

The Pattern of Dissent: *Boko haram* in Nigeria 2009

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The *Boko Haram* incident in Nigeria in July 2009 provoked two distinct responses within Nigeria: one very scornful of the ‘terrorists’ while making them out to have been a serious threat and focusing on the ‘huge’ arsenal they were supposed to have with them. The delight at the success of the police and army in wiping the cult out was an important part of this line. A later development was the parading of a convert to Islam who had, it was claimed, been sent to Afghanistan by *Boko Haram* to train in bomb-making. The other line was to dismiss the incident as involving yet another fringe religious group of no significance, and implying that the police and the army over-did the violence of their response. They report that, far from being heroic, the police carried out extra-judicial murder on a systematic and quite large scale. The Nigerian newspapers tended, if anything, to switch from the first line to the second, with the BBC Hausa service and its Nigerian journalists providing early crucial evidence. Subsequently, photos, recordings and film footage became available publicly, and these tended to discredit the police’s version of events. As for the bomb-maker’s claims, to many experienced observers of police press conferences they seemed very implausible. Given that the key members of *Boko Haram* were killed, we will now never have as much detail as we’d like about the group, but I wish to offer here some of the historical background to incidents of this kind.

The incident

In outline, the course of events went as follows

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(I was in Kano at the time). In Bauchi town a branch of *Boko Haram* had been under surveillance by the intelligence services (SSS) for some time, and in early July the SSS had instructed the police to raid the group and arrest many of its members. In response, those of the group who had evaded arrest attacked the police station where their colleagues were detained in an effort to release them forcibly. This led to a shoot-out in which a number of police as well as several *Boko Haram* members died. The incident prompted the authorities to extend the action against *Boko Haram* to the group’s headquarters in Maiduguri, where its leader Shaikh Muhammad Yusuf had built up a sizable following in one section of the city, and had collected weapons in the preparation for the expected attack by the police upon his quarter. Muhammad Yusuf had been arrested by the police before (he was later released by the courts in Abuja), and seems to have known a show-down was in the offing. Maiduguri had already recently been the scene of a confrontation with the police. In that incident several *Boko Haram* members, who rode motorbikes as ‘*yan acaba*’ (motorbike taxi drivers), refused to wear the helmets that they had been instructed to wear, and in June 2009 seventeen were shot and wounded by the police of the Governor’s “Operation Flush” force in a fracas linked with a funeral procession.

The Shaikh’s followers around northern Nigeria were being summoned to Maiduguri – some obeyed the call, selling up all their property at home and moving with their families to Borno.

When the army was instructed by the President, Umaru Yar'adua, to close *Boko Haram* down, they did so over a period of two or three days using artillery and tanks as well as infantry. Muhammad Yusuf was captured by the army and after a brief interrogation was handed over to the police who then shot him. They also shot his father-in-law after calling him to the police station, and they shot, among others, the Borno State ex-Commissioner of Religious Affairs Buji Foi who had been funding the group (it was his execution that was videoed and eventually put on Youtube). The group's arms cache was displayed, but despite the talk of 'artillery' and suggestions of a 'bomb factory' much of it was simply machetes and the like. The group meanwhile had also launched mainly ineffective attacks on police stations in Potiskum, Wudil and Danja, which showed the extent of the group's network across the north and alarmed the authorities still further. The security services of several States, in the weeks that followed, went after anyone with an iconic beard and those with known 'fundamentalist' sympathies. In Bauchi the police took no chances – they arrested the entire ten-man state Taekwondo team as they practised in IBB Square, but eventually they were released without charge. The 'panic' was widespread; Niger State went so far as to disperse the 3000-strong, long-standing, peaceable community *Dar al-Islam* near Mokwa. The President also ordered an enquiry into the extra-judicial killings.

Analysis

The pattern of events followed a standard format, in four stages, that dates back to at least 1775-1800 AD. Stage 1 sees an Islamic scholar 'on the make' attracting a small following; the local ruler supports him in order to win his political backing. Some sons of the local elite join and protect the nascent community. In stage 2 the scholar's following grows so large that the local ruler and his officials get seriously alarmed and try to limit the scholar's following. Stage 3 sees subordinates from the ruler's polity get involved

in a major violent fracas with subordinates from the scholar's community; the confrontation (often involving the release of prisoners) is too big to be ignored. In stage 4 all-out war is formally declared between the local ruler's state and the scholar's community, resulting in (usually) the scholar losing out, but on at least one famous occasion the scholar's community eventually won after a four-year 'jihad' and set up a new state (the Sokoto caliphate). The leader then, Shaikh 'Uthman, was of course a scholar of far greater calibre than Muhammad Yusuf, but the government's response was strikingly similar. A more recent example where the scholar lost was in Maitatsine's "rising" in Kano late in 1980 when the Governor Abubakar Rimi, who had initially sought Maitatsine's support and given him lunch, eventually sent in the tanks and killed some 4,000 civilians.

