leaders remain questionable. Given the level of atrocity committed by the Boko Haram even against fellow Muslims, the big question is the extent to which the group can still be seen as strictly a religious movement aimed at any edification of Islam. Galadima (2011) argues that the group has transformed from a seeming ideological sect into a group of murderers and political gangsters.

The Boko Haram, in spite of whatever appeal to the aspirations of the common people, is first and foremost an Islamic fundamentalist group. Although Islamic fundamentalist groups are characterized by vast differences in ideology, beliefs, organization and behaviour (van Bruinessen, 1995; Choueiri, 1990; Dessouki, 1982), they share commonality in rejection of secularism and an avowed commitment to enthronement of Sharia. Islamic fundamentalism has thrived in Nigeria against the background of fears and suspicion which have marked inter-group relations in the country (Anugwom, 2008; Sanusi, 2007; Udoidem, 1997). In effect, Islamic fundamentalism has become more or less a recurrent decimal in national socio-political life (see Udoidem, 1997; Williams, 1997).

The Boko Haram is not the first incidence of Islamic religious uprising in Northern Nigeria. In fact, it could be argued that the Boko Haram is largely a new addition to the long history of Islamic fundamentalist conflicts in the area. It might have been this fact that led Aghedo (2014) to view the Boko Haram as ‘old wine in a new wine bottle’. Aghedo traced in broad detail the relationship between the Boko Haram and the Maitatsine uprising, although he focused mainly on similarities between the two groups outlined in the rejection of secularism, condemnation of ostentatious lifestyle, rejection of western democracy and education. But the above traits of similarity between the two groups can be fairly generalized for all Islamic fundamentalist groups in the world. Thus, the challenge would really lie in generating a nuanced understanding of the innovative strategies of insurgence imbued in the Boko Haram.

Prominent in the discourse on the Boko Haram is the role of socio-economic deprivation. In this sense, most writers on the subject subscribe to what can be termed the economic narrative of the insurgence (Loimeier, 2012; Adesoji, 2010; Aghedo, 2014; Perry, 2014; Comolli, 2015) and in most of these cases, the economic situation is seen as the main driver of the insurgence. Smith (2016: 59) summarily captured this fact thus:

As Nigeria’s oil economy led to the neglect of other industries and corruption flourished, the North-east struggled. The region, for so long a crossroads of ideas and trade in the scrubby savannah near Lake Chad and the Sahara desert, trailed much of the rest of the country in education and wealth by the time Yusuf began building his movement.

However, a thorough-going study of the Boko Haram as done in this study and familiarity with the history of both Islam and its relationship with the state in Nigeria may indicate a tendency to over-emphasize the socio-economic drivers of the insurgence. In other words, apart from interrogating some of the generalizations in the extant knowledge on the Boko Haram, this study was called forth by the need to investigate the innovative credentials of the Boko Haram and its assumed niche as a youth agency responding to socio-economic and political challenges of the ordinary citizens in the Northeast of Nigeria.

The Boko Haram and the Innovative Gospel of Terror: Evidence from the Field

Origin of the Boko Haram

While there are contending and even contradictory viewpoints on the origin of the Boko Haram (Onuoha, 2010; Cook, 2011; Danjibo, 2009; Cline, 2011; Comolli, 2015) especially

in relationship to the exact date it took off and its relationship with the group called the Nigerian Taliban which sprang up in Yobe state and launched attacks in 2003/2004 in that state; there is an emerging consensus among my respondents which shows no ambivalence regarding the origin of the group. The majority of the gatekeepers interviewed linked the Boko Haram to a group initially called the *Yusuffiyya* which was a crystallization of those who were drawn to the fiery preaching of Mohammed Yusuf in early 2000s.

