

***Boko Haram*: Reflections of a Nigerian Progressive**

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The Imperative of Understanding

The social scientist, by his training and orientation must be after the truth, at least approximately, as truth can be established by natural scientists in the natural sciences. Truth in the social sciences cannot be finite, but as Karl Popper (1902-1994) says, it may reign as finite, as long as no higher truth has come to “falsify” it in the same subject matter.

Religion, which the social scientist sees as man’s effort to understand and rationalize the natural and supernatural environments he invariably lives in, must necessarily deal with both the real and the mythical. The real as he actually experiences; the mythical as his senses, usually guided or “manipulated” by others (as Marxists would say), enjoin it on him. Religion, as some political theorists see it, is the biggest and most potent ideological construct, with apology to true believers of whatever religion. It is therefore not surprising if religious beliefs have been causes of dissension and conflict in society throughout ages.

The *Boko Haram* conflagration that engulfed Borno and some other Northern states of Nigeria in late July 2009, is not the first instance of sectarian religious conflict, nor it is likely to be the last in the country, unless Nigerians make a genuine effort to understand it. Not only to understand the *Boko Haram* event in its singularity and religion as its vehicle, but also the powerful dynamics of the latter and the nature of human beings. This is the burden of this paper, if it succeeds at all.

The second lesson to understand is the resemblance, if not the near identity of views of the sedate, even if still derisive “radical” postures of the intellectuals of Nigerian Universities and those of the unlettered adherents of *Boko Haram*. Both, in their own right, and despite their different perspectives – and the differences are significant, even fundamental – have reached the one single conclusion that Nigeria is a failed State

Let me first of all say, that one positive side to the *Boko Haram* tragedy in Borno State is the “wake up call” it served the leaders of this country, if any such “wake up call” was ever needed. Indeed, those of us so often hounded and vilified as “radical” academics and/or politicians had always, stridently made such “wake up” calls, but our voices only fell on deaf ears and earned us reprimands and reprisals. Take the travails of the eminent, now late “radical” scholar Dr. Yusuf Bala Usman of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, in the hands of a then Minister of Education, now a sitting Senator. Bala was hounded for “teaching what he is not paid to teach”. Also the deportation of Dr. Patrick Witmot, of the same University, ostensibly for the same reason is another case in point. These incidents threw out the altercations from the serene and secure environment of

University Seminar Halls and lecture theatres to the boisterous platforms of political parties, market squares and motor parks from where the adherents of *Boko Haram* abound.

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There is neither the time, the space, nor even

the need to fully document the positions of the two groups. It is enough to say that while our conclusions on the state of the Nigerian nation are similar, our methods are different, and so our means.

***Boko Haram* and the Progressive Radicals: Objectives and Methods**

The objectives of both Nigeria's diversely lettered radical progressive intellectuals and the scarcely lettered *Boko Haram* members apparently come to converge in their common desire to change the political status quo. But their respective means and methods are different.

Progressive intellectuals do not a priori preclude violence in the process of politics. After all, the political state is defined by its monopoly of violence. This monopoly bestows the state the ability to govern. In modern state systems, this ability derives to the state from its very citizens, and it is mediated through political processes developed over centuries. In its final and refined form this process has come to be called democracy. The present Nigerian government has come to be established through such democratic processes. But in the Nigerian experience, the process is no doubt faulty, and the foundation of the Nigerian state is – no doubt – shaky.

Many genuine progressives must have felt, at first, that they could share some sense of affinity with *Boko Haram*, as it presented itself as an anti-corruption and pro-people pressure group. Many, with a sense of frustration and disappointment about the current state of affairs of the Nigerian political elite produced by the democratic process, had said to themselves: we had seen it coming! We had said so! Blame the Nigerian leadership – for their gluttonous corruption and politics of deceit. So said the progressive intellectuals, more or less as *Boko Haram* – in the different language of religion and in a more demagogic way – was propagating.

This bitter truth, progressive Nigerian intellectuals and politicians have never been tired of saying since the time of the First Republic (1960-1966) but, quite clearly, with a very marginal success. The closest they ever came to success, an event more symbolic than substantial, was in 1979, when progressive political forces came to hold a government in the two core Northern Nigerian states, Kano and Kaduna. This was under a political party that traced its ideological origins back to a revolutionary First Republic Nigerian political party, the Northern Elements' Progressive Union (NEPU) established by the doyen of Nigeria's revolutionary politicians, Mallam Aminu Kano.

The Peoples' Redemption Party (PRP) had grown out of the womb of the NEPU and was fathered by the same politician, Mallam Aminu Kano. The PRP did not only have the most progressive manifesto of all the parties registered to participate in the Second Republic (1979-1983), but thanks to its charismatic governors, Alhaji Balarabe Musa of Kaduna State and Alhaji Abubakar Rimi of Kano State (1979-1983), it was able to effectively mobilize the two Northern states to a revolutionary take-off pad. This experience did not last however, and the two governors were unceremoniously thrown out of power by a coalition of reactionary politicians and a power-hungry section of the Nigerian military, willing to subvert the will of the people for a bowl of pottage.

