

# “We ain’t coming to take people away”: A Sufi Praise-song and the Representation of Police Forces in Northern Nigeria

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## The context

In most Western media coverage (as well as in most of the national, generally Southern based Nigerian media), the recent clashes between the Nigerian government and the *Boko Haram* sect<sup>1</sup> have been represented as just another illustration of the apocalyptic confrontation between the “freedom-oriented” value system of modernity and the forces that reject it, motivated by irrational religious ideologies. Could there be a more paradigmatic case than an Islamic sect that condemns Western education (in Hausa *boko*) as a sin, to illustrate the intrinsic hostility that Islam nurtures towards all the good of modernity encompassed in the concept of (free?) universal education?

The attitudes of most Northern Nigerians towards modern education are today, in fact, much more pragmatic and less ideological than the apocalyptic scenario advanced both by the founder of the sect and by the Western media. The pursuit of modern education is an option that is chosen by an increasing number of urban youth in the region, and *boko* education may indeed prove to be a good option at times. Not one that will grant you any warranty from falling into the most frightful potential scenario of a capitalistic economic system – unemployment – but one that many Northern Nigerian Muslim youth, men

and women alike, pursue today without either suffering from a dreadful crisis of conscience, vis-à-vis their Islamic faith, or experiencing a breathtaking cultural emancipation and elevation. *Boko* is mainly, for those who are successful, a way to find a job.

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Yet it is true that the path for *boko* education and cultural values to be accepted by people in Northern Nigeria has not been an unproblematic one. Until the late 1950s and early 1960s, sons of notables

were still taken from their villages by the Northern political elite, amidst their cries and those of their families, to be destined to forced *boko* school recruitment, in an attempt to augment and equip the manpower of a nascent Northern political and bureaucratic class provided with the necessary skills to administer a modern State, and thus reinforce the position of the region in the newly independent Nigerian nation.<sup>2</sup> In town, the funny spectacle of the school children walking in military-like rows, with their curious uniforms and an abecedary under the arm would always be accompanied by the mocking songs of their peers, sitting on the mat of a qur’anic school with their *allo* (wooden qur’anic slate) and pen-stalk: “*yan makarantar bokoko, ba karatu ba salla, sai yawan zagin Malam*” (“children of the modern school, they do not pray nor recite the Qur’an: they only learn to disrespect our scholars”).

Through a political and cultural process that culminated in the 1976 UPE (Universal Primary Education) program however, *boko* education has gradually become a fact of life for most urban Muslims of Northern Nigeria.

On the other hand, however, a measure of mistrust towards *boko* as a “system” is still present among Northern Nigerians.<sup>3</sup> *Boko* is seen as a way of life, a set of behaviors identified with “modernity” and the political culture of modern Nigeria, and a scornful attitude towards it is still very common, taking the form of mockery rather than a violent resistance inspired by ideological Islamism or by the sectarian ideology of the unpopular *Boko Haram* group.

While the figure that more genuinely embodies the perceived amorality of the present political system is the greedy politician with his cannibalistic practice of power,<sup>4</sup> the perceived arbitrariness of the judicial and security apparatus of contemporary Nigeria is epitomized by the corrupt policeman. The *Boko Haram* group, before the deadly confrontation of July 2009 that led to the annihilation of the group, had been known for years for its attacks on police stations.<sup>5</sup> Besides being identified as the repressive arm of the immoral *Boko* system responsible, according to the leader of the movements, for all the ills that plague the country, the somnolent staff of local police stations also offered an easy target for night raids aimed at supplying the extremist group with fire-arms.

If the *Boko Haram* did not enjoy a wide popularity among the country’s mainstream Muslims, the diffidence towards *Boko* as a system of values, modernity as a cultural project and the police as an institution that embodies the latter’s myths of order and realities of corruption, is shared by many Northern Nigerians, and has deep social reasons, associated with the low moral performances of the Nigerian State and its representatives.

