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Visual Essay

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The media, politics and *Boko* blitz

Since it first hit international headlines in July 2009 Nigeria's militant Islamist group *Boko Haram* has never been out of them. Formed in north-eastern Nigeria about a decade ago, the group first began as a peaceful Islamic movement before liaisons with politicians and encounters with the police turned it into a violent outfit blamed for a series of bombings and shootings in the country. Either because of those violent operations or because of its cult of secrecy or its extreme ideology, or a combination of them, the shadowy group has generated both awe and outrage from the authorities and the public alike. The car bombing of the United Nations building in the Nigeria's capital Abuja on Friday 20 August 2011 (Mshelizza 2011), which it claimed, may have launched its international notoriety, but it was the Friday 20 January 2012 attacks in the northern city of Kano (Lobel 2012; Oboh 2012) which claimed over 185 lives that defined the depth of its brutality. Yet neither its emergence nor its violent approach is out of sync with Nigeria's complex political and socio-economic milieu.

First, *Boko Haram* is not a 'well-organised, ideologically coherent' group (Herskovits 2012); rather it is an informal movement that is as much an offshoot of a failing state as it is a product of anger against both the Nigerian state and mainstream Islam. The name *Boko Haram* (meaning 'western education is sacrilege') is not even the group's real name — its members abhor it; they call themselves *Jama'atu Ahlus Sunnah lid Da'awati wal Jihad* (approximately 'movement for the enthronement of righteous deeds'). The tag *Boko Haram*, catchier and shorter, sticks mainly because the public prefers it partly as a way of ridiculing the group and partly because it seems to fit into the group's outward ideological outlook. And, contrary to media's regular reference to these two words as classic Hausa words, neither of them (*boko* or *haram*) originates from Hausa language. They came from English and Arabic languages: *boko* was derived from English word 'book' (Philips 2004) while *haram* is an undiluted Arabic word in its fullest sense. Similarly, the group's open claim of wanting to implement *sharia* in Nigeria is probably a mere slogan, given the members' apparent non-

comprehension of key Islamic teachings (a major source of their conflict with other clerics) let alone its complex *sharia* code.

The movement was formed in Kanamma area of Yobe State around 2002 (Herskovits 2009, 2012) or three years earlier (*Daily Trust* 2009) — there is no clear record of the start date, typical of such informal religious and quasi-religious groups, both Christian and Muslim, that mushroom across the country — with its young charismatic leader Muhammed Yusuf, then in his late 20s or early 30s, preaching mainly among the youths. Although it started as a peaceful movement (Herskovits 2009; *Daily Trust* 2009), its leaders were noted for their radical rhetoric critical of the mainstream Islamic clerics and the Nigerian state. Some local politicians were believed to have used them in mid-2000s 'for electoral purposes' but later dumped them after getting into office (Herskovits 2009, 2012), exposing them to both the lure of power and the bitterness of betrayal. They had, even at the early stage, had brushes with the security (*Daily Trust* 2009; Gorman 2009) but not on the level witnessed in 2011 and 2012.

Big confrontations began in 2009; and, in fairness to *Boko Haram*, even those ones started with an unprovoked attack on them by the police in the north-eastern city of Maiduguri in Borno State, whose governor Ali Sheriff was among those alleged to have used and dumped them. It was in mid-2009 when their members were on a peaceful funeral procession in the city that police reportedly attacked and killed some of them (Herskovits 2012). They demanded instant justice but saw no sign of it. They then launched revenge attacks, not only in Borno State but also in Bauchi, Yobe and Kano States, killing policemen, burning public buildings, churches and police stations and snatching arms and ammunitions (*Daily Trust* 2009; Gorman 2009; Herskovits 2009). The response from the authorities was massive. Police and army were deployed in all the suspected *Boko Haram* strongholds. Hundreds of their suspected members were hunted down and killed. Several of their leaders, including Muhammed Yusuf and his father-in-law Baba Fugu Mohammed, were arrested and killed while in police custody (*Daily Trust* 2009: Herskovits 2009; *Al-Jazeera* 2010). The video footage of the killings 'went viral', available on networking site *YouTube* (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HItqhm24LVM&NR=1&feature=endscreen) and aired by *Al-Jazeera* (2010), prompting many people and human rights groups to raise concern over their plight (*Al-Jazeera* 2010; Herskovits 2012).