Yusuf's antecedents can rightly be traced as far back as the 1990s when he was a key member of the Muslim Youth Organization called the *Ahlulsunna wal'jama'ah hijra* in Maiduguri (Adisa, 2012). This group was largely seen as an offshoot of the Izala, a Salafist movement for removing impure additions to Islamic practice (e.g. Sufism), and engaged mainly in intellectual discourse and debates over the Qur'an and Hadith. The group was initially led by Abubakar Lawan. Yusuf, who was a member of this group and even assumed the mantle of leadership briefly when Lawan left for further studies in Saudi Arabia, soon enough carved an entirely different niche for himself. He believed that the Izala, in spite of portending Salafist tendencies, was too soft and often in cahoots with the decadent modern state (Harnischfeger, 2015). The group later imploded over the style and obvious confrontational orientation of Yusuf.

The remnants of the group that agreed with the stance of Yusuf, especially on the immediacy of jihad and the total negation of the state, and others--especially young unemployed males; artisans; commercial motor cycles riders and even young men in tertiary institutions in the state (a group obviously staring down the barrel in terms of socio-economic future) were drawn to the powerful preaching of the young Yusuf and transformed into the Yusuffiyya sect. Thus, the respondents saw the Yobe group (the so-called Nigerian Taliban) as an independent group of those who were originally with Yusuf but rebelled against him. Hence:

The group was founded by Muhammed Alih and Muhammed Yusuf of blessed memories in Maiduguri and had branches across the Northeast zone of the country. It was based on the authentic interpretation of the Glorious Qur'an and the Sunna of the Prophet as well as the philosophies of Ibn Taymiyya (of blessed memories) after whom our headquarters "Ibn Taymiyya Masjid," which was bombed in 2009 by the Nigeria government, was named. The group was peaceful and structured around Yusuf until his death in 2009 after which Imam Abubakar Shekau took over the leadership.²

This is slightly different from the dominant narratives in the literature which argue that the group led by one Ali broke away when it became tired of Yusuf's slow build-up to the desired Islamic state (Walker, 2016). A more telling, but not evidence-borne, perspective is that privileged in Comolli (2015) - that the Boko Haram sprang up from this group and probably moved to Maiduguri after the altercation with security agencies in 2004. Those interviewed were of the predominant view that the group originated from Maiduguri with the antics of Yusuf in the Indimi mosque in that town. Thus:

Jama'atu Allis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal Jihad now referred to as Boko Haram was a group of Muslims who came together under the leadership of late Sheik Muhammad Yusuf here in Maiduguri for the practice and propagation of Islam in its original form. The sect was peaceful before it was attacked by the Nigerian

² Personal interview with Ademu Alih, Boko Haram sympathiser in Gwoza (21 April 2016).

authorities and hijacked by the criminals. The intention of the founders was clearly to propagate Islam based on original interpretation of the doctrines of Islam and that was why the sect attracted large numbers of people to her processions and lectures in those good days.³

The sentiments above also found overwhelming support among the FGD participants. Apart from a lone dissenting voice in the FGD for men in Gwoza, there was agreement on the Maiduguri origin of the Boko Haram. The lone voice was of the view that the Boko Haram took roots first from Yobe state before moving to Maiduguri. On further probe, the dissenter conceded and stated that he got the view from discussions with a neighbour who lived in Yobe in the early 2000s.

Boko Haram as Reflective of Novel Youth Agency

One thing that is generally agreed upon regarding the Boko Haram is the demographic categorization of its members. In this regard, the movement is perceived generally in the Northeast as a movement by young people. This perception was common among all the respondents and even among the FGD participants. As a matter of fact, some opinion leaders in the communities investigated saw the young age of the members of the group as the main reason why they are easily misled by their leaders. According to one such respondent, an Imam in a mosque in Maiduguri: 'the Boko Haram are misdirected and misinformed young people who think that they can transform their situations overnight. It is both the exuberance of young people and some foolishness gone too far'.⁴ 'This view is further reinforced by the contention, 'Yes of course! They are young people. And that is perhaps a major reason why they choose violence instead of seeking justice peacefully'.⁵ Another respondent easily concurs, 'Boko Haram is an organization of young people, most of whom have no education, and that is why their approach is very poor and bad'.

