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**Working Paper**

## Religion and religious fundamentalism in Nigeria: Boko Haram's claims to truth

WZB Discussion Paper, No. SP VI 2019-102

**Provided in Cooperation with:**  
WZB Berlin Social Science Center

*Suggested Citation:* Malefakis, Medinat A. (2019) : Religion and religious fundamentalism in Nigeria: Boko Haram's claims to truth, WZB Discussion Paper, No. SP VI 2019-102, Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung (WZB), Berlin

This Version is available at:  
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Medinat A. Malefakis

## **Religion and religious fundamentalism in Nigeria: Boko Haram's Claims to Truth.**

**Discussion Paper**

SP VI 2019-102

August 2019

**WZB Berlin Social Science Center**

Research Area

**Migration and Diversity**

Research Unit

**Migration, Integration, Transnationalization**

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Discussion Paper SP VI 2019-102  
Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung (2019)

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## **Religion and Religious Fundamentalism in Nigeria: Boko Haram's Claims to Truth**

### **Abstract**

The aim of this research is to analyze the local plausibility of religious claims to truth in Boko Haram's ideology. As global jihadi organizations continue to operate under-ground in the face of successful counter-terrorist actions against them, religious underpins seem to be one of the few cohesive glues holding them afloat and keeping the flow of blind support unending. Is this however enough for unwavering loyalty to a terrorist group declared 'technically defeated' by the state? The research analyses why Boko Haram's ideology of radical Islam resonated with many (mostly young) people in Nigeria's northeast. It does so by looking, on the one hand, at the narratives the insurgency creates with reference to globally circulating ideologies based on interpretations of the Quran and the Hadiths, and, on the other, by analyzing the socio-economic and cultural situation of the local and Islamic communities in northern Nigeria that seem to make the group's claims potent.

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## **Introduction**

The study builds on earlier field-work research conducted on the humanitarian displacement from Boko Haram's terrorist insurgency in the Lake Chad Basin of West Africa. The earlier research included structured and un-structured interviews with former/current Boko Haram members in IDP camps and those in the custody of security agents. Boko Haram sympathizers were also part of focus groups which the researcher interacted with. From this fieldwork, it was evident that Boko Haram still had proponents who overtly and covertly supported its cause. A cursory investigation revealed religious affinities as a factor, but this begets allusions to the socio-economic standings of these supporters in northern Nigeria's societal class relations. More so, Boko Haram's break-away faction (Islamic State of West Africa Province - ISWAP) contemporarily recruits supporters in areas where they have established political and economic control. This posits that the base of terrorist support is built not only on religious fundamentalism, but also on other factors which when combined makes Boko Haram's claim to truth potent in the area of study. Employing Noam Chomsky's assertion, Boko Haram is presented here as a representation of the literal terrorism typology, meaning it has specific, empirical causal factors which led to a particular societal impact (George 1991). This research also premises on Moses Echonu's theory that poverty, exclusion, formal illiteracy and non-access to basic amenities make Nigeria's northeast a fertile ground for the populist messages of Boko Haram because educational deficit, the resulting poverty index, and religious fundamentalism are intricately connected in a causal cycle, reinforcing one another. Religious fundamentalism in the area of study predates an era of fragmentation in the practice of Islam in northern Nigeria. The role played by fragmentation in the emergence of fundamentalism and

extremist ideology is further examined in this research as abetting Boko Haram's claims to religious truth.

This paper is divided into four sections. Section one introduces Boko Haram and its emergence in Nigeria. Section two employs an historical narrative approach in examining the emergence of fragmentation in the practice of Islam in Nigeria, and the resultant spread of fundamentalist ideologies therefrom. Boko Haram itself evolved on a background of fragmentation, dissidence and sectional divisions between fundamentalist and non-fundamentalist groups in northern Nigeria. The extent to which fragmentation reflects in Boko Haram's development will be analyzed in this section. Aspects of Islamic tenets used by Boko Haram as ideological justifications for its terrorist dogmas will be investigated in the third section. The last section of the study researches political, economic and societal dynamics which were appropriated by the Jihadi groups for insurgent terrorist agendas in the north of Nigeria. Here, the interplay of religious fundamentalist ideology and governance deficiencies is highlighted as bedrocking the emergence and continued existence of Boko Haram and ISWAP (its breakaway faction) in northeastern Nigeria.

### **Birth of an Insurgent Turned Terrorist Group**

The Boko Haram terrorist insurgency in Nigeria's north east came into global limelight in 2009 when the group had a military confrontation with the Nigerian military forces. Before then, the group had surfaced in 2004 as an insurgent crowd in the Kanuri speaking city of Maiduguri in Borno state. Its original name is Jama'at Ahl al-Sunnah li Dawa wa-l-jihad but Boko Haram (education is forbidden) is its most popular alias, given to it by Maiduguri populace in an attempt to label the group with its disdain for western education. Boko Haram merged its grievances with

its extremely violent Salafi ideology to emerge as one of the world's deadliest Jihadi groups. After the group's foremost leader ((Muhammad Yusuf) was killed during a confrontation with security forces in 2009, Boko Haram regrouped under a new leader, Abubakar Shekau (Yusuf's former deputy). They reinvented their tactical approaches to include suicide bombings, prison raids and high-profile kidnappings. At the height of its existence in 2014, Boko Haram controlled areas in the north east which was the size of Belgium. They also spread their attacks and sphere of influence beyond Nigeria to Mayo Tsanaga and Mayo Sava in Northern Cameroon, Nguimi in the north of Niger's Diffa region and Ngouboua in Chad.