This paper presents the translation of a recent Hausa Sufi pop song, in which traditional Islamic ideals of justice and leniency are used as a framework to elaborate a critique of the conduct of the Nigerian police. The song is an illustration of the ongoing popularity and vitality of the Sufi genre of *madh* (religious praise song), and of its aptitude for combining several functions, such as re-affirming the established ethical values of the Muslim community, evoking doctrinal principles relating to concepts of sainthood and of the metaphysical status of the Prophet, providing ideological support to the local charismatic leadership of Sufis and scholars and articulating a commentary on issues of broader social concern. All of this alongside a rich, healthy supply of humour. While the eruption

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of violent crises such as the recent *Boko Haram* draws the attention of international media and shocks the Nigerian public opinion, ordinary cultural items like devotional religious songs may offer a view of a cross-section of Northern Nigerian life that sheds some light on the complex net of cultural /religious paradigms and historical memories on

the basis of which the political and social experience of contemporary Nigeria is observed and commented upon on a daily basis by Muslim Nigerians themselves.

The attitude of mistrust towards the police appears thus to us to be the fruit of the combination of two factors: on the one side, the practical experience of a corrupt system where underpaid police forces are known for their daily petty extortions; on the other hand, a more deep-seated concept of justice that ideally tends to place more emphasis on the free transaction between individuals and communities (within limits defined by religious revelation as interpreted by traditional scholarly authority) rather than on a detailed code engraved in a constitution and enforced by a professional security apparatus. The role of the police in the administration of justice had been an old bone of contention between the colonial government



Tijjani Mohammad Milla on the cover of one of his CDs.

and the *'ulama* (Muslim scholars) and *qadis* (judges) of Northern Nigeria. While the colonial judicial system tended to empower the role of police forces, the *qadis* tended to rely exclusively on witness testimony as evidence in criminal cases, and to discard police investigation reports as inherently biased against the offender, inherently 'unmerciful' as it were.<sup>6</sup> The popular Hausa *kirari*, or praising epithet (in this case with a sarcastic overtone) for the policeman, *baban kowa* ("everybody's father"), stands as an implicit critique of an institution that claims for itself an authority over people that has no 'natural', God-given basis, and that arrogates the right to address people and elders in a way that would be appropriate, according to local cultural norms, only for a father with his children. It is in an effort to counter this image and to change people's perception, that the Northern Nigerian radio stations have broadcasted over the past years a government-sponsored, counter-song that portrays the policeman as "everybody's friend" (*abokin kowa*):

*Everybody's friend, the policeman / the  
policeman is important in society  
Police in society are helpful / let's assist  
them  
Let's cooperate with them, people*

It seems to us also that the Islamic utopia that is nurtured (as the initial popular enthusiasm for the Sharia reforms that followed the democratic transition of 1999 shows) by Northern Nigerians, is based on a cultural imaginary that associates with the 'Islamic way' not so much an aspiration towards increased rigour and harshness of the penal system, but, quite contrarily, to limit the scope of the repressive apparatus. While it is legitimate to be skeptical about the viability of the current Sharia reforms, the nature of this (possibly incongruous) aspiration, that combines the nostalgia of old-days security with the traditional emphasis on a justice enacted through judicial mediation rather than law enforcement from above, needs to be fully acknowledged and recognized.<sup>7</sup>

## The song

The author of the song here translated, Tijjani Mohammed Milla, is a resident of Kofar Wambai in the Northern Nigerian metropolis of Kano. He is a former member of the police force, which he left, reportedly, after his 'conversion', when he resolved that his job did not fit the standards of a pious Islamic life. After leaving the police, he started composing songs in the popular genre of *yabon Annabi* (praise to the Prophet), over which the members of the two major local brotherhoods, the Tijaniyya and the Qadiriyya, have competed from the early 1940s, nourishing the bubbling devotional life of Kano city. Milla was soon discovered and broadcasted by the local station *Freedom Radio*, which is known as one of the most popular critical voice of Northern Nigerian society.<sup>8</sup>

Closely associated with circles of the Tijaniyya Sufi brotherhood, Tijjani Mohammed has become over the last few years a regular guest of religious ceremonies such as *Mawlid*s in Kano, where he performs wearing a full police uniform, and has gained the nickname of *Dan sanda na Ma'aiki* ("The Prophet's cop"). After an initial outcry, with some representatives of the Nigerian institutions accusing him of being hypocritical and taking advantage of popular misconceptions and prejudices about the police to make money and finance a lucrative career as a singer, he has eventually been endorsed (probably in an effort to domesticate his critique) and sponsored by some highly influential representatives of the Nigerian police forces who may have realized that paradoxically, it is only through the burlesque of a 'Prophet's cop' parading in the city's religious festivities, that the institution of the police may finally be able to gain among the innately humorous citizens of Kano the acknowledgment and the sympathy that years of solemn Radio advertisements have never succeeded in generating.