Slow, but Sure

It must be noticed that the rude annihilation of the genuine democratic will of Nigerians has been a constant feature of the political life of the country since Independence in 1960. The expectations of the majority of Nigerians who were dreaming of a life of bliss after Independence has been repeatedly denied and frustrated by a succession of undeserving leaders. It is not surprising that, in the long run, this would lead to such blow-ups as the *Boko Haram* incident.

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Although *Boko Haram* can be credited with an objective shared with University intellectuals who have a genuine interest for changing the political culture of the country, the religious movement can still be criticized for choosing wrong means and methods. University intellectuals incline towards dialogue. Dialogue is slow, but sure. University intellectuals have neither the haste nor foolhardiness to take up arms, even for defense, as *Boko Haram* did. They do not need it. They have time and history on their side.

Therefore, while University intellectuals were waiting their time until the right moment would eventually appear, the tempestuous *Boko Haram* movement, irresponsibly and inelegantly, struck. *Boko Haram* has been tempestuous because it has allowed emotion to rush it into precipitate, foolish and eventually fatal action, and inelegant because it did not see the need to properly, if even slowly and painfully, anchor its struggle on the will of the majority of the people. It has worked on abstract theological precepts rather than on practical realities on the ground. Such would have been, on the contrary, the way of progressive University Intellectuals, who might in the process team up with progressive activists in society. They would eventually change the tide of reaction nation-wide, through dialogue and other meaningful democratic processes, at some due time. This may be cowardly, but it is less costly and – I believe – ultimately wiser.

The Cost of the *Boko Haram* Uprising

The *Boko Haram* uprising has been costly in terms of not only the number of people killed – most of whom in the prime of their lives, but also the furor it has set ablaze nation-wide. In terms of its scope, the most evident limit of *Boko Haram* was its narrow appeal for, in essence, *Boko Haram* was a sectarian phenomenon, limited as it was to a peculiar section of Muslim clerics. Even in Maiduguri where it ap-

parently had enjoyed some free reign, its followership was limited to illiterate and semi-illiterate youth, and not able citizens occupied in productive pursuits while yet engaging in theological disputations in their spare time.

For this youthful followership, which could be defined as dropouts, the message delivered by its undoubtedly charismatic leader, was usually a balm. They had neither the experience nor the knowledge to peer through it. They had swallowed the bait hook and line, and eventually they followed their master up the garden path to disaster.

There are some who followed Muhammad Yusuf, the late leader of *Boko Haram*, consciously and willingly. But this must be due to what Karl Marx might call false consciousness, rather than to a lucid decision, even though in some cases, these illustrious followers of Muhammad Yusuf were quite enthusiastic. The former Commissioner of Borno State, now late, Alhaji Buji Foi, was one such an avid or enthusiastic follower. Considered one of the leading local protectors and financiers of the movement, he was killed during the repression of the group, and videos of his killing have also circulated in the internet through youtube video site.

Now, if care will not be taken, the *Boko Haram* misadventure is likely to inflict on the nation an even “more costly cost” than the lives we have lost and the properties destroyed. There is no doubt that the peoples’ psyche was (and still is) injured by the loss of their sense of security. In fact, for the citizens of Maiduguri, the epicenter of the incident, at the heat of the moment, the cry – and indeed the prayer – was: “death is round the corner, who would come and save us?”. Saviours came concretely in the form of the Nigerian military and the Nigerian Police.

From the perspective of one who lived through the unfolding events of the *Boko Haram* incident in Miduguri, in the recesses of our rooms

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and hideouts, we were pinned down, petrified, praying that our lives be spared from the holocaust that had befallen us for four endless days during which I would say all of us lost our manhood. The only exception to the latter were our gallant soldiers and police officers, who were lobbing fireballs at the *Boko Haram* insurgents, to save the state, nation and the innocent citizens. Thousands of innocent citizens were caught up in a fight which they neither understood nor sought, and the security officers were duty-bound to defend them. Relief was the main emotion felt by all in the metropolis when, at last, the *Boko Haram* insurgents were routed, and their leader Muhammad Yusuf was killed. I understand troops marching back to their barracks from the theatre of war were escorted by cheering crowds, happy that they were now liberated by their gallant security men!

Turn of Events

This being the mood all over Maiduguri, it is with shock, surprise and disbelief that we heard a different song being sang on the Nigerian airwaves and written on the pages of Nigerian newspapers. This is the song about “extra-judicial killings” which were being labeled against the military and the state officials who have prosecuted the war against the *Boko Haram* insurgents. We the victims, in our innocence and naivety, but more so because of our genuine gratitude for being saved from the grip of religious fanatical zealots, to whom death is an honour and would sure kill us if they were allowed, felt betrayed.