The surviving members of the group went underground, reorganised themselves and appointed a new leader Abubakar Shekau and spokesman Abu Ziad [and his regular representative Abul Qaqa, who was later arrested by the Nigeria's secret police on 31 January 2012 (Idris 2012)]. Perhaps because of what happened to its former leaders, the group maintained strict secrecy about its new leadership — neither Shekau nor Ziad has ever made physical public appearance (only Shekau's online video footage and images have so far been made public) — and displayed a surprising skill of employing the new media in their engagement with the public. Unlike in their earlier outings, when the authorities effectively used media against them, portraying them as Seventh Century savages who were anti-people and anti-modernity (*Daily Trust* 2009; Boyle 2009), the new *Boko Haram* is new media savvy, uploading their leader's video speeches in the *YouTube*, releasing press statements online and organising mobile teleconferences with journalists (using concealed mobile phone numbers) to deliver their messages (Mshelizza 2011; *Al-Jazeera* 2012). But they are also deadly to journalists, having killed at least two of them. They killed Zakariya Isa, who was working for the government-owned Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) in Maiduguri, accusing him of spying for the state security service, and Enenche Akogwu, a correspondent of the privately-owned *Channels Television*, during their attacks in Kano (Gambrell 2012).

The ferocity of their general attacks was also stronger in their latest coming. Their initial targets were police, politicians, mainstream Islamic clerics and local community leaders. They then widened the scope to include any symbol of authority as well as churches and Christians (especially southern Nigerians) — the latter with a particular intention of igniting national conflict (Abubakar 2012), given the fragility of the union between Nigeria's mainly Muslim North and largely Christian South. Nigerians had fought a terrible 30-month civil war, costing an estimated one million lives, from 1967–1970 when the predominantly Christian south-eastern region attempted to secede from the country (Perham 1970; Akinyemi 1972; Bamisaiye 1974; Williams 1984). *Boko Haram* was apparently exploiting that fragility by attacking southerners — some of whom promptly fled the North — and generating reprisal attacks in the South, prompting some northerners there to run back to the North. Ironically, though, the bitter memories of the civil war seem to have equally inspired stronger resistance against succumbing to the *Boko Haram*'s machinations,

with many people resolving to stay put in their adopted regions (Abubakar 2012). Actually, lesser number of people fled than many had thought, and the reprisal attacks were not as serious as originally feared. Worse for *Boko Haram* the January 2012 deadly attacks in Kano look set to strip them of any trace of sympathy they might have had in the North and to further isolate them from the public.

This may set a motion for their demise as a group, but not for the eradication of their menace since the socio-economic condition that breeds them still persists. Many have linked *Boko Haram*'s emergence to Nigeria's chronic poverty [which is worse in the North (Wallis, 2012)], compounded by the circles of endemic corruption and systemic bad governance (Herskovits 2009, 2012; International Crisis Group 2010), all of which appear to be getting worse in the wider republic, despite huge oil revenues, massive agricultural potential and 13 years of unbroken civilian rule (past lapses were often blamed on military dictatorships). Rintoul (2012) has argued that despite Nigeria's rating as the fourth-fastest growing economy in the world between 2001 and 2010 and its economic growth predicted at 6.6 per cent in 2012, corruption and poverty are holding the country back. Political stability and national cohesion, which elude the country for long, took a further nosedive particularly after President Goodluck Jonathan, a southerner, broke a 'gentleman's agreement' (the informal North-South rotational presidency arrangement) and ran for the office in 2011, sparking days of violent protests in the North (Campbell 2011). Added to all these are the worrying security challenges and the legendry incompetence of the Nigerian security services. The Nigerian police force in particular, a colonial creation, has always faced difficulties in identifying and addressing the country's security challenges. Ojie (2006) asserts that 'there exists intense mutual hostility between the police and the public in Nigeria' (p.561). 'Ill-trained, ill-paid, and housed in squalid barracks, they are feared for their indiscriminate use of force' (Herskovits 2009). Unfortunately for them they are also prime targets of the *Boko Haram* militants. That is what a failing, or a flailing, state breeds. When growing political instability and deteriorating socio-economic condition converge with corrupt and incompetent policing, a *Boko Haram* scenario is almost inevitable. Eradicating it requires a systematic tackling of these underlying causes, not sporadic shootings of its symptoms.