In general, the Boko Haram is a movement in the demographic category that can be referred to as young people or those who are far short of 40 years. Even though the exact age of both Yusuf and Shekau remain unknown, there is little doubt that Yusuf died before he was 40 years and Shekau is presumably short of forty years in age. The high number of young people drawn to the movement has been seen in the literature as a direct consequence of the increasing privation among this demographic group and the obvious incapacity or unwillingness of the state (easily represented in the public imagination by the political elites) to do something about the situation of these young people. An obvious fact from the study is that despite the role of politics in the movement, there is no gainsaying the fact that its foot soldiers are drawn from the commoners who are typically young, poor, uneducated and either unemployed or severely underemployed.

Even those people in the Northeast who condemn the actions of the group relate all the same to the dire socio-economic situation of young people there. In this sense: 'The situation [of the young people there] is nothing to write home about. They are mostly illiterates and have no opportunities to advance themselves compared to youths in other parts of the country and the governments have not done much to arrest the situation and if nothing is done, other sects might emerge and do the same thing'.⁶

³ Personal interview with Aliyu Gambo, Maiduguri (25 July 2016).

⁴ Personal interview with Imam Abubakar in Maiduguri (17 August 2016).

⁵ Personal Interview with Abubakar, 38 year old politician in Gwoza (18 April, 2016).

⁶ Personal interview with Alhaji Maitokobi a local politician in his early fifties in Gwoza, 19th April 2016.

Despite the above sentiments, some of the respondents could not see how the engagement in violence would in any sense ameliorate the situation of the young people. According to one of those with this opinion, an Imam of a mosque in Gubio, Maiduguri, ‘Boko Haram is a terror group and the major drive behind its violence is the ideology. Yes, the people are poor and mostly illiterate but can Boko Haram violence solve these problems’⁷.

Equally reinforcing image of the Boko Haram as a group made up predominantly of young people is that it is associated with not only the rejection of the *status quo* by the young but equally as an attempt to use the vehicle of radical religion to remake their socio-political situation. The menace of the Boko Haram and the large following it enjoys are equally often related to another group of young people fostered by Islam in the form of the *almajarai* system very popular in the North. It is often the contention that Islamic fundamentalist groups like the Boko Haram have exploited this system in attracting members and willing soldiers to fight their cause (Isichei, 1987; Danjibo, 2009). Despite the predominant culpability of the *almajarai* one finds in the extant literature, Hoechner (2015) has called attention to the fact that the *almajarai* might not be guilty as charged. There is however, no contesting the fact that often there is only a thin veneer between pursuit of religious edification and fundamentalism. This separation can easily be lost in the case of the very young and impressionable youth that one finds in the ranks of the *almajarai*.

From Infidels to Takfirs: Boko and the Redefinition of Fidelity to Islam

A critical difference between the Boko Haram and the other Islamic fundamentalist groups before it in Nigeria is in the redefinition of those who are faithful to the religion. In this case, while other Islamic fundamentalist groups before the Boko Haram conceptualized opposition and enmity to Islam broadly in terms of unbelievers (Christians) and heathens, the Boko Haram operate from the perspective that Muslims who do not subscribe to the jihad and return to pure Islam are equally as guilty as the former and deserve death. This orientation is largely captured in its unpopular notion of ‘Takfir’.

The ideology of the Boko Haram derives not only from an extreme form of salafism but equally a non-negotiable belief in the principle of ‘Takfir’. In line with this principle, all non-practicing Muslims (defined by the Boko Haram as the so-called mainstream or moderate Muslims in Nigeria) should be seen as ‘kafirs’ i.e. the equivalent of infidels. This principle goes on to hold that it is the primary obligation of the faithful to abandon polluted or impure Muslim societies, seek new abodes and more crucially wage a war against these Muslim infidels who deserve death in line with the overriding goals of the jihad.

The idea of Takfirism as promoted by the Boko Haram makes a critical but broad sweeping distinction between apostates and infidels. Even though this distinction is not in any sense novel in Islam, what is new is that the Boko Haram believes that both categories deserve the ultimate punishment i.e. death and that it is the required obligation of all Muslims to carry out this punishment.