Nobody, but those of us who have been at the butt of this traumatic *Boko Haram* war could understand the service the military and the state officials who executed the war against *Boko Haram* – to save our lives – lives of innocent citizens-men; women and children, can appreciate. And we have appreciated!

For us, the niceties of war protocol, rightly and

necessarily enshrined in the annals of the Geneva Convention, were not of immediate concern. Nor the righteous insistence of the Human Right Crusaders without whose steadfastness the world, Nigeria in particular, would have been hell on earth. But this notwithstanding, to play up the “extra-judicial killing” dimension, almost to the level of holding the governor of the State and security agencies who prosecuted this war for criminal responsibility, sort of misses the point. Thus, what is the context under which the *Boko Haram* mayhem should be understood?

Boko Haram as a Protest Riot

Boko Haram must be seen, first and foremost, as a protest riot against the Nigerian State, for the State’s own failure. The Nigerian State has abysmally failed to provide the greatest good for the greatest number of its 140 million people. Over 70% of Nigerians are daily ravaged by hunger, disease and general wants of all the essentials of life. To these, the *Boko Haram*

message is a message of salvation. Mamman (Muhammad) Yusuf, the *Boko Haram* leader, who from all accounts was very charismatic and had considerable oratorical skill, simply exploited the hopelessness and frustration of the poor in Nigeria, and ultimately led them into the disastrous uprisings of 24th – 29th July 2009.

Nigerians have the right to be angry over what happened.

But this anger must be well focused and directed to the right quarter. The focus must be on the politics of Nigeria. Nigerian politics, formally a democracy, is in reality, an aristocracy. As an aristocracy – i.e. government of the few – though, it also lacks the essential characteristics of honour and valour inherited from progenitors born and raised to rule. Where valour and honour, that are the defining values of an aristocracy, are upheld, at least in principle, the aristocratic system forces the aristocrats to rule with due consideration. Nigerian crop of leaders on the contrary, especially the current crop, are mere

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grunts from nowhere – and they have certainly not bothered to consider the good of the people, even as on so many occasions the people have gone through the arduous task of voting them into office.

***Boko Haram* and the Islamic Utopia**

Since the ugly incident in Maiduguri and other parts of the Muslim North in Nigeria in late July 2009, many among the Muslims have condemned *Boko Haram*, and some have even denied it its Muslim identity. This is disingenuous, as it can neither explain the appeal that *Boko Haram* had on its following, nor the dynamics that caused it. Nor can it drive *Boko Haram* as a phenomenon out of our polity.

There is more to *Boko Haram* than meets the eye. *Boko Haram*'s credentials are eminently Islamic – though indeed expressed in a populist mood. The virus in *Boko Haram*'s blood is, to a greater or lesser extent, in every unswerving Muslim cleric's blood. In its pristine form, Islam does not accept secular legislation. In fact, no legislation is permitted as all legislations have already been issued by Allah Almighty and transmitted as *wahy* (revelation) to Prophet Muhammad (*saws*) to guide human conduct and especially to establish good governance. And this is for all time and for all people. The prophet of Islam Muhammad (*saws*) is the first *Imam* (leader) and titular head of the community. This revealed law is sacrosanct and complete. It does not change and requires no refinement by rulers. Rulers are to adhere closely and strictly to this divinely revealed law, which is permanently codified and recorded in the Qur'an. The qur'anic revelation is supplemented by the practice and teachings of the Prophet himself, when he lived and led the Muslim community, in

the early 7th Century. These laws and practices (including subsequent refinements) are institutionalized as the *Sharia* – the true path – for the Muslims to follow throughout life.

This, at least, is the ideal, and the ideal is always realized only to a degree of approximation. Immediately after the days of the Prophet Muhammad (*saws*), Islam expanded to the four corners of the then known world. Today, both in terms of reach and impact, Islam is universal and global, and it controls the most diverse and heterogeneous of followership in the world. Because of this, Islam has had to necessarily become very tolerant and adaptive to different cultures, as well as social and political circumstances. But also, not unexpectedly, as it tries to adapt to different times and climes throughout the world, Islam is always plagued by controversies of interpretation and practice.

The crux of the matter for Nigerians is to reach a consensus over what must be the role of Islam in the country's politics today. *Boko Haram*'s pugnacious though ineffectual intervention is both a lesson and a warning that Islam, no matter how strong its appeal as a discourse of protest to articulate a critique of a corrupt leadership and counter it, cannot and must not be imposed on Nigeria as a state religion. It cannot even be imposed on the Muslim population by force. Only by strength of example and good governance, which the Muslims must establish through their daily lives and personal conduct, will such a credibility naturally give Islam a positive political role. The general well-being which will ensue could bring the development which would ultimately cement the unity of a country of 130 million people, of whom Muslims constitute at least a half.

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