In 2014, the group abducted over 250 school girls in town of Chibok, a move which teleported it to the ranks of global jihadi organizations such as IS and Al Qaeda. In fact, the kidnap and other carefully orchestrated bombings of both soft and hard targets such as military bases signaled Boko Haram's contact with top Jihadi organizations such as Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and the Islamic State. In 2015, Boko Haram was ranked deadlier than the Islamic state according to the Global Terrorism Index. The Council on Foreign Relation's Nigeria Security Tracker stated that Boko Haram's terrorism has killed 27,414 from May 2011 to January 2019 (Council on Foreign Relations 2019). The United Nations High Commission for Refugees estimates the number of refugees and internally displaced persons from Boko Haram's activities to be over 2.2 million people, with the displaced scattered across ill-equipped, mostly unhygienic and improperly managed camps across Nigeria, Cameroon and Niger (Abdulazeez 2018, 97).

A faction broke out of Boko Haram in 2016 called Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) led by Abu Abdallah al-Barnawi. The split was attributed to ideological and operational differences between Abubakar Shekau and his former comrades, Mamman Nur and Al Barnawi. Earlier, this same faction, calling themselves *Ansaru* had splintered from Boko Haram on the



premise of non-concomitance with Boko Haram's tactics which inadvertently involved killing of Muslims. When ISIS designated former Boko Haram spokesman and former Ansaru leader, Abu Musab Al Barnawi as the new leader of its West African province, neglecting Abubakar's Shekau's earlier pledge of allegiance, ISWAP officially branched off further, independently. This new faction is reportedly deadlier in its attacks, overrunning military basis in the northeast with impunity. The structure and operation of both Boko Haram and ISWAP is categorized as *amorphous* (combining sophisticated combat techniques and technology with a variety of target victims), *anonymous* (due to the lack of an organized group of interlocutors with whom, policy agencies could engage), and *internally fragmented* without a centered leadership (Amaliya and Nwakpa 2014, 80).

### **Islam in Nigeria: Fragmentation and the Emergence of Fundamentalism**

Islam came to Nigeria in two almost interwoven phases. The first was between the eleventh and seventeenth centuries when it was introduced by clerics and merchants (often the same individuals) from North Africa, the Arab world, and from across West Africa. The rulers of the Borno Empire in Nigeria's northeast were the first to convert in the eleventh century. With the coming of Wangarawa traders and scholars from Mali at the end of the fourteenth century, and increase in trade with the Songhai Empire in the fifteenth century, Hausa kings in the core north followed suit (Crisis Group 2010, 9). The most celebrated medium was the Trans-Saharan trade (Kani 1990, 323). The Islamic view of the universe as governed by one God who is to be worshipped in a particular way by one world-wide community of believers appeared universalist and more enlightened. The ruling elites accepted Islam for the advantages it brought along with it. Economically, Islam gave the kings equality and brotherhood with the trading partners. The presence of Muslim scholars further provided an important element in the infrastructure of long-

distance trade such as written communication in Arabic which made it possible to order goods and maintain a system of banking and credit. The literacy of Muslims made them the only ones capable of administration (Gwadabe 2017, 11). Islam therefore brought acculturation and nation building into Hausaland and in the process enhanced the socio-economic and cultural advancement of those communities that embraced it (Gwadabe 2017, 11).

The second way Islam spread in Nigeria was through the Jihad of 1804 led by Shehu Usman Dan Fodio. *Jihad* in Arabic means 'to strive' and in this case refers to winning more converts for the Islamic religion. The reasons for this revolt are varied. Scholars like R.A Adeleye and Michael Crowder seem to agree that the Jihad was a holy war declared and prosecuted with a view to establishing a purer form of Islam in a predominantly decadent pagan society (Olaosebikan 2011, 4) because the Hausa states of the late 18th century could be said to belong to a world in which Islam was marginally and ceremonially conditioning traditional cultures (Milsome 1075, 8). Encouraged by Jihads in other parts of West Africa including in Futa Jallon and Futa Toro, Usman Dan Fodio's movement gathered such momentum that his followers were able to spring attacks in different Hausa city states and win one '*Birni*' (city state) after another. Barely four years later were most Hausa states effectively under the influence of Dan Fodio who presided over a caliphate famed to spread as far as northern part of present Cameroon and the eastern part of Burkina Faso (Mahadi and Kwanashie 1994, 8). The political seat of the caliphate was (and still is) in Sokoto. Islamic law (Sharia) was adopted as a framework of legal and social reference, with provisions for the non-Muslim populace to co-exist peacefully within the confines of northern Nigeria's Islamic caliphate.