Bombed UN building: *United Nations office in Abuja after the car bomb attack in August 2012. Boko Haram's spokesman Abul Qaqa claims that the group was responsible for the attack (photo by Felix Onigbinde).*

Catholic Church: *St Theresa Catholic Church in Madalla, near Abuja, after the Christmas Day bombing in December 2011 blamed on Boko Haram.*

Coach booking shed: *A small shed at Yola Motor Park (coach station) in Adamawa State, north-eastern Nigeria, where passengers buy tickets to travel to south-eastern Nigeria (photo by Abdullahi Tasiu Abubakar).*

Ochenna and co: *Ochenna Ike with a young man and young lady at Yola Motor Park in north-eastern Nigeria after loading their goods in a coach scheduled to travel to south-eastern Nigeria (photo by Abdullahi Tasiu Abubakar).*

Southerners preparing to leave: *A group of southerners at Yola Motor Park hoping to travel home after attacks on churches by suspected Boko Haram members in January 2012 (photo by Abdulahi Tasiu Abubakar).*

Motor Park in Yola: *People trickling in hoping to get a vehicle that can transport them to south-eastern Nigeria (photo by Abdullahi Tasiu Abubakar).*

Removing the victims: *Rescue workers removing the victims of the car bomb attack on UN building in Abuja in August 2011 (photo by Felix Onigbinde).*

Bombed police shops in Kano: *The ruins of police shops bombed in January 2012 by suspected Boko Haram members in Kano, northern Nigeria.*

Bullet holes in 'Missionary car': *Damaged missionary car after the attack on a church in Yola by suspected Boko Haram members in January 2012 (photo by Abdullahi Tasiu Abubakar).*

Tony Ologbesere, *an engineer from southern Nigeria who has spent 30 years working in the north-eastern Nigerian city of Yola. He considers Yola home and will not be fleeing because of Boko Haram attacks (photo by Abdullahi Tasiu Abubakar).*

Burnt properties: *Houses and shops burnt by operatives of the joint military task force (JTF) at Budun area of Maiduguri. The area was suspected to be a stronghold of Boko Haram (photo by Hamza Idris).*

Burnt vehicle: *A burnt vehicle following the raid of Budun area of Maiduguri by operatives of the joint military task force (photo by Hamza Idris).*

Widows: *Saudatu (left) and Fatima with their children. Their husband was allegedly killed by security operatives for allegedly belonging to the Boko Haram group (photo by Hamza Idris).*

Rubbles: *A house turned into rubbles following a raid by operatives of the joint military task force in response to a blast that targeted their vehicle (photo by Hamza Idris).*

Abubakar Shekau: *The current Boko Haram leader delivering an online speech (photo), http://www.gistexpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/as2.jpg, accessed 28 January 2012.*

Abubakar Shekau, *the current leader of Boko Haram who has replaced its founder Muhammed Yusuf (photo), http://www.google.co.uk/imgres?q=abubakar+shekau&um, accessed 30 January 2012.*

Muhammed Yusuf: *The Boko Haram's leader before the July 2009 confrontation with the Nigerian security forces (photo), http://www.ligali.org/images/mohammad_yusuf.jpg, accessed 26 January 2012.*

Muhammed Yusuf's arrest: *Ex-leader of Boko Haram Muhammed Yusuf at the time of his arrest by the army in July 2009. The photo was uploaded in the Internet apparently by Boko Haram members or sympathizers (photo), http://www.leadership.ng/nga/sites/default/files/articleimages/mohammed_yusuf_.jpg, accessed 29 January 2012.)*

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