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Maitatsine's movement shared some characteristics with *Boko Haram*. Both were hostile to aspects of modernity associated with the 'westernisation' of everyday life in northern Nigeria. Both had their headquarters in a major city, taking over a run-down quarter; Maitatsine was the first to go urban, since before him all radical religious groupings went deep into the countryside where they lived almost beyond the government's reach. Many radical groups are still based in deep-rural areas where they pose no threat to the government. Notable examples today are the Digawa in Kano and the Salihawa in Katsina, both 19th century (at least) in origin. A characteristic of such groups is that they follow an unusual practice known only in archaic Islam such as praying only three times a day, or in *Boko Haram's* case apparently wearing shoes in a mosque (which they reportedly did in Bauchi's Muda Lawal market). But a group that comes to the city is explicitly challenging the legitimacy of the government and its policies, especially its espousing of 'western' values and commodities. The recent flood of rural youths into the cities makes urban frustrations the logical vehicle for an Islamic movement.

Al-Zakzaky's modern Shi'i-oriented group, *al-Ikhwān al-Muslimun*, were thus similarly urban in the early 1990s and had its own radio station to broadcast its message. Its base in Zaria was eventually (1996) over-run by the police, but the group and its leader survived and still recruit young members especially in schools and colleges. In Sokoto a militant Shi'a group has had to leave town and are now up-country, almost 'invisible'. I suggest that, had *Boko Haram* similarly opted for a deep-rural base, they too would probably be still functional but on a small scale. Indeed some of its members may well have now sought obscurity in the countryside.

It is important to note that Nigeria's constitution gives everyone a right to believe whatever he wills. It is therefore in no way illegal to espouse and promote beliefs that are "unorthodox", and it is on these grounds that courts tend not to convict cult leaders should the police bring them before the courts. By contrast, preachers who incite violence or simply a disregard for law and order, are indeed guilty of an offence; but few if any preachers call for violence openly. Much more common is to call for followers to disengage from the government, from 'Nigeria' and focus instead on the Day of Judgment and what is necessary to ensure entry to paradise. They preach that the way to do that

is to be a strict Muslim and associate with similarly strict Muslims in a scholarly, self-sufficient community in which you can study the Holy Qur'an and other texts. Such a call can attract the sons of the rich too – and in *Boko Haram's* case it is thought they may have delayed the authorities from taking action earlier.

For young men (and women), however, with so desperately poor an education that they cannot get jobs in the modern sector, joining such a community offers a real solution. Being jobless and with no prospect of getting a job (their Eng-

lish is usually almost non-existent), they also have no prospect of finding a woman to marry, and hence no prospect of having children or a house of their own in which to build a family. If they have been to primary or secondary school they may have never developed the skills to be a farmer or a craftsman. In which case, the prospect of being a member of a pious, radically religious community is the best available as within such a community you might find a wife; you acquire the learning (and a command of some classical Arabic) which enables you to provide Islamic services to others and so earn a living (albeit as alms given before you); you earn the respect of the world at large as a pious scholar and is given the title of 'Mallam' or even Shaikh, or Ustaz; you might well become in time



Dead bodies of suspected Boko Haram followers in Maiduguri surrounded by Nigerian police forces.

the Imam of a mosque with a regular salary and status thereby even becoming famous for your sermons and acquiring a following of your own. In short, joining a group like *Boko Haram*, or the late Shaikh Ja'afar Adam's *Ahlus Sunna wal Jama'ah* (with which *Boko Haram* was once identified but was then split off as too extreme; Shaikh Ja'afar was murdered in his mosque in 2007) or the new Shi'i groups may seem a wise career move for many a young man, especially when all other openings appear closed to him.

With the huge growth in population there are

increasing numbers of religious specialists looking for posts either as teachers of Arabic, the Qur'an and Islamic sciences or as imams of a mosque. Businessmen, worried about the legitimacy of the sources of their new wealth, tend to build a mosque alongside their premises. These mosques are known colloquially as "*Allah ga naka*" ("Allah, here's your share") – and the owner may hire a young imam for the mosque as part of his 'good works'. Many young students go round preaching, or perform other ritual services for people (such as repeating for them 10,000 prayers), and are given alms, generously if the work done seems effective. In this context, then, there is competition to stand out from the crowd with a message that is radical enough to attract attention or with displays of great learning that impress. A successful preacher/teacher gathers around him a growing following who spread his message. Ustaz Muhammad

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Yusuf was one of these rising teachers (he was 39 at his execution), with a very distinctive message, albeit one that has been heard before. He may, however, have pushed it to more of an extreme than usual. The competition to be heard encourages extremism, especially when there's an audience so disenchanted with contemporary conditions of life that they are receptive to any message that promises to radically alter those conditions.