With colonial takeover in 1900, the British administered northern Nigeria through the already structured and functional emirate system as it was from the time of the Sokoto caliphate. This

colonial system was known as 'indirect rule'. By this, the caliphate and the emirs were no longer religious leaders promoting Islamic Sharia law in their various emirates, but had being transmuted into efficacious instruments of British colonialists. The application of Sharia was systematically scaled down to civil and family issues. It was eventually abolished on the basis that it was antagonistic to the freedom of all people in a society not populated exclusively by Muslims. When the roman writing script was introduced to replace the traditional 'ajami', Muslims in northern Nigeria became suspicious that the British may be considering an imposition of Christianity in the area. To avoid tensions, the colonialists restricted formal education and activities of Christian missionaries to the fringes of the northern protectorate. This would prove lethal, making northern Nigeria formally illiterate as compared to the south and east who embraced Christianity and formal education brought by colonialists and missionaries.

With the Sokoto Jihad of 1804, all Muslims in northern Nigeria subscribed to Sunni Islam of the Maliki School with most elites belonging to the Sufi *Tariqa* (paths) - *Qadiriyya* or Brotherhood (Mustapha and Bunza 2014, 54). Around the 1830s, certain fragmentations became noticeable which resulted in divisions and dissensions of Islamic practice. A part of the fragmentation began from dynamics in strictness of ritual practices resulting in the dissolution of the Sufi orders into Tijaniyyah and Qadiriyyah. Fragmentation also arose from condemnation and rejection of existing Islamic doctrinal practices which was the principal reason for the emergence of the Izala after Nigeria's independence. Izala was introduced into Nigeria by Sheikh Abubakar Mahmud Gumi. His doctrines, drawing upon the writings of Usman Dan Fodio insisted on the idea of *Tawhid* (oneness of God) and a return to strict Islamic mode of worship (*Shari'ah*) as perfected in the days of the *Salaf al-Ṣāliḥ* - pious predecessors of the Prophet (Ben Amara 2013, 247).

Gumi opposed ideas from the Sufi brotherhoods of Qadiriyya and Tijaniyya which supposed that the prophet still exists mystically and continues to transmit instructions to particular persons, Sheikhs, etc. (Ben Amara 2013, 119-120). Such claims, Gumi regards as *Bidi'a* (innovation) practices which contradict the Qur'ān and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (Ben Amara 2013, 119-120). Other practices condemned by Gumi include the Sufi's recitation of incantations or supplications (particularly *salatil fatih*) composed by the *turuq* (plural form of *tariqa*) saints; reverence of the saints particularly visits to their tombs; use of charms; and the drinking of Arabic writings washed off from the wooden slates - *shan rubutu* (Hassan 2015, 18). Although the Izala rejected music, dance and separation of mosques by gender, they appeared modernist by cultivating western education for men and women, the use of modern information technology for the propagation of Islam, and the enjoyment of modern comforts such as cars (Hassan 2015, 20). Fragmentations emanating from internal rivalries and power struggles however also occurred in the Izala. This divided the group into Izala A (the old Izala brigade seen as the 'un-compromisers' and based in Jos), Izala B or *Yan Tawaye*' (the liberal and moderate 'seceders' based in Kaduna) and Izala C (the neutrals) (Mustapha and Bunza 2014, 87).

The 1970s heralded the emergence of education-influenced fragmentations. Scholars who were students at the Islamic University of Madina (*Yan Madinain*) and activists responsible for the formation of the Muslim Student Society of Nigeria in many universities began to demonstratively exhibit their contacts with new Islamic ideals by establishing strong religious followings. They included Sheikh Jafar Adam (Muhammad Yusuf's teacher), Sheikh Isa Fantami, Abdullahi Akinbode and Babs Fafunwa. Abdul Raufu and Mustafa Bunza agree that the emergence of these groups increased the fragmentation of Muslim identities resulting in further individualization of religious affiliation and heightened competition for followership in a

‘prayer economy’ led by the clerics - *ulamas* (Mustapha and Bunza 2014, 55). Groups which arose from this wave of fragmentation include the Shi’a’s Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN) or Muslim Brothers led by Sheikh El-Zakzaky and its splinter group- Jamat al-Tajdeed al Islami (JTI); the Yoruba Muslims prominent of which are Nasrul-Lahi Fathi Society of Nigeria (NASFAT), Ansar al Deen, Nawairrudeen, Nurudeen, Umarudeen and the Yoruba populated Ahmadiyya; women organizations such as Federation of Muslim Women’s Association of Nigeria (FOMWAN).

Stemming from this fragmented atmosphere were covertly radical Islamic fundamentalists whose ideologies opposed the liberalization of any aspect of Islam and advocated for orthodox practice of religious doctrines. They adopted a microscopic and literal understanding of religious teachings especially in its relation to the direct transliteration of Holy Scriptures, and insisted on the sacred perpetuation of such transliterations. They were in certain cases radicalized and systematically structured. The Maitastine group which emerged in northwestern Nigeria in the 1980s and Boko Haram which began in the northeast are classic examples of such groups. Others include marginal but ‘heretical’ sects such as Mahdiyya which sprung up in Kano, Darul Islam which started around Mokwa in Niger state, Nibrassiya Huda in Cheche village also in Niger state, the Yan Hakika led by Sheikh Baban Salma in Jos, the Qur’aniyyun, Isawa and the Kala Kato. The ideologies of some of these groups included a rejection of state political authority and a refusal to co-exist in a state or country where Sharia was not the governance code.

