

# Sacrilege of the Sacred: Boko Haram and the Politics of Unreason

Written by Daniel Agbibo

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## Sacrilege of the Sacred: Boko Haram and the Politics of Unreason

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DANIEL AGBIBO, JUL 26 2013

In 2013, Boko Haram, an extremist Islamic group from northeastern Nigeria, represents the biggest threat facing peace and unity in Nigeria, Africa's most populous and oil-rich country. The group has created a wave of religious violence that is spiralling out of control. In an already highly polarised country of roughly 150 million people and nearly 350 ethnic groups speaking 250 languages, where about 50 per cent of the population is Muslim and 40 per cent Christian, and where nearly three-quarters of the people eke out a living on less than \$1.25 a day, the potential for inter-ethnic and religious pogrom looms ever large. In addition, poverty and lack of gainful employment in the Muslim north of Nigeria, coupled with population increase and state's inability to deal effectively with non-state groups, can turn northern states into an ideal recruitment ground for extremists and a springboard which they could expand into the rest of the world.

This paper explores the ongoing religious terrorism of Boko Haram in northern Nigeria, and its growing connection with the Global Jihad being fought by transnational terrorist groups like al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (and its affiliates in Mali and the entire Sahel) and the Somali-based al Shabaab. The paper argues that extremist Islamic movements in northern Nigeria should be considered a movement of restoration since their overriding aim continues to be the enforcement of sharia in the spirit of earlier times, as inspired by Usman Dan Fodio and the sharia-governed Sokoto Caliphate.

### Religion-Terrorism Nexus

The link between religion and terrorism has a long genealogy in Western scholarship. Specifically, the concept of "religious terrorism" goes back to David Rapoport's seminal paper[i] analyzing the use of terror in the three monotheistic religions. This paper inspired many similar works which towed a similar line of explaining why violence and religion has re-emerged so seismically at this moment in history and why they have so frequently been found in combination.[ii] In short, these works sought to answer the famous question posed by Scott Appleby: Why does religion seem to need violence, and violence religion?[iii] In this strand of literature, religious terrorism has been raised above a simple label to a set of descriptive characteristics and substantive claims which appear to delineate it as a specific 'type' of political violence, fundamentally different to previous or other forms of terrorism. As argued by Bruce Hoffman, this new type of terrorism produces "radically different value systems, mechanisms of legitimation and justification, concepts of morality and, worldview... it represents a very different and possibly far more lethal threat than that posed by more familiar, traditional terrorist adversaries."[iv]

The claim about the specific nature of religious terrorism rests on a number of arguments which I briefly turn to next. First, it is argued that religious terrorists have anti-modern goals of returning society to an idealised version of the past and are therefore necessarily anti-democratic and anti-progressive. It is further argued that religious terrorists have objectives that are absolutist, inflexible, unrealistic, devoid of political pragmatism and hostile to negotiation. According to Matthew Morgan, "Today's terrorists don't want a seat at the table; they want to destroy the table and everyone sitting at it."[v] A second important argument suggests that religious terrorists employ a different kind of violence to the previous terrorists. For example, Hoffman argues that for the religious terrorist, "violence is... a sacramental act or divine duty executed in direct response to some theological demand", as opposed to a tactical

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means to a political end.[vi] It is further argued that because religious terrorists have transcendental aims, are engaged in a cosmic war and lack an earthly constituency, they are not constrained in their pedagogy of violence and take an apocalyptic view of violent confrontation.[vii]

Thirdly, it is argued that religious terrorists have the capacity to evoke total commitment and fanaticism from their members; they are characterised by the suspension of doubt and an end-justifies-the-means view of the world – in contrast to the supposedly more measured attitudes of secular groups. Mark Juergensmeyer argues that “these disturbing displays have been accompanied by strong claims of moral justification and an enduring absolutism, characterised by the intensity of the religious activists’ commitment.”[viii] This aside, it is argued that in some cases the certainties of the religious viewpoint and the promises of the next world are primary motivating factors in driving insecure, alienated and marginalised youths to join religious terrorist groups as a means of psychological empowerment.[ix] Nowhere is the specific type of terrorism discussed here more obtrusive than in the predominantly Muslim north of Nigeria. The brief case study that follows seeks to demonstrate that militant Islam has a long history in northern Nigeria. This helps to situate the ongoing religious terrorism of Boko Haram in its proper historical context.