The song translated below is entitled *Ba kame muka zo ba* ("We ain't coming to take people

away") and has become a sort of hymn of Tijjani Mohammed Milla, with different editions featuring in his published DVDs.

### BA KAME MUKA ZO BA

It is only through the burlesque of a 'Prophet's cop' parading in the city's religious festivities, that the institution of the police may finally be able to gain among the innately humorous citizens of Kano the acknowledgment and the sympathy that years of solemn Radio advertisements have never succeeded in generating.

#### Chorus:

*We ain't coming to take people away  
We're only bringing good tidings  
By God, people, stop being afraid  
I ain't going to arrest nobody  
And if you're wondering about my khaki cap  
Well, I'm just the Prophet's cop ...*

I begin in the Name of God the Lord, the One, the Only:

Allah the All-powerful, the Generous (*dhul-manni*)

My Lord, remove all constraints from our lives

Oh Majestic one, grant me discernment

My Lord, the Self-Sufficient,

Forbid me from [saying] anything wrong while I start singing my praise for the Prophet

#### Chorus

Oh Lord, multiply your blessings in thousands for *Taha*,<sup>9</sup> the father of *Fati*<sup>10</sup>

And his family and wives, oh Allah, and all his companions

Like Abu Bakr *Siddiku*, Ali the spouse of *Fati*, Umar and Usman,

For they're the warriors and the mounted fighters of the Messenger

#### Chorus

Before I start singing for the Prophet, I've to mention my Shaykhs, my stepladders:<sup>11</sup>

You leader of all saints, Tijjani<sup>12</sup>, by God you are my ladder!

Oh Shaykh, Sidi Abdulkadir<sup>13</sup>, I kneel down before you

That you may stroke my forehead!

My tributes<sup>14</sup> go to the Master of this Time<sup>15</sup>,

Inyass<sup>16</sup> grandson of the Prophet

*Chorus*

From among the scholars [of Kano] my greetings to Karibu<sup>17</sup> and *Sarkin Gida*<sup>18</sup> and all their family Shaykh Sani “mai Zawiya”<sup>19</sup>, I pay visits to their lane Ali Harazumi, o Shaykh ... by God, I will never forget men of this stature<sup>20</sup> And the Shaykh, son of the Shaykh of Gwale<sup>21</sup> They have all obtained the approval of the Prophet

*Chorus*

If you wonder why I’m wearing a khaki uniform I’m holding gun and tear-gas Well, I just had to do that, to make a living for my family, That’s what made of me a cop My Lord, give me a real job, that I may forsake working as a cop [From now on] I’ll immerse myself totally in the service of the Prophet

*Chorus*

Muhammad, Messenger of God, no-one who praises you will be disappointed Praising you is the true wealth The wealth of your praise will never be quenched Thanks to your praise I have become somebody, people are pointing at me Wherever I go people clap their hands: “come and see the cop of the Prophet”

*Chorus*

The light of Muhammad, Messenger of God, has no end Oh my master, beloved of Allah Your beauty, Taha, has no limit

Nobody has been created that even comes close to look like you:

Perfect in character and handsome in form The practice [*Sunna*] of the Prophet is a Mercy, a gift for everybody from the Messenger

*Chorus*

Oh God, you have dispensed gifts out of your generosity And I’ve received my own too: Look at the kind of job we used to do, wherever we go people scorning us But God has chosen me, and from among them [i.e.: the police] he has granted me a gift I’ve lost my old name, now I am just “the cop of the Prophet”

*Chorus*

Oh God, even if I am going to die in this [meagerly paying] profession [of singer], I seek the intercession of the Prophet, and I swear No matter what trouble and hard time, I’m going to cling unto the Prophet alone And you Death take it easy,

no hurry!