Fragmentation in Islam as practiced in Nigeria has been credited as a major factor influencing the rise of fundamentalist religious ideologies and groups. Although it was not anticipated that fundamentalist groups would crystallize into global jihadi organizations, the crowded religious marketplace characterized by the struggle for followership and influence was a breeding ground

for doctrinal schisms. It encouraged the isolation of one Islamic group from another, and from the larger Muslim body. Each group began outright condemnation of the other and their scholars escalating rebellion among Muslim elites and youths on very minor, insignificant, fundamental and non-fundamental issues (Gwadabe 2017, 11). This development further divided the Muslim Community, encouraging the establishment of separate mosques and Islamic schools owned by different sects instead of the community. All these fueled bitterness and enmity among these groups infrequently resulting in violence. The clashes between the Izala and the Sufi brotherhoods in the 1980s and the Derika-Izala Market dispute of 1987 in Zuru, Kebbi state were believed to be the result of doctrinal disputes. Similarly, the Sunni-Shiite clashes in Sokoto and Zaria in the 1990s was essentially a conflict within Islam based on sectional differences.

Having paved way for different groups to nurture their own versions of Islam in Nigeria, Fragmentation provided fortitude for fundamentalist groups. It made it impossible for consensus Islamic practice to be promoted as a united response to seemingly violent, extremist ideologies. In certain instances, fragmentation camouflaged the existence of these extremist ideologies. Thus, when Boko Haram developed their own version of Islam following Nigeria's dissenting antecedents, 'mainstream/nominal' Muslims simply dismissed it as another unacceptable version of Islam that yet again had crept into Nigeria's Islamic realm. Having emerged from a backdrop of fragmenting dissents, Boko Haram exploited the disunity to create an ideological brand promoted as superior to any, using varied Islamic leanings.

### **Boko Haram's Claims to Truth**

Having studied and remained for a long time with his Izala-oriented teacher, Sheikh Ja'afar Adam, Muhammed Yusuf developed rudiments of Boko Haram's doctrinal outlook by initially

drawing on ideological inspiration from the *Salafi Izala*. Not considered as a sect but a ‘trend’, Salafist Izala was appealing to Yusuf and other Muslim youths in Nigeria particularly in university campuses at this period (Ben Amara 2013, 143). As a ‘student preacher’ (with Sheikh Jaafar), Yusuf laid the foundations for his then unknown group preaching laced with calls for northern Nigeria to return back to Sharia. The argument for the reintroduction and expansion of sharia law was motivated by unresolved anger at the relegation and overall influence of Islam on society since colonialism, and many in the Muslim community envisioned Sharia’s relegation as a panacea for the complex and messy problems of social injustice, poverty, unemployment and political corruption. Yusuf participated in the delegations that traveled to different parts of northern Nigeria to appeal for the implementation of the sharia law codes between 1999 and 2002. Together with *Salafi Izala*, he believed that the reintroduction of sharia penal codes would represent the enduring appeal of Islamic governance as a basis not only for ordering society but also for social and political renewal.

When Sharia was signed into law following the 1999 general elections in some northern states, it proved to be another case of politicizing religion, a political strategy to win votes from the people than a stringent religious stance. Yusuf and other proponents of Sharia had hoped it would lead to a qualitative improvement in the lives of northern Nigeria’s inhabitants. However, the operation of Sharia as an adjunct to, and in subordination to the secular constitution was anathematized (Mohammed 2014, 23). Much after the implementation and expansion of Sharia in its ‘half-baked’ form, the unchanged circumstances of many who had celebrated its signing created even more anger and disaffection towards the state governments that had adopted the new laws, opening up the north’s social space for extreme religious ideologies to be seeded, and for older strands of radical Islamism to be revived (Crisis Group 2010, 2). Yusuf and many others

concluded that the promises of Sharia will never be truly realized until it is implemented by religious rather than political authorities– in other words, after the installation of an Islamic state (Mohammed 2014, 23).

Following the failure of Izala inspired Salafism to fulfil his yearnings, Yusuf devised poignant changes to his ideological leanings. Revisiting Usman Dan Fodio's 1804 Jihad model of revolution, Yusuf insisted that the full implementation of Sharia requires a change of political regime because a democratic and secular constitution contravenes, and is an affront to the law of God (Perouse De Mont Clos 2014, 8). This was an outright denouncement of the Nigerian state and constitution's legality, and an open challenge to government authority. In another apparent divergence from Izala dispositions, Yusuf established a culture of publicly confronting the state. Unlike the Izala in Jos, Kaduna or Kano, he did not advocate voting in elections and forbade his followers from working in the civil service (Perouse De Mont Clos 2014, 8).

When his teacher, Sheikh Jafar called on his followers to vote for opposition candidate Muhammad Buhari in Nigeria's 2007 presidential elections, Yusuf admonished that voting legitimizes secular democracy and regarded participation in elections as heresy (Perouse De Mont Clos 2014, 8). He then either quit, or as reported by other scholars, was expelled from sheikh's Jafar's Indimi Mosque in Maiduguri, signaling his official split from Izala. Boko Haram's first ideological learning curve thus sprang from its attempt at emulating functional capacities of the state in creating governance codes for the populace through the insistence on the adoption of Sharia. When this proved unattainable, Muhammed Yusuf broke away from the Izala, adapting to the climate of continued conformance with historical fragmentation of Islam in Nigeria, and proceeded to consolidate external ideological underpins into Boko Haram's creed.