## Northern Nigeria and Militant Islam

Northern Nigeria has a well documented history of militant religiosity going back to the highly successful holy war fought by Sheik Uthman Dan Fodio (1754-1817) in the early 19th century. Uthman Dan Fodio launched a holy war (*jihād*) against what he saw as the hopelessly corrupt and apostate ruling elite of his time and established the sharia-governed Sokoto Caliphate across much of what is today northern Nigeria. What began as a search for religious purification soon became a search for a political kingdom, with the outcome that Islam has remained the focal veneer for the legitimacy of the northern ruling class, and consequently, its politicians have always prided themselves as soldiers for the defence of the faith.[x]

Following Nigeria’s political sovereignty in October 1960, the violent confrontations that took place between a radical sect commonly known as “Maitatsine” and the Nigerian Police Force in Kano (December 1980) and Maiduguri (October 1982) did not come as a surprise to those who understand the continued importance of the first jihad fought by Dan Fodio. Indeed, the Maitatsine uprising was embedded in the deeply conservative practice of Islam which has been dominant in northern Nigeria since the time of Usman Dan Fodio.[xi] The leader of Maitatsine, Muhammed Marwa, was an Islamic scholar who migrated from the town of Marwa in northern Cameroun to the city of Kano in 1945. Like Dan Fodio, Marwa became an Islamic zealot preoccupied with the purification of Islam (Salafism). He believed that Islam had come under the corrupting influence of modernization (Westernization) and the formation of the modern state. Marwa was nicknamed “Maitatsine” (which means, “the one who curses”) because of his curse-laden public speeches against the secular Nigerian state and Western influence. Although Marwa was sent into exile during British colonial rule in Nigeria, he returned to Kano shortly after Nigeria’s independence. By 1972 he had a large militaristic group of followers. As his following increased in the 1970s, so did the number of confrontations between his adherents and the Nigerian police. In 1975 he was arrested by Nigerian police for slander and public abuse of political authorities.[xii]

Marwa attracted the urban poor in northern Nigeria with his message that denounced the affluent elites as infidels, opposed Western Influence, and refused to recognize secular authorities. Specifically, his preaching attracted youths, unemployed migrants, and those who felt that mainstream Muslim teachers were not doing enough for their communities. Maitatsine extremists, rejecting Muslims who had, in their eyes, gone astray, lived in secluded areas to avoid mixing with mainstream Muslims, and rejected material wealth on the grounds that it was associated with Western values. The urban Muslim poor were attracted to Maitatsine because he condemned the hypocrisy and ostentation of the nouveau riche and promised redemption to poor and lowly Muslims.[xiii] The Maitatsine uprising led to eleven days of violent clashes with state security forces in Kano in December 1980. A tribunal of inquiry set up by the federal government in 1981 found that 4,177 people were killed in the violence, excluding members of the police force who lost their lives. In addition, state security forces were implicated in extrajudicial killings and torture of Maitatsine members in their custody. Although the Nigerian military crushed the Maitatsine uprisings and killed its leader, Marwa, the riots continued over the next five years and several hundred people were killed in reprisal attacks between remnants of the Maitatsine movement in the north and state security forces.[xiv]

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Sheik Abubaka Mahmoud Gumi (under whom the founder of Boko Haram, Mohammed Yusuf, studied) was another notable Muslim that promoted militant Islam during the 1980s. He was renowned as the foremost Islamic savant in Nigeria during the 1980's. He once declared that 'once you are a Muslim, you cannot accept to choose a non-Muslim as a leader...'[xv] Sheik promoted the implementation of Sharia courts in the Christian south of Nigeria. He also argued that Nigeria should become an Islamic state. His speeches and ideas radicalised many Muslims in Nigeria and goaded the burning of eight prominent churches in Kano by Muslims in October 1982.[xvi] According to a government tribunal, the dastardly act was caused by two things. Firstly, Kano was predominantly an Islamic city where the growing influence of Christianity was a constant worry for Muslims. Secondly, the tribunal argued that the radical Islamic literature imported from Iran motivated the Muslims to start the fighting.[xvii]