The only close resemblance to the above can be discerned in the activities of the 1980s Maitatsine Movement. The leader of the group, the late Mohammed Marwa also held

⁷ Personal interview with Imam Ishaq, July 23, 2016 in Maiduguri.

strong strictures about members of the Islamic faith who were not members of the Maitatsine and unreceptive of the millennial doctrine of the group. Marwa only took this loathing of other Muslims to the extent of verbal cursing and unending vituperations. This was actually the source of the name ‘Maitatsine’ bestowed on him since it refers to ‘the one who curses in Hausa language’. Thus, while Marwa would not have cared whether this group of Muslims lived or died he never raised his hands knowingly against them, thereby keeping to the injunction of the Holy Prophet that Muslims should not kill fellow Muslims.

Boko Haram’s idea of the role of true Islam in present Nigeria differed radically from the *status quo* and thus set it far apart from other Islamic sects and mainstream Islam in the Northeast. Therefore:

Boko Haram was not relating with other religious groups that existed before it because they believed that other Muslims were not practicing Islam the way it ought to be. They took a radical view of the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims as well as the government. Their beliefs that the government is corrupt and meant to serve the elite and wants to replace it with an Islamic state that will be strictly guided by the Sharia. This position is similar to that of the Maitatsine sect that existed a long time ago.⁸

Incidentally, the unpopularity of the group beginning from 2013 can be related to the inability of other Muslims to understand the rationale, even from an Islamic point of view, behind the slaughter of other Muslims by the Boko Haram. This has led to recent attempts at questioning or doubting the religious credentials of the group and its intentions. Thus:

I am not sure that these people are really Muslims. At the beginning one felt it was a religious thing but now nobody is sure again. How can they be bombing mosques, killing both Muslims and Christians? They are more like people who are not well [mad], I mean they cannot be Muslims. This is not Islam at all. In fact, it is either that they are ordinary blood thirsty people using religion as cover or they read the Qur’an upside down. This is not the behaviour of Muslims at all, we are not monsters, never.⁹

Familiarity with the history of the group’s activities would show that the popularity of the group began to wane only when it became deeply involved in the killing of fellow Muslims from 2011 onwards. In other words, before this time, a lot of people supported the group and even its metamorphosis into a terrorist group was seen in many quarters as the consequence of the unnecessary highhanded response by the government:

The group that was led by Yusuf was lawful and was minding its own business, preaching and even helping poor people here in Maiduguri until the military came and killed the leaders and most of them including even those who were not with the group. I think what we are now seeing is the retaliation of the young men in the group to government’s brutal action.¹⁰

⁸ Personal interview with Alhaji Maitokobi, a local politician in his 50s in Gwoza (19th April, 2016).

⁹ Personal Interview with Ahmed (taxi driver) - July 18th 2016 - Maiduguri, Nigeria.

¹⁰ Personal Interview with Ishaya Adama, a long distance lorry driver – July 21, Maiduguri Nigeria

Legitimacy of Boko Haram's Methods

A critical concern of this study was to ascertain the extent to which the methods of the Boko Haram can be defined as novel and, critically, as truly reflective of the canons of Islam. The study was not as concerned with establishing the authenticity of jihad, which might be said to be emblematic of the religion in general, but rather attempted to examine the impact of Boko Haram's belief that other Muslims who do not subscribe to the immediacy of jihad and imperative of action are not truly Muslims.

As would be expected, the findings indicate a division between the members of the community who are neither members of the group nor sympathetic to it and those who are sympathetic or are aligned in some way to the group. However, this distinction is complicated by the voices of some people who are not members of the group and are ordinary members of the society see the methods of the Boko Haram as lying squarely within Islam. Given the fact that this was a consensus of an FGD session where participants were drawn from ordinary members of the community, one can only conclude that there is a certain ambivalence about the legitimacy of the Boko Haram. The consensus as expressed by one of the participants is, 'Boko Haram is Islamic. Shekau and his people are Muslims and they have repeatedly justified their jihad with provisions of the Quran and Hadiths. Whoever says that the sect is not Islamic is living in denial'.¹¹