Mohammed Yusuf is assumed to have written his book *Hazihi Aqeedatun wa Minhaju Da'awatuna* (This is our belief and method of call) to reshape the Izala doctrine according to his more radical interpretation in 2008 (Perouse De Mont Clos 2014, 8). The group's chosen name was stated in the book as *Jama'at Ahl al-Sunnah li Dawa wa-l-jihad* (people committed to the ways of the Prophet, Proselytization and Striving/Struggling or Holy War) (Kabbani and Hendricks 2016, 9). Identifying the group's mission as a return to the *Ahlus Sunnah wal Jama'a* (adherents to the ways of the Prophet), Kyari Muhammed posits that the message of Boko Haram, as outlined by Mohammed Yusuf, derived from and fed into the extant discourse of Islamism worldwide. The main narratives of the group, as explained in Yusuf's sermons were:

- (1) the rejection of secularism and western democracy - This was derived from the Saudi Arabian establishment's aversion to democracy's subversive streak (Muhammed 2014, 16) and Boko Haram's concept of '*al-hukm bi-ghayr ma anzala Allah*', or 'ruling by other than what God revealed (Quran) is equivalent to polytheism (Thurston 2016, 12);
- (2) Rejection of western education on the basis that it begets mannerisms, institutions, technologies and forms of recreation and entertainment which are outside the judicial permissions of Sharia law and antithetical to pious Islamic living (Echonu 2014);
- (3) Emphasis on physical participation in Islam because Islam does not only exist 'within the walls of the mosque' and personal piety alone was insufficient as Muslims needed to confront the fallen society surrounding them (Thurston 2016, 12);

Under Yusuf, scholars like Moses Echonu agree that Boko Haram's truth claims were an eclectic collage of beliefs cobbled together from controversial medieval Salafi sources, from Wahhabi doctrines, from expedient idiosyncrasies, and from ideologies modeled by the Afghan Taliban (Echonu 2014). Broadly, these theologies are resplendent of the Wahhabi school of thought from

which Yusuf sought greater inspiration after his disappointing experience with the Izala. Yusuf's fixation with Wahabism stem from the latter's seeking the establishment of a pure Islamic State (Caliphate) and a return to "pure Islam, pure monotheism (*tawhid*) and pure prophetic way (*sunna*), as opposed to Bid'ah (innovation) which they believe has become the dominant practice of most Muslims (Abu 'Iyad. As-Salafi 2015). In short, Wahabis preach a pristine version of Islam as practiced in the age of the Rightly Guided Caliphs (Pesature 2015, 1) and this is why Wahabism and Salafism are sometimes seen as vastly similar. Wahabbis distinctively limit the authority in transmitting Islamic religion to three men only: Ahmad Ibn-Taymiyyah, his student Ibn al-Qayyim and Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahhab (Al-Hijazi 2016, 5). Ibn Taymiyyah was a fourteenth century Damascene Salafist scholar, who was devoted to the concept of religious (Islamic) war-Jihad, wrote much on it and even elevated Jihad above the Islamic pillars of fasting and pilgrimage (Muhammed 2014, 14). Many Salafist scholars (including Muhammad Yusuf) used his *fatwas* (rulings) urging Muslims to rise against the Mongols, to justify suicide bombings today (Muhammed 2014, 14). Mohammed Yusuf even named his mosque in Maiduguri after Ahmad Ibn Taymiyyah.

Just as Wahhabism is an expansive theology pool for global Jihadists, so also is the concept '*al-walā' wa-l-barā'*' which for Boko Haram means exclusive loyalty (*al-walā*) to Islam, and disavowal (*al-barā*) of anyone the group considers an infidel (Thurston 2017, 59). This thus becomes a formula for cultivating intense in-group loyalty and anathematizing Muslims who take non-Muslims as allies. This was on the basis that such Muslims have not practiced the proper loyalty to other Muslims (Thurston 2017, 59). Like many other jihadi groups around the world thus, Boko Haram claimed the right to pronounce other Muslims as unbelievers, a process known as *Takfīr*, meaning excommunication (Thurston 2017, 60). In Islamic theology, once

*Takfir* is made of a Muslim; he is considered a *murtadd* (apostate) by which his blood becomes *halal* (permissible) to spill. If *Takfir* is made of an entire community, their men are killed, their properties taken and their women enslaved (Al-Hijazi 2016, 4). The short-lived life of Muhammad Yusuf makes it impossible to contextualize his Wahabbi doctrines with Boko Haram. If Yusuf would have put to practice the Takfirist concept of ‘*al-walā’ wa-l-barā’*’ remains relatively unknown.

With the death of Muhammed Yusuf in 2009 and Boko Haram’s resurgence in 2010, the group’s ideological learning curve changed first as an experiential response to its brutal suppression by the state, and in emulation of violent extremist movements across the globe. Abubakar Shekau took over the leadership of the organization after Yusuf was murdered extra-judicially in a confrontation with the Nigerian military in July 2009. Shekau’s Boko Haram was more brutal, replete with sophisticated Jihadi propaganda, and adept with extreme terrorist actions. In a 2014 video posted by Boko Haram following their attack on Giwa army barracks in Maiduguri, Shekau made known the changes to Boko Haram’s jihadi agenda:

“We fight the whole world, especially all those who don’t practice Islam. We are against all non-Muslims, all non-practicing people. You’ll never be at peace again because we will fight you, and we will fight the whole world. May Allah do whatever is necessary for us to fight in His name and not serve our own interests. Let me tell you: anyone who converts becomes one of ours, so you can still change, because in the eyes of Allah, any sinner who repents is saved. But we’ll fight all those who do not convert because they are our enemies..... In this world, the Koran will dominate. We’re going to burn the constitution, but in the

meantime, let's slaughter and kill! The Prophet cut the infidels' throats and killed them. His companions did too, and that's what inspires us."