Or I’ll report you straight to the Prophet He’s my life’s savior: I’m “the cop of the Prophet”

*Chorus*

In principle our job is a noble one If we [limit ourselves to] protect lives Protect people’s property and lives That nobody may take them away During cold, rainy and dry season, patrolling every corner Offering our selves out for the people of the Prophet

*Chorus*

But the reward for saving the lives of the *Umma*, let it only be God to award it<sup>22</sup>

If you wonder why I’m wearing a khaki uniform I’m holding gun and tear-gas Well, I just had to do that, to make a living for my family, That’s what made of me a cop My Lord, give me a real job, that I may forsake working as a cop [From now on] I’ll immerse myself totally in the service of the Prophet

So I plead to the police, please try to be wary  
If we deceive the trust of God's slaves, you  
know God will never forgive  
May God guide us all ... As for me, I will only  
cling to the Prophet

*Chorus*

If somebody says police are living of dishonest  
means<sup>23</sup>  
Well, I don't know if all of it is *haram*  
But as for me, I prefer to sing for the Prophet  
If a bird prays for rain, it's him  
that rain will hit<sup>24</sup>  
The reins of my life now are  
only in the hands of the  
Prophet

*Chorus*

Muhammad, *Rasulullahi*, the  
passion for your praise  
has got hold of me  
The joy of your praise, when I  
sing it, almost kills me  
I was filthy, thanks to your praise I shine with  
light  
Who would have ever dared to imagine  
That a cop would come out and sing for the  
Prophet...

*Chorus*

The city of Kano is indeed a blessed one  
The secret of Kano is the love for the Prophet  
Everybody there is concerned for the Prophet  
They shun the ones who have no love for the  
Prophet  
Saints [*Awliya*] and *Sharifs*<sup>25</sup>, you are the  
storehouse of the love for the Prophet!  
People of Kano, be kind and generous to me  
by the grace of the Prophet

*Chorus*

Oh Prophet, *sadiqul masduqu*<sup>26</sup>, truthful and  
trustworthy  
*Ya misbahu dhun-Nurayni*,<sup>27</sup> a support for  
everybody to lean on  
You can give Paradise as a gift

Yours is the *Kauthar*<sup>28</sup>, water to sip from  
Oh God, grant us to drink from it, by the merit  
of the Prophet

*Chorus*

Because of your praise, Messenger of God,  
people abuse me  
Some say it's just for the sake of this world  
That I sing my verses only to make money  
But [I answer that] power, material goods and  
intellect

Have all been created for the  
father of *Nana* [Fatima]!<sup>29</sup>  
"Envy is manure for the  
predestined"<sup>30</sup>, so let me  
carry on and sing for the  
Prophet...

*Chorus*

Critics, you can keep your  
money in your pockets:  
I am not asking you for a cent  
I'm holding to the Prophet of

God, prosperity will never come to an end  
It's God who makes you rich, not a handful of  
shillings from the audience<sup>31</sup>  
But indeed, the Prophet's people are going to  
give out  
When they will hear that his praise is being  
sung

*Chorus*

*Fatimat al-Zahra'u*, queen of the Garden of  
heaven  
Greetings, immaculate Queen, I love you from  
the depth of my soul  
You look like the Prophet of God!  
His appearance has been bestowed on *Nana*<sup>32</sup>  
She walks and she talks just like the  
Messenger

*Chorus*

Allah, I'm begging you, take me to the city of  
the Prophet  
To walk around the house of the *Ka'ba*  
To kneel down before the Prophet

Muhammad, *Rasulullahi*, the passion  
for your praise has got hold of me  
The joy of your praise, when I sing it,  
almost kills me  
I was filthy, thanks to your praise I  
shine with light  
Who would have ever dared to  
imagine  
That a cop would come out and sing  
for the Prophet...