Since Nigeria's independence in 1960, power has shifted from the Muslim north to the Christian south. The Iranian revolution of 1979 resulted in growing demand for sharia law to be adopted across Nigeria. In addition, Saudi-sponsored missionaries from Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Libya, Pakistan et al. began in the 1990s to promote Wahhabi doctrine and orthodoxy. This helped lead to the adoption of sharia law in 12 northern states between 1999 and 2001.[xviii]

## **Boko Haram: Killing in the Name of God?**

From northern Nigeria comes yet another radical Islamist group commonly known as Boko Haram (a Hausa name which means "Western Education is Sin"). Mohammed Yusuf, born on the 29th of January, 1970, in Girgir village in Yobe State, Nigeria, founded Boko Haram in 2002 in the city of Maiduguri with the goal of establishing sharia government in Borno State, northern Nigeria. Yusuf established a religious complex in his hometown that included a mosque and a school where many poor families from across Nigeria and from neighbouring countries enrolled their children. However, the centre had ulterior political goals and soon it was also working as a recruiting ground for future jihadists to fight the state. The group includes members who came from neighbouring Chad and Niger and speak only Arabic. Boko Haram was able to attract more than 280,000 members across northern Nigeria as well as in Chad and Niger Republic.[xix] Boko Haram was led by Mohammed Yusuf until he (along with 1,000 of his followers) was allegedly killed in police custody during a 4-day series of clashes with government forces in July 2009.

Since its first emergence in July 2009, Boko Haram has launched increasingly coordinated and sophisticated attacks that have left thousands dead, thousands more displaced, and millions living in fear in Africa's most populous country, Nigeria. Boko Haram has masterminded more than 700 violent attacks in the last three years, in some cases using suicide car bombers, on various locations in Nigeria including police stations, military facilities, churches, schools, cell phone towers, beer halls, newspaper offices, and the United Nations building in Nigeria's capital, Abuja. Human rights organisations recently estimated that, since 2009, over 3,500 people have been killed in attacks by the Islamist group. The death toll keeps rising by the day.[xx]

Boko Haram's ideology is embedded in deeply traditional Islamism, and is but one of several variants of radical Islamism to have emerged in northern Nigeria. Its adherents are reportedly influenced by the Koranic phrase: "Anyone who is not governed by what Allah has revealed is among the transgressors." [xxi] As the name suggests, Boko Haram is strongly opposed to what it sees as a Western-based incursion that threatens traditional values, beliefs, and customs among Muslim communities in northern Nigeria. Boko Haram's attacks have targeted Nigeria's ethnic and religious faultlines in what appears to be a deliberate attempt not only to spark large scale sectarian violence that will strike at the foundations of the country, but ultimately to wrest power from the Nigerian secular government and create a full Islamic state governed by sharia. Boko Haram has also assassinated several Muslim clerics in northern Nigeria for opposing the group's avowed mission or for allegedly cooperating with state authorities to implicate group members.[xxii] The group's most frequent attacks have targeted police stations, patrols, and members of the Nigerian police and army in what appears to be an act of vengeance against the Nigerian government and Joint Military Task Forces (JTF) for killing its founder Muhammed Yusuf and 1,000 of his followers during a four-day series of clashes in July 2009.[xxiii] In Boko Haram's most recent attacks in July 2013, more than 40 people, mostly boarding school students, were burnt alive before dawn in Potiskum, northeastern Nigeria. Boko Haram gunmen came armed with jerry cans of fuel that they used to torch the school's administrative block and one of the hostels.[xxiv] These attacks came in the wake of a direct military crackdown on Boko Haram and its major

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hideout in northern Nigeria, as ordered by the Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan. So critical is the threat posed by Boko Haram that it has been described by the Nigerian president as the worst since the country's civil war (1967-1970) which claimed over one million lives.[xxv]