(Apard 2015, 60-61).

Under shekau, Boko Haram's claims to truth were justified using specific Quranic verses. For violence against Christians, Boko Haram posits that the Quran says: "fight those who believe neither in God nor the last day, nor hold that forbidden which hath been forbidden by God and His Apostle, nor acknowledge the religion of Truth, (even if they are) of the People of the Book, until they pay the Jizya (tax to be paid by non-Muslims living in a Muslim country) with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued" (Quran 9:29). They also put forward: "Muhammad is the messenger of Allah. And those with him are hard against the disbelievers and merciful among (Muslim) themselves" (Quran 48:29). To justify kidnappings of females, the group put forth the verse "and also prohibited to you are all married women except those your right hands possess (Slaves)" (Qur'an 4:24). Consequently, kidnapped females such as the Chibok and other girls taken from the northeast are seen as 'war booty' (spoils of war), for which Boko Haram members are entitled to do as they wish, including but not limited to marrying them off to members or selling them into slavery.

There were varied attempts to squash the spread of Boko Haram's claims to truth. Saudi Arabia's grand mufti, Sheikh Abdulaziz Al al-Sheikh, declared that Boko Haram was "set up to smear the image of Islam and these extremists not only disavow their Islam, but their humanity" (Power 2014). The Sultan of Sokoto (Nigeria's Islamic spiritual head) publicly attacked Mohammed Yusuf's ideology and Islamic pedigree, labelling Boko Haram members as common criminals. These statement echoes attempts by 'mainstream' Muslims to disassociate themselves from Boko Haram as an ideology, as a group, and as Muslims. Raheel Raza however sees these

attempts as a deflective delusion. He asserts that Boko Haram leader Shekau, known as *Darul Tawheed* is an expert in Islamic monotheism, studying first under a cleric and then at Borno State College of Legal and Islamic Studies (Raza 2016). While Boko Haram can be faulted for orchestrating horrible crimes against humanity, Reza is adamant their ‘being Muslims’ cannot be faulted as they are self-defined Muslims who can throw Quranic verses and hurl *hadeeth* (secondary commentary) faster than we can say ‘fatwa’ (Raza 2016)!

Muhammad Yusuf himself could not be faulted as ‘non-Muslim’ or unknowledgeable in Islamic jurisprudence. Before his death, Yusuf propagated his group’s philosophy not just through recorded preaching sold to the public, but also through ideological confrontations with erstwhile Salafi associates by participating in series of jurisprudential debates with them. These debates were with his former teachers and other Salafi scholars like Sheikh Jaafar Adam, Sheikh Auwal Albani, Malam Isah Aliyu Pantami and Sheikh Idris of Bauchi. They took place in mosques, were recorded, reproduced, and made available for sale to the public. At the debates, the scholars try to argue out Mohammed Yusuf’s consternations especially as regards his animosity towards western education and being employed under the government. His group was accused of exclusivist reading and understanding of the Quran, which makes it easy to quote and misquote phrases, a process Jewish scholar of Islamic history, Lesly Hazleton refer to as the ‘highlighter version’ (Hazleton 2011). The highlighter version is a microscopic and literal interpretation, devoid of contexts, as long as it helps carry projected messages. Boko Haram was said to take only the parts of the Quran that suits their actions and belief without recourse to the context in which such verses were revealed or other verses that explain such verses further. In one such debate, Sheikh Jaafar stated that Yusuf’s views were wrong because they lacked authoritative Islamic support. Jaafar invoked the doctrines of necessity (*darūra*) and Muslims’ collective

interest (*maslahah*) to elaborate the various arguments in support of both modern secular education and working in non-Islamic government positions. Jaafar also developed a moral counter-argument by observing that Yusuf lacked sufficient knowledge of Islam and thus his religious views should thus not be accepted. Yusuf was also presented in these debates as lacking the moral integrity of abiding by his own religious views because he used cars, went to hospitals where western education was used, and had a Nigerian passport issued by the same government he continues to denounce (Sani Umar 2012, 132). Additionally, Jaafar claimed that Yusuf was serving the cause of a conspiracy against Muslims (Sani Umar 2012, 132).