People of Kano, help [with your money] this  
Sergeant to travel and pay homage to the  
Prophet  
People of Kano, be kind and generous to me,  
by the grace of the Prophet

### Chorus

In Kano, a means of transport was given to me  
Because of the Prophet, father of *Fati*  
At the *mawlid* of Tijjani Bala,<sup>33</sup> lover of the  
Prophet father of *Fati*  
I was singing my praise-song, and the  
audience was answering with the refrain:  
The ecstasy of love got hold of everybody that  
day!  
'Everybody's father'<sup>34</sup>, the cop, today has  
indeed turned to the Prophet

### Chorus

The Commissioner of 'everybody's father'<sup>35</sup>  
Has offered me a new motorbike  
And told me to travel all around Kano  
And to keep singing without end  
May Allah reward you, may Allah multiply your  
recompense  
Whoever gives me a cent, it's like he's giving it  
to the Prophet himself!

### Chorus

Thank you *Freedom*<sup>36</sup>, may Allah grant you  
success  
And Madobi's *Pyramid*<sup>37</sup>, may Allah strengthen  
you  
And *Radio AM-FM*<sup>38</sup>, you are the Mother of all<sup>39</sup>  
Radios of Kano, well done: indeed you've  
made a service to the Prophet of God!

*We ain't coming to take people away  
We're only bringing good tidings  
By God, people, stop being afraid  
I ain't going to arrest nobody  
And if you're wondering about my khaki cap  
Well, I'm just the Prophet's cop ...*

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## Notes

1. On *Boko Haram*, see the articles by Murray Last and by Kyary Tijani published in the present volume of ARIA.
2. We are thankful to Alhaji I., for generously sharing details of his life experience, and comments on the attitudes of the villagers of Fiji (Eastern Kano State) towards *boko*. For an exhaustive study of the rejection of colonial and post-colonial education in an African Muslim society, see Khayar 1976. For a history of the changing concepts of education in the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial Muslim society of Mali, see Brenner 2001.
3. Almost untranslatable, *Boko* (from the English 'book') is a Hausa term that was used originally to refer to colonial secular education, but is applied more broadly to the cultural values and behaviors associated with colonialism and the West in the past and with the political culture of the Nigerian State and its ruling elite today.
4. 'Cannibalistic' metaphorically, as the political class is perceived as nourishing itself off the rights of other people, but also literally, as candidates to political offices are accused (imagined?) of performing, during the electoral process, rituals involving the eating of human parts that allegedly increase their chances of winning elections. In Kano, children are told not to go out of their homes when the time of elections approach, for fear of being kidnapped.
5. After the extra-judiciary killings of dozens of unarmed men during the *Boko Haram* operation have been exposed by a video report of Aljazeera, the Nigerian inspector general of police has been forced to order the arrest of seventeen Nigerian policemen ([http://www.islamicity.com/m/news\\_frame.asp?Frame=1&referenceID=49468](http://www.islamicity.com/m/news_frame.asp?Frame=1&referenceID=49468)).
6. Umar 2006: p. 47. Islamic law also tended to consider criminal offences as a private matter between the offender and the offended. Thus, even murders could be resolved with the pardon of the offender by the family of the offended in exchange for a monetary compensation (*diyya*). These two procedural habits, together with the respective role of corporal punishments and detention and the inequality of Muslim and non-Muslim citizens in certain instances of criminal cases, were often sources of conflict between the two legal systems in the colonial period: while the British considered extreme forms of corporal punishment like amputations as barbaric, the Maliki judges, in turn, considered adjudging sentences of detention penalties for periods longer than one