This should not be all too strange since a good knowledge of the dynamics of the sect would show that until the later stages of its existence, say from 2013 when it began to enforce the 'takfir', the group had enjoyed the support or sympathy of the larger Northeast population mainly based on their dissatisfaction with the way and manner the government and its agencies handled the 2009 face-off with the group. A classic example of the above can be seen in the assertion that:

The Boko Haram group started here in Maiduguri in the early 2000. The sect was a religious group with a focus on the propagation of Islam through lectures and processions. It was founded by Sheikh Muhammad Yusuf who was killed by the police after he was arrested in 2009. It is important to differentiate between the sect Yusuf led and the Boko Haram group we have today. During the life time of Muhammad Yusuf, the Yusufiyya as they were then known were not armed. It was after his death that his student, Abubakar Shekau who took over the mantle of leadership successfully transformed the sect into an armed group and moved the sect to Sambissa forest.¹²

The legitimacy of the Boko Haram is influenced by status or social divide in the society. Therefore, while there is a certain ambivalence on this issue among members of the public, religious clerics and scholars who have borne the full brunt of both the humiliation (Boko Haram repeatedly referring to them as the supporters of the corrupt state and its political class) and violence (including assassinations) out rightly condemn the group and see no rationale for its activities. The same goes for the military engaged with the group. In one such instance, 'those guys [Boko Haram] do not even know why they are fighting. We have arrested and interrogated so many of them and I can authoritatively tell you that illiteracy

¹¹ FGD Consensus with adult males. FGD conducted on 7th August 2016 at the LGEA Primary School, Madimagari, Maiduguri.

¹² Personal interview with Hon. Rabi, a 45 year old politician originally from Biu (Maiduguri, 11 July 2016).

and poverty are the major reasons why Boko Haram flourished here in the North east¹³. But the remonstrations of the above people on the illegitimacy of the group flies in the face of the opinions of the sympathizers of the Boko Haram who are in total agreement that the group is justified in its methods (actions) and hold the right interpretations of the Qur'an and the Hadith. Therefore:

They are very legitimate [in methods]. As a Muslim, the Sharia is the most important law as far as I am concerned. There are clear provisions of the Quran about when to start a holy war and the rewards as well as punishments for Muslims who participate or refuse to participate, as the case may be. Whatever tactics adopted in the course of a holy war against the enemies is legitimate provided the Sharia is not against it.¹⁴

What the above sentiments underline is the observed incapacity of even mainstream Islam to denounce the Boko Haram on the basis of scripture. What one encounters is the usual denunciation of the group as young men ill-motivated or in pursuit of wrong interpretations of the scripture. The fact that Yusuf Mohammed while alive could hold his own admirably well in debates with recognized Islamic scholars and clerics says much about the doctrinal foundations of the group. Perhaps, what is at issue is the methodology of the Boko Haram rather than its version or interpretations of the scripture *per se*.

Boko Haram and the (En) Gendering of Violent Fundamentalism

Without doubt, the Boko Haram is the first Islamic fundamentalist group in the history of Nigeria to have found a meaningful role for women. While women were undoubtedly, victims of the insurgence (for instance the much-cited Chibok abduction and the numerous widows created by the group), there is strong indication that the women were not only victims of the Boko Haram. There have been reports of the active involvement of women in the activities of the group, not only in terms of providing backroom support like keeping the camp, cooking and fetching for the men, but also as active in the field by helping spread the message and even recruiting new members for the group.

According to a report by the Sahara Reporters (2014), the Nigerian military captured some of these women who confessed to acting as recruiters for the Boko Haram. This was seen as totally unrelated to the Chibok abduction and the women seemed to be working as undercover recruitment agents for the Boko Haram out of their own volition. In spite of the above, the dominant view is still that of the women as victims. Thus: 'women are being used by both parties even the government has been detaining and harassing women suspected of being wives and close family members of suspected Boko Haram people. They seem to forget that these women have neither influence nor power over the men. The men just do what they want to do'.¹⁵

Therefore, for an overwhelming majority of the respondents both in the interviews and the FGDs, women have been more or less pawns in the hands of the Boko Haram. Their opinions are agreed on the fact that the insurgence has visited untold hardship on both the women and the girl-child. Thus, 'As a women leader, I can tell you with all assurance that women are the big victims of Boko Haram crisis. Many have lost their

¹³ Captain Sotonye, field commander, Operation Lafia Dole (Gwoza, April 23, 2016).