In most of the debates, especially the ones made public, Yusuf usually responded by culling up rulings and evidences from foremost Salafi Imams such as Wahhab, Ibn Baaz and Ibn Taymiyyah. This way, the debates worked in his favor, as Muhammad Gwadabe opined:

“Looking more carefully into early Wahhabi teachings, I start to understand why it is so difficult for people like Shaykh Ja'far Mahmud Adam, Shaykh Auwal Albani and others to win the debates with Muhammad Yusuf and his followers: because Yusuf could quote, to win the argument against his teachers, the books of the same scholars the latter had taught him to revere and consider as the Mujaddids (Prominent scholars who appear every one hundred years to revitalize and renew the religion)! The more I look into the complex debates between "mainstream salafis" like Adam and Albani, and "extreme Salafis" like Yusuf, the more I understand how the big problem there was that Yusuf's thought is at least as rooted (or perhaps more rooted...) in Wahhabi theology than that of his opponents. I think Adam and Albani were in a

very delicate position, because they attempted to moderate a group of their followers that was using, in order to justify its extremism, teachings of the very same people that Adam, Albani etc. had been promoting” (Muhammad Gwadabe Personal email to Hassan Hijazi, January 2016).

The debates also helped to expose his oratory prowess and demagoguery of Muhammad Yusuf, much to the admiration of a section of the people who were easily convinced and carried away by his fiery arguments. It would seem also that the debates earned him sympathetic attention, especially in the sea of other Salafist/Izala ‘Ulamas’ who appeared to be ‘against’ him.

Thus, Boko Haram’s claims to truth were grounded in Islamic jurisprudential justifications which mainstream Muslims were unable to jettison without indirectly presenting Islam as a religion with extremist tendencies. For example, Jaafar Adam in replying to Muhammad Yusuf’s ideological standpoints agreed that all systems of government other than the prophetic *khilāfa* (caliphate) were not Islamic, and should not ordinarily command the allegiance of Muslims (Sani Umar 2012, 133). Adam however contended that the first imperative task for Muslims was to uncover the evil implanted by the British colonialists and remove it by working inside the government, a task that could not be accomplished without first acquiring modern education (Sani Umar 2012, 134).

### **Societal Dynamics and Boko Haram’s Claims to Truth**

Other factors interacted with Boko Haram’s claims to truth. Political, economic and social relations in Nigeria, and specifically the north constituted piles of emotion-driven frustration, pent-up anger and resentment in the citizenry. To begin with, relics of colonial leadership patterns left educational imbalances in the regional outlook of the country. Because the north

was colonially governed indirectly through the existing emirates system, the area had little or no contact with western education brought by Christian missionaries. Home to 19 out of Nigeria's 36 federated states and accounting for 41% (79m) of Nigeria's population, the north ended up being the area with the highest illiteracy rates. Yobe state in the north east for example has literacy rate as low as 7.23 percent. When compared to states in the south, east and west, the gap in literacy levels is even more glaring. Imo state in the east for example has a 96.4 percent literacy level while Lagos state in the west has 96.3 percent according to the literacy data index published by Nigeria's Bureau of Statistics (Amzat 2017).

Inequality between the regions is also reflected in other sectors and spheres of life. In 2015, national poverty index stood at 46%. Of this, Lagos recorded 8.5% and the south west and east averaged 19.3% and 25.2% respectively. The northeast rated 80.9% with the three states affected by Boko Haram reading 70.1 percent (Borno), 90.2 percent (Yobe) and Adamawa 50 percent (United Nations 2015). In 2010, the year Boko Haram resurfaced with more sophisticated terrorist agenda, 9 of the 19 northern states had the highest levels of formal unemployment in Nigeria – some as high as about 40 percent (Hoffman 2015, 4). The disparities between the north and the south are quantified by the Gini Index, which rates Nigeria among the most unequal 35 countries in the world with a coefficient of 48.8 (Varin 2016, 43). The consequences of economic and social realities for the ordinary citizen in the north have been stark intensifying poverty, lack of basic amenities and heightening social dislocations (Ustapha and Bunza 2014, 84-85). This, coupled with stolen election mandates, had led to a growing disenchantment with the democratic system of governance, particularly among jobless young men (Adesoji 2011, 99). Thus, when Boko Haram presented a movement whose ideology was centered on a rejection of



northern Nigeria's governance structure in particular and democracy in general, social discontent was already apparent in societal ranks and provided a ready fuel for the jihadi fire.

Csikszentmihalyi stated that although low status, poverty, or marginalization does not (in and of itself) trigger humiliation or retaliation, "humiliated fury" relates to deprivation that is perceived as illegitimate or unjust, or that of a colonizing act perpetuated by the powerful over the powerless (Stephen 2009, 249). From this perspective, James Waller notes that those who begin the psychological trajectory towards violent extremist behavior may draw on emotional energy generated from both historical and immediate social contexts which they perceived as exclusionary, oppressive and sometimes cruel (Wright Neville et al. 2009, 89). Anas, an internally displaced person at the NYSC camp said:

"Every day, we used to sit in our *majallisa* (gathering by the roadside) without doing anything. No job, no school. We cannot go to anybody for help. We only see our councilors during election. That is when we make money. After we vote, no more. We don't see any politician again. That's why when Mallam (Yusuf) started insulting them, I liked it. I used to buy his *waazi* (preaching). I even prayed behind him (in his mosque). I love him so much." (Anas, 2016)

The appropriation of societal decadence began under Yusuf and has been a defining factor in the emergence and development of violent Extremist agenda in Nigeria. Yusuf was described by Elodie Aparad as "a gifted orator who used national and international news to denounce corruption and inequalities; rally against extortion and excessive violence by the police and the army. By doing do, he developed feelings of injustice; the stoking of hatred and calling for violence which proved to be crucial elements in his discourse (Aparad 2015, 43-44).