Boko Haram's modus operandi has involved the use of gunmen on motorbikes, killing police, politicians and anyone who criticises it, including Muslim clerics who disclose information of their whereabouts to state security services. For many Boko Haram members, the extrajudicial killing of their founder (by the Nigerian police and army) served to foment pre-existing animosities toward the Nigerian government and its security forces. In the group's bid to avenge the death of its founder, almost every other person and group outside Boko Haram was antagonised, especially the Nigerian security forces. Boko Haram have used petrol bombs, improvised explosive devices, and armed assaults in its violent attacks. In 2012, Boko Haram launched several attacks against police officers, Christians, and Muslims who allegedly cooperate with the government or oppose the group. Among the demands of Boko Haram are the release of all its prisoners and the prosecution of those responsible for the killing of their founder. This is in addition to its ultimate goal of creating an Islamic state of Nigeria governed by sharia law.[xxvi] Given the increased rate of violent attacks carried out by Boko Haram almost on a daily basis, the prospect for human security remains grim in Nigeria and for neighbouring West African countries. For one thing, Boko Haram provides al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb with an avenue to expand its operations in Africa, should the two groups become affiliated organisations. Leaders of both organisations have publicly pledged mutual support. Abubakar bin Muhammad Shekau, current head of Boko Haram, has linked the jihad being fought by BH with the global jihad. To be sure, one of Boko Haram's main ambitions is to become a key player in the global jihad. In one of its early statements, the group declared that 'Boko Haram is just a version of the al-Qaeda which we align with and respect. We support Osama bin Laden, we shall carry out his command in Nigeria until the country is totally Islamized which is according to the wish of Allah.'[xxvii] Members of Boko Haram are known to have fought in Mali alongside groups affiliated to al-Qaeda. Its members have also received training with the Somali-based al Shabaab. Boko Haram members were reported to have been significantly involved in an April 2012 invasion of the Algerian embassy in the Malian city of Gao, which resulted in the hostage-taking of seven Algerian diplomats. A local official in Mali confirmed that 'there are a good 100 Boko Haram fighters in Gao. They are Nigerians and from Nigeria... they're not hiding. Some are even able to speak in the local tongue, explaining that they are Boko Haram.'[xxviii] According to General Andrew Azazi, Nigerian National Security Adviser: 'We have evidence that some Boko Haram leaders are trained outside of Nigeria: their methods, their bomb-making technologies – who taught them?'[xxix] Adducing the tactical and operational upgrade when it launched a vehicle-borne IED (improvised explosive device) suicide attack on 16 June 2011 against the inspector general of the Nigerian Police Force at its Abuja headquarters, Peter Pham argued that, 'in fact, the incident showed that far from being a spent force, Boko Haram had adopted one of the deadliest instruments in the jihadist arsenal and had demonstrated that it was now capable of carrying out attacks far from its usual areas of operation.'[xxx]

Boko Haram has also expanded its propaganda efforts to show solidarity with al-Qaeda and its affiliates. In July 2010, current Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau reportedly released an online statement praising al-Qaeda and offering condolences to al-Qaeda of Iraq for its loss of Abu Ayyub al Masri and Abu Omar al Baghdadadi, two top al-Qaeda operatives in Iraq. In another video released in November 2012, Shekau said he and his fighters support the ongoing jihad in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kashmir, Chechnya, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Somalia, Algeria, Libya, and Mali. Shekau's speech, which was received and translated by the SITE Intelligence Group, was issued in Arabic, which suggests that the Boko Haram leader is seeking to appeal to both the wider jihadist community and al-Qaeda's leaders.[xxxi]

In August 2011 General Carter Ham, Commander of the US Africa Command (AFRICOM), claimed that al-Qaeda and al Shabaab are financing Boko Haram and also said both global Jihadist-terrorist groups shared training and fighters with Boko Haram. He described that as 'the most dangerous thing to happen not only to the Africans, but to us as well.'[xxxii] In November of that year, Algerian Deputy Foreign Minister Abdelkader Messahel said he had 'no doubts that coordination exists between Boko Haram and al-Qaeda,' citing intelligence reports and common operating methods.[xxxiii] Recently, Boko Haram placed posters at key road intersections in northern Nigeria warning the local public against assisting police in apprehending members of the sect. Strikingly, each poster bore the signature of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.[xxxiv]

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Not surprisingly, Boko Haram has increased its suicide operations in Nigeria. So far this year, the group has carried out at least 19 suicide attacks on targets including churches, mosques, newspapers, schools, government officials, and security forces. Although Boko Haram's attacks have been largely local Nigerian targets, the group's most high-profile suicide attacks have targeted the United Nations headquarters in the Nigerian Capital Abuja in August 2011. Since al-Qaeda has attacked UN targets in Algeria, and al Shabaab has attacked UN targets in Somalia, Boko Haram's decision to attack the UN building in Abuja is unlikely to be a coincidence. This attack on a distinctly non-Nigerian target may indicate a major shift in the group's strategic goals.[xxxv]