¹⁴ Personal interview with Shamsudeen Adams, 37 year old Boko Haram sympathizer (Maiduguri, 11 August 2016).

¹⁵ Personal interview with 48 year old Hajia Hadiza Aminu (Gwoza; 19 April 2016).

husbands and children, even houses, and are displaced and might never return to this L.G.A again¹⁶.

However, an interesting dimension came from the sentiments of an Islamic scholar in Gwoza who contends, ‘there is no doubt that women because they are weak physically have been abused in the conflict. However, a good number of women have served willingly as the wives and cooks of these boys. Some of them are in the camps of the sect because they want and not really because they were forced’¹⁷. Perhaps lending some credence to the above views is the position of a youth respondent in Maiduguri, ‘women are sometimes drawn to men of action. They may think that going to the members of the sect makes them special or something like that’¹⁸.

Be that as it may, while the notion that women were pawns in the hands of the Boko Haram might be strong there is no denying the case that over 85% of the bombings of the group since 2013 have been carried out by women. These female suicide bombers are usually young girls in their teens. While, there is some controversy about whether these girls are willing suicide bombers or are rather being led or coerced into it by the group (like in the idea that some of the abducted Chibok girls are being used in this manner); the fact remains that these girls are the ones bearing the torch of Boko Haram’s suicide bombing nowadays. Interestingly, even with the diminishing capacity of the Boko Haram in the last two years, these women suicide bombers have remained active. The first two suicide bombings recorded in 2017 in Madagali and the University of Maiduguri were the handiwork of these teenage female bombers.

Towards a Theoretical Explanation of the Boko Haram

In spite of the existence of a good number of theories (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010; Sinai, 2012; Borum, 2003; Schmid, 2013) I find the staircase model of Moghadam (2009) very insightful in understanding the Boko Haram in Nigeria especially in view of the revelations from my study. The model in significant ways addresses the peculiar needs of a study of jihadist terrorism or the Salafist-jihadism of the type of the Boko Haram. In the views of Moghadam, radicalization in Islam can be seen in the form of narrowing staircase which leads step by step to the very top represented by acts of terrorism.

He conceives the staircase model like a building which has, in his unique metaphor five main floors, viz. the ground floor, occupied literally by the over 1 billion Muslims in the world, who have some sort of the cognitive apprehension of the structural circumstances of the individual. The first floor is occupied by individuals who are seeking to remedy or set right the conditions seen as unjust. Ultimately some of those on the first floor eventually move up to the second floor, which involves being directed towards external targets. This stage equally involves the process of radicalization in a number of places including mosques. The third floor is the next stage and involves both a disengagement from the society and a moral engagement with the terrorist organization. It is here that values are constructed which are geared towards rationalizing violence and debunking the moral authority of the state. Also, some of those on the third floor soon move upward again to the fourth floor where there is the strong acceptance of the legitimacy of the terrorist organization.

¹⁶ Personal interview with Hajia Mairo, 55 year old women leader in Gwoza (20 April 2016).

¹⁷ Personal interview with 62 year old Malam, Gwoza, 21 April 2016.

¹⁸ Personal interview with a youth in his 20s, Maiduguri, July 14, 2016.

According to Moghadam (2009) at this stage the predominant attitude is you are either with us or you are against us. At this stage, the individual is also incorporated into the organization and its values and structures. Like the other stages, some individuals here are recruited into the fifth or final steps on the staircase which involves the committing of terrorist acts. Despite the fact that the above model arose largely in response to global terrorism and worries with radicalization, it can be used in explaining the Boko Haram. Thus, the members of the Boko Haram sect can be seen as neither reflective of Islam in Nigeria nor in the Northeast. Thus, radicalization and engagement in violence are choices made by few individuals who strongly feel the need to take matters into their hands in order to address perceived injustice or seek redress.