More so, Boko Haram activated what Arie Kruglanski theorizes as the psychological construct of *deprivation* and an opportunity for *significance gain*, representing the psychological construct of *incentive* (Kruglanski et al. 2014, 74). Here, Boko Haram, just like Hamas and Hezbollah induced violent extremist behavior by investing their energies in alternative pursuits related to comfort, survival, or health (Kruglanski et al. 2014, 74). Just as Hamas' and Hezbollah's domestic legitimacy and appeal was attained through extensive social service networks that local governments have proven incapable of matching (Mathew and Jacobson 2009, 312), Boko Haram's evangelism also began in the form of a Muslim social movement: catering for orphans, widows, and the vulnerable. Mohammed Yusuf gathered a considerable number of students on his property and regularly fed them (Adam 2007).

He provided start-up capital for members and distributed motor cycles, wheel barrows and other means to members so they could become self-employed. Describing this move as incredibly clever, Lisa Inks in her report for the Mercy Corps highlighted Boko Haram's tapping into the yearning of Northern youths to get ahead in an environment of massive inequality, by giving capital and loans to lure young entrepreneurs and business owners in return for joining the group (Ink 2016). Boko Haram paid their recruits, offering them a livelihood and social status that has nothing to do, initially, with ideological indoctrination (Varin 2016, 45). Widows of members were taken care of as were orphans. As described by Hilary Matfess, Boko Haram was one of those groups serving as a kind of para-government filling the gap left by the absent state (Matfess 2016).

Bashir has a tiny wooden box at the center of NYSC IDP camp where he sold biscuits, sweets, detergent, soap and sachet water. He disclosed that he was a beneficiary of Mallam's motorcycle scheme. "We use to pay daily for the hire purchase. Government burnt everything and killed

Mallam. They did not give us, and they did not allow who wants to give us to do so” (Bashir 2016). Without access to, or interaction with public officials, and thus little opportunity to express grievances, request services, or affect political debates, many communities initially supported the idea of an opposition to what they considered an ineffective government (Matfess 2016). By proffering solutions to societal problems such as unemployment, inequality and exclusion, Boko Haram took over the economic and infrastructural responsibility of the state, and for this, they held the loyalty of their beneficiaries. The change in leadership to Abubakar Shekau changed Boko Haram’s welfare outlook as Shekau’s philosophy was brutally suppressing of all oppositions.

When ISWAP broke out from Boko Haram, they returned to stoking the psychological construct of deprivation, opportunity for significance gain and incentive. Unlike Shekau who killed all and sundry blindly, ISWAP sees the political value in not slaughtering potential future citizens of the more inclusive state they are trying to build, based on sharia law, in the Lake Chad region (Anyadike 2019). ISWAP “levies taxes on fishermen and farmers and in return digs wells, provides security, rudimentary healthcare, price caps on basic food items and trader-friendly policies to encourage the flow of goods. Until mid-last year, life was hard on the islands, but ISWAP’s success in clearing military bases along a corridor to the Niger border has boosted business” (Anyadike 2019). Unlike Shekau’s Boko Haram who abducted girls and subjected them to domestic, violent and sexual abuse, ISWAP returned all but 1 of the Dapchi girls they abducted in February 2019, claiming the abduction was a mistake which did not paint them in a good light. With its established control of communities in Baga and other parts of the Lake Chad Basin, ISWAP continues to show that it is different from Boko Haram, and is a credibly viable alternative to the Nigerian government.

## Conclusion

Having identified the culprits presumed responsible for social inequality as the government and corrupt elites, Boko Haram only utilized imaginaries shaped around Islam to present violence as the morally warranted and effective method of removing such injustice and moving towards the ideal state (Kruglanski et al. 2014, 333). Stephen rice explains this as an attempt by the instigators of extremist violence to formulate a mobilizing framework that encourages disobedience and participation in conflict, a framework that replaces the previously dominant interpretive order legitimizing the status quo and encouraging submission to the authorities (Rice 2009, 250). A male youth from Yobe said: “Boko Haram told us that it is the role of youth to protect the religion of God” (Ink 2018). The reframing of calls for violence as ‘duties’ or ‘moral obligations’ is a technique used to legitimize collective violence, and by linking the perpetration of terrorism to a religious duty, extremists use religion and God as the ultimate authority. The interplay of existing social grievances consequently provided a catalyst for the use of fundamentalist religious identities as extremist propaganda.

The correlation between social inequality, governmental inefficiency and terrorism is contested. Certain studies assert that poverty, unemployment, inefficient governance structures or a failed state do not cause terrorism, and providing all of these would not stop terrorism especially in a multifaceted conflict environment like Nigeria. However, what is important to note is that for terrorist groups, weak or failed states serve as a context within which they can operate relatively freely, deliver socio-economic infrastructures which the failing state is unable to provide, and show an alternative to the dominant political culture by leading an exemplary life that is marked by austerity, community service and rejection of corruption (Brinkel and Ait-Hilda 2012, 5). This was done by Boko Haram pre-2009, and is being continued by ISWAP in parts of the Lake Chad

basin today. If this continues, terrorist claims to truth will always be plausible and potent, and they would continue to have a backbone of support in the Lake Chad Basin and other parts of West Africa.

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