On 24 November 2012, a Boko Haram spokesman, Abul Qaqa, confirmed what most people have long suspected: "It is true that we have links with al-Qaeda. They assist us and we assist them." [xxxvi] Boko Haram has also admitted to establishing links in Somalia. A statement allegedly released by the group read: "very soon, we will wage jihad... We want to make it known that our jihadists have arrived in Nigeria from Somalia where they received real training in warfare from our brethren who made that country ungovernable... This time round, our attacks will be fiercer and wider than they have been." [xxxvii] In association with al-Qaeda and al-Shabaab, Boko Haram could pose a major threat not only to Nigeria, but also transnationally, since Nigeria is the world's eighth largest oil producer. Awakened to this threat, in June 2012, the United States added Boko Haram's most visible leader, Abubakar Shekau, to the list of specially designated global terrorists. Khalid al Barnawi and Abubakar Adam Kamba were also included in the list, because of their ties to Boko Haram and close links to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. But the US government has not added Boko Haram to the list of terrorist entities, as some officials fear the designation would only serve to further radicalize the group. However, recently, the US announced a \$7 million bounty for the capture of Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau.

## **Concluding Remarks**

In 2013, Boko Haram remains the biggest security problem facing Nigeria, with far-reaching implications for peace and unity. Unfortunately, various attempts at negotiating with senior leaders of Boko Haram, including the recent amnesty offer extended to its members, have stalled due to distrust on both sides, and the factionalized leadership of the group's different cells. In search for explanations, some have argued that the extent of relative deprivation in northern Nigeria is the main factor behind Boko Haram's rebellion. This line of argument resonates broadly with Jeffrey Seul's argument that "Religion is not the cause of religions conflict; rather for many... it frequently supplies the fault line along which intergroup identity and resource competition occurs." [xxxviii]

While acknowledging the skillful way in which Boko Haram has exploited and harnessed the extant circumstances of socio-economic deprivation and political grievance in northern Nigeria to promote its vision to turn Nigeria into a fully Islamic state, I argue in this paper that the ultra-violent turn of Boko Haram must be traced back to the extrajudicial killing of its leader, Muhammed Yusuf, and the arbitrary arrest, torture and bloodletting of its members. For many Boko Haram members, the killing (without trial) of their founder was the catalyst event that served to foment pre-existing animosities towards state security forces. Until 2009 Boko Haram was seen as radical, but not ultra-violent. The killing of Yusuf provoked a staunch reaction from Boko Haram members who primarily want to settle their scores with the police and army. In a video that was released in June 2010, Abubakar Shekau – the group's current leader – vowed to avenge the deaths of its members in the hands of the Nigerian police and army. In a typical al-Qaeda-style video, Shekau said: "Do not think Jihad is over: Rather Jihad has just began." [xxxix] Not surprisingly, between January and September 2012, at least 119 police officers lost their lives in suspected Boko Haram attacks, more than in all of 2010 and 2011 combined.[xl] Quite aside, I also argue that the terrorism of Boko Haram should be considered a movement of restoration since their claim continues to be the enforcement of sharia in the spirit of Usman Dan Fodio two centuries earlier.

The growing frustration of the Nigerian government with the deteriorating security situation in northern Nigeria is evident in its "flip-flop" approach from amnesty (soft approach) talks to the deployment of troops (hard approach) and the declaration of an outright war on Boko Haram. The latter, coupled with President Goodluck Jonathan's declaration of a state of emergency in troubled parts of northern Nigeria where Boko Haram has been most active, has added a further complication to the already complicated situation and made it extremely difficult to win the confidence of Boko Haram members which is crucial in bringing them to the negotiating table. As one leading human

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rights activist in the northern Nigeria said, "You can't talk of peace on one hand and be deploying troops on the other." [xli]

While military crackdowns on Boko Haram have the potential to significantly degrade the group's operational capability to mount devastating attacks on a wide-scale, it must be considered that such an approach may increasingly force ultra-radical elements within Boko Haram to connect with other terrorist networks like al-Qaeda and al-Shabaab as a form of survival strategy. In the event of this happening, the group's operational base could expand beyond northern Nigeria and their target selection could change fundamentally to include attacks on Western interests.

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