Crucially, the model recognizes the same fact as my findings do - that terrorism and insurgency do not simply arise because one is a Muslim or aware of his situation viz.-a-viz. significant others in the society. Therefore, becoming a committed member of the Boko Haram or other insurgent sects and being ready to embark on violent jihadism goes beyond being a Muslim. It involves a systematic process of radicalization and/or indoctrination, which leads the individual to the point of violent action.

Concluding Remarks

The major outcome of the investigation of the Boko Haram carried out in this study is the revelation that the Boko Haram is a product of myriad socio-political and historical factors. To this end any monolithic explanation of the insurgency and its nature misses the mark. For starters, the insurgency is built on a robust history of Islamic fundamentalism in the North of Nigeria.

As the contemporary political history of Nigeria shows, the quest for pure Sharia and the place of Sharia in national life have played controversial roles in the nation's body politic and in informing intergroup relationships since independence in 1960 (Kukah, 1993). The Boko Haram has benefitted from the above history and the politicization of Sharia by politicians eager for cheap electoral votes in early 2000s. The failure of the political class in the North to live-out the prescriptions of Sharia and give the people the Sharia system promised after election has been a prominent plank of the Boko Haram insurgency.

Widespread poverty and deepening privatisation in the Northeast have unwittingly produced a teeming army of frustrated and hopeless young people, amenable to the devices of the Boko Haram. The socio-economic situation is craftily construed as a response to the political class and the large-scale corruption in the state which has created a situation in which the poverty and misery of ordinary citizens deepen, while the political elites swim in dumbfounding opulence. However, as I have argued, despite the prominence of the socio-economic privation in the Northeast it cannot be taken as an adequate explanation of the Boko Haram. In this sense, the economic condition was important largely in terms of making it easier for the message of the group to strike the right chords and for the group to easily recruit young people to its cause.

The Boko Haram can also be validly explained within the context of the politicization of Islam in modern Nigeria. While the political elites have found it expedient to manipulate religion to their benefits; the religious class has also played politics by hobnobbing with these politicians and even slanting religious doctrines to suit decadent politics and

obedience to a failed state. In the consensual views of participants in one of the FGD sessions: ‘Most politicians always want to take advantage of everything including Boko Haram. Before it was outlawed, there were allegations of even government financial supports and patronage which played vital roles in the survival and capacity of the sect. Politics is a dirty game and politicians are devils. They supported Boko Haram.’¹⁹

The angst of the Boko Haram against prominent Islamic clerics in the North and even the falling out between Yusuf and the Izala Movement is traced to the belief of the Boko Haram that these people were wrongly using religion to prop-up a decadent political system to the neglect of the citizens and the dictates of pure Islam.

One of the solutions to the insurgence that came up equally in the views of the respondents is the use of de-radicalization which aims at weaning the young people in the Northeast from the poisonous doctrines of the Boko Haram and similar groups. In the views of one of the respondents:

There is need to get right information regarding the religion to the young ones in order to avoid groups like Boko Haram confusing them. Islam is a religion which preaches love and submission to Almighty Allah. A religion which talks about love cannot also support massive killing of innocent people as the Boko Haram has done. The young ones need to know the truth about Islam.²⁰

Without doubt the government in Nigeria has seen de-radicalization as a viable solution to the recurrent menace of Islamic fundamentalist groups in the North of the country and has instituted programmes on de-radicalization. However, the efforts of the government, apart from not being massive or widespread in the North, are undermined by the fact that it uses the same set of clerics that the Boko Haram has stigmatised as the leaders of de-radicalization. This has meant massive pessimism amongst the youth and general distrust with the programme.

Edlyne E. Anugwom, Professor of Sociology in the University of Nigeria Nsukka. His current research interests include development, labour, natural resources conflict, climate change, and terrorism in Africa. He is also the current Secretary-General of the Pan African Anthropologists Association (PAAA). Email: akommiri@gmail.com;

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¹⁹ FGD Consensus with adult males. FGD conducted on 7th August 2016 at the LGEA Primary School, Madimagari, Maiduguri.

²⁰ Personal interview with Aminu Hassan, legal practitioner in his 50s in Maiduguri (27 July 2016).

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