Boko Haram's message was clear: "*boko*", the western-style education that equips you for the modern corrupt life of Nigerian politics and business, is un-Islamic and should be shunned. [Boko simply derives from 'book', which when in roman script is iconic of western education; "*Boko Haram*" simply became the nickname (and slogan) for the group. In Maiduguri they were known simply as *Yusufiya*.] Politicians and the wealthy elite epitomise *boko*, while the police epitomise both the elite's means of enforcement and endless petty extortion on the roads. Muhammad Yusuf specifically distinguished technology from *boko* having mobile phones, motorcycles, television &c was all right, since

they were technology – "if Allah's enabled you to afford it, have it", he said, "they are not *haram*". This is the same distinction made about medicine (and other sciences): all knowledge is ultimately Allah's and a Muslim should pursue it "as far as China"; Allah enabled westerners to develop modern medicine which Muslims should now acquire for the good of the Muslim *umma*. But the culture of *boko*, of the '*yan boko* (those with aspirations to non-Islamic ways of living), is indeed *haram*. Admittedly, Muhammad Yusuf is reported as having unscientific notions about rain, denying Darwinism and the spherical shape of the world, but since he was executed before he could be thoroughly cross-examined, we will never know exactly what he preached. He had been, I was told, a student in Ahmadu Bello University, though my colleagues there did not know which department he had been in. Others say it was University of Maiduguri. He certainly was close

to some teachers there.

Maitatsine for years (pre-1980) had promulgated a rather similar message, but his followers at the end were specifically targeting the 'western' gadgets they found on people – such as watches – and tried to ban Muslims from wearing them. So Muhammad Yusuf's distinction between technology and *boko*, though new, is an understandable development now that almost everyone has a mobile phone and motorbikes are the transport of the youth – as neither had been ca. 1980.

This acceptance of technology extended to modern weaponry. The only easy, cheap way to acquire AK 47s and the like is to mount a surprise raid on a remote police station, preferably late in the night when there are only sleepy guards on duty. The alternative way is to buy them from soldiers (guns for sale were readily available – if sometimes expensive – after the Nigerian army returned from Liberia). Muhammad Yusuf's group, or radicals similar to it, seemingly specialised in such raids (two such raids had happened in recent years: one in rural Borno, the other in

urban Kano). They needed guns because any attempt to set up an autonomous community, even in the 'bush', risked being confronted with force. The police in particular tend to shoot first as they have learnt from bitter experience when dealing with armed robbers; and they distrust the courts' frequent willingness to set free those the police 'know' are criminals. Hence, any radical group needs its own weaponry not only to face down the attack that will inevitably come but also to make the police reckon that any arrests they might make will not be a push-over. In a sense, it is a self-fulfilling prophecy: a group that gets arms violently will eventually find itself facing counter-violence from the state. But possibly that leads to martyrdom and all the rewards promised martyrs in the next world who die at the hands of a secular, un-Islamic force like the police or the army.

I would suggest, then, that the *Boko Haram* incident followed a pattern that goes back at least some 200 years in northern Nigeria, and has a logic to it that is understandable given the conditions of life for the poorly educated young today in a Nigeria where the elite are astonishingly well-off on 'stolen' money. The young know this as never before. They can organise a riot using mobile phones and motorcycles, they are ready to

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match the police's violence and they can quickly travel to support their fellow group-members. One day they might win. They might get the mass support that would bring the government down (as has happened before); or they would die. This time they died.

Sources

My main sources in Kano at the time were daily or weekly newspapers like *Daily Trust*, *Leadership*, *Weekly Trust*, *Amana* and local radio. In addition, colleagues, especially in Bayero University but also elsewhere in Kano, Zaria, Kaduna, Malumfashi, Sokoto and Abuja, discussed it with me as they heard news from their friends in Maiduguri, Potiskum, Wudil, Jos &c. I was not conducting research on it. Subsequently, Dr Kyari Mohammed has sent me his analysis from Yola. For further reading on Sokoto, see my *Sokoto Caliphate* (1967) or the late Mervyn Hiskett's *The Sword of Truth* (1973); on Maitatsine, see for example, Allan Christelow's "The 'Yan Tatsine disturbances in Kano", *The Muslim World*, April 1985, 69-84; Raymond Hickey's "The 1982 Maitatsine uprisings in Nigeria: a note", *African Affairs*, 1984, 83: 251-256, or Elizabeth Isichei's "The Maitatsine risings in Nigeria, 1980-1985", *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 1987: 17.3, 194-208.