- year as unduly oppressive. For a comprehensive study of the (political, legal and cultural) tensions and accommodations between the Islamic and the colonial system in Northern Nigeria, see Umar 2006. See also the remarks of Murray Last (2008) on the changing concept and experience of security (as well as the lack thereof) and law enforcement in Kano, especially pp. 54-56 on prison and police.
7. The eventual contradiction of the two exigencies is well apparent in the ambiguous and controversial role of the institution of Hisba, a parallel Sharia law enforcement body established in most of today's Nigerian 'Sharia States'. See Last 2008.
  8. The first Northern private radio station, *Freedom Radio* is usually closer to 'Wahhabi' or Salafi-oriented circles than to Sufi ones. The radio was also broadcasting regular lecture programs by Ja'far Mahmud, the cleric assassinated in April 2007. It used to be very active in the mobilization for Sharia, although it has more recently become critical of the Kano State Government's running of Sharia. It also hosts a very popular platform for the public critique of the Nigerian judicial system in its regular program *Gatan mara gata*, "The consolation of the inconsolable" by Aminu Daurawa, a close associate of Ja'far Mahmud. This program is dedicated to interviewing people in local prisons and investigating their cases. In several instances, people appear to have been jailed without charge, and to have spent several years waiting in vain for a regular trial, forgotten by the judicial system and given up for missing or dead by their families.
  9. One of the names of the Prophet Muhammad.
  10. Fatima, Muhammad's most beloved daughter.
  11. I.e.: my intermediaries to the Prophet and ultimately to God.
  12. Shaykh Ahmad al-Tijani (d. 1815), founder of the Tijaniyya order, the most popular Sufi *tariqa* in Nigeria.
  13. Shaykh 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani (d. 1166), founder of the Qadiriyya Sufi order.
  14. *Jinjina*, Hausa salute to a superior by shaking a raised fist.
  15. *Shehu z-Zaman*, i.e. the Pole, who occupies the top of the saintly esoteric hierarchy at any particular time.
  16. Shaykh Ibrahim Nyass (d. 1975), the influential Tijani scholar from Senegal.
  17. Qaribullahi, son and *khalifa* of Shaykh Nasir Kabara (d. 1996), who was the most influential leader of the Qadiriyya brotherhood in 20th century Nigeria and a prolific scholar and poet.
  18. "King of the house", a nickname given by Shaykh Nasir Kabara (see note above) to his son 'Abd al-Jabbar.
  19. The Shaykh of the old tijani *zawiya* of Koki ward, built by the Moroccan Muhammad al-'Alami during a visit to Kano in the 1920s.
  20. Shaykh Ali Harazim of Hausawa ward in Kano, today in his nineties, is considered as one of the most saintly figures of Kano, and is one of the focuses of veneration by the authors of devotional poetry and songs. Several famous singers popular among the city youth like Kabiru Mawlana are associated with his *zawiya*.
  21. Gwale is a local government in Kano. The person referred to here could be Malam Uthman (*Shehu*) Mai Hula (d. 1988), son of a renowned scholarly family and one of the first disciples of Shaykh Ibrahim in Kano.
  22. I.e.: instead of taking bribes from the people.
  23. Lit.: "they are amassing *haram*".
  24. A Hausa proverb. In this song's context, it means: "if the police have a bad reputation, they are the only ones to blame".
  25. Descendants of the Prophet.
  26. In Arabic in the song: "truthful and trustworthy".
  27. In Arabic in the song: "Oh lantern, oh holder of two lights". The latter (*Dhun-Nurayn*) is commonly used as an epithet of the Caliph 'Uthman.
  28. A river in Paradise.
  29. As the Universe, according to the Qur'an, has been created to serve God, then Muhammad, who is the first and the perfect servant of God, is the purpose of the Universe and what it contains. So – the author argues – if the singer uses his gift of eloquence to praise Muhammad, and this becomes a source of livelihood for him, at the end it is only Muhammad receiving (praise) and Muhammad giving out (cash)!
  30. A Hausa proverb. Envy for the success of the one who is destined to achieve is like manure, which is unpleasant but helps the growth of plants.
  31. *Taro-taron liki*. Money that is poured upon musicians by the audience during a performance.
  32. A Hausa surname for Fatima.
  33. Malam Tijani Bala Kalarawi, a Muslim scholar who teaches in the ward of Fagge in Kano.
  34. See above for an explanation of this sarcastic Hausa epithet for the policeman.
  35. Dr Tijani Mohammed Naniya, Commissioner of Police in Kano State.
  36. *Freedom Radio*, the first station to broadcast Milla's songs.
  37. *Pyramid Radio* is another private station, broadcasting from Madobi, a small town in Kano State.
  38. The State Government radio.
  39. It is the oldest radio in Kano.