Boko Haram, Identity and the Limits of Counter-Terrorism

Nigeria, Africa's Leviathan, has been in the throes of escalating violence since July 2009 when the shadowy Islamist sect, Boko Haram, began a campaign of terrorist violence.[i] Invariably the counter-terrorist approach has been adopted by academics in understanding the Boko Haram phenomenon and by Nigeria's security establishment seeking to end the scourge of violence in northern Nigeria. However, the simplistic and narrow counter-terrorism lens ignores the historical context in which religious identities are being shaped and re-shaped in the country. That view also appears to gloss over the fact that regional, ethnic and religious identities often reinforce each other. A narrow counter-terrorism lens also ignores the socio-economic context in Nigeria which has exacerbated the economic imbalance between relatively rich Southern and relatively poor Northern Nigeria.

This article seeks to shed light on one phenomenon, the interplay of religious, ethnic and regional identities in the development of Boko Haram.

The Religious Identity

Often academics stress the religious identity of Boko Haram – its strong Wahhabist Islamist identity, for instance. Such a view could be supported by much historical evidence. Indeed, historical precedents to Boko Haram go all the way back to 1802 when Uthman dan Fodio[ii], a religious teacher and ethnic Fulani herder, declared his jihad to purify Islam[iii] – in the process establishing the Sokoto caliphate which exists to this day. More recently the Maitatsine uprisings of 1980 in Kano, 1982 in Kaduna and Bulumkutu, 1984 in Yola and 1985 in Bauchi, represent an effort to impose a religious ideology on a secular Nigerian state[iv] in much the same way that Boko Haram is attempting to force Abuja to accept sharia law across all 36 states of the Nigerian polity. Between 1999 and 2008, 28 religious conflicts were reported – the most prominent being the recurrent violence between Muslims and Christians in Jos in 2001, 2002, 2004 and 2008.[v]

Whilst the religious factor is important in explaining Boko Haram, and cannot be discounted, I would argue that such a view is overly simplistic. Religions, after all, do not exist in a historical vacuum. They are interconnected with issues like ethnicity, politics, economics, migration and violence. To understand the recurrent resurgence of religious violence in northern Nigeria, therefore, we need to explore the context in which this Islamist fundamentalism thrives. As Hall has eloquently observed, 'Religious violence is embedded in moments of history and structures of culture'.[vi]

A Case of Reinforcing Identities and Fault lines

It would be wrong, however, to assume that religion is the only fault line confronting the Nigerian polity. Other demographic factors constitute fault lines or compound the situation. Consisting of 160 million people divided into 350 ethnic groups speaking 400 languages[vii], Nigeria has since independence struggled to define a common Nigerian nationality. Africa's most populous country is further divided into 50 percent being Muslim, 40 percent being Christian and 10 percent adhering to indigenous faith traditions.[viii]

Given the ongoing ethnic, cultural and religious conflict in Africa's Leviathan[ix] one could well conclude that the

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nation-state project has foundered in Nigeria. This is certainly the conclusion of Watts[x] who notes that, 'What, we have, in other words is not nation-building but perhaps its reverse; the "unimagining" (contra Benedict Anderson, that is) or deconstruction of a particular sense of national community'. Concurring with Watts, Said Adejumobi[xi] has argued that, 'More than ever before, there has been an unprecedented denationalisation of the state, with sub-national identities challenging, and in many cases, unravelling the nation-state project'.

I really do not subscribe to the primordial view which espouses the notion of the inevitability of conflict between these ethnic identities. One could point to several examples of multi-ethnic polities in which harmonious co-existence has been possible. However, I agree with Adejumobi that in situations where there is shrinking social resources, excruciating economic crises, a retreat of the welfare state and its consequences on contracting social services, and a market ideology of 'fend for yourself', sharp divisions are wrought in social relationships, in which the identity issue becomes a major weapon of economic and social competition.[xii] It is within this context that political elites exploit resurgent identities for both political and economic gain. For instance, there is evidence, that northern political elites exploited Boko Haram's founder Mohammed Yusuf in 1999 as a cynical response to the population's desire to curb spiralling crime levels by the introduction of shari'a law. Having used shari'a law and Yusuf's support as a vote-catching device, these politicians then discarded Yusuf.[xiii] Feeling used, an embittered Yusuf went on to form Boko Haram in 2002.

Ikelegbe[xiv] posits that ethnic, communal, religious, regional and sectarian identities are on the rise in Nigeria since they provide a safe haven for increasing numbers of people fleeing an incompetent, insensitive and, at times, predatory state. The antipathy with which Nigerians view the state and the concomitant trust with which they view religious leaders is seen in a Pew Global Attitudes Project. Asked if religious leaders should play a role in politics, a staggering 91 percent in Nigeria agreed with the statement. This was the highest of all the countries surveyed.[xv]

Exclusionary Character of the Nigerian State

This antipathy towards the state is made worse by the exclusionary character of the Nigerian post-colonial Nigerian state which is designed to accentuate and not attenuate differences. For instance, local and state governments are clearly exclusionary in how they differentially confer rights on people living in respective jurisdictions. At local government level, for example, there is a marked distinction between 'natives' or 'indigenes' who share the same ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic characteristics and who are termed 'local citizens' and 'immigrants' or 'settlers' who are considered to be 'non-citizens' who share different ethnic, cultural, religious, or linguistic characteristics from the 'locals' irrespective of how long they have resided in a particular area and the fact that they are all Nigerian citizens. Indeed until three years ago, 'indigeneity' was a criterion for qualification to contest in local elections, and not residency – irrespective of whether you lived your entire life in that locality.[xvi] The consequences of the exclusionary nature of the politics of the Nigerian state are clearly seen in narratives amongst ordinary Nigerians when explaining the violence. Religion, ethnic and regional identities all feature. Sadly, there is no articulation of a common Nigerian citizenship which effectively transcends these differences.

Although the media has portrayed the conflict as a Muslim vs Christian issue, there is another ethnic dimension in which the conflict is being waged as a case of reinforcing fault lines. Whilst the Islamist Boko Haram may be targeting Christians living in the north, the perception is that the Hausa-Fulani Boko Haram are targeting the Igbo ethnic group resulting in perceptions by the Igbo that this is 'systematic ethnic cleansing' and that the 'Igbos should just secede'.[xvii] In response to a Boko Haram ultimatum that all Christians should leave the north or face death, the Igbo group, Ogbunigwe Ndigbo, gave all northern Muslims living in the south two weeks to leave or face death. In Lokpanta, the Muslim Hausa community, which were living among the Igbo for decades, took the warning to heart and were soon leaving the area by the truckload.[xviii] This perception is given added credence by Corinne Dufka, a senior West Africa researcher at Human Rights Watch. Following extensive research on the victims of Boko Haram violence, Dufka is of the opinion that, 'Boko Haram is targeting and killing people in northern Nigeria based on their religion *and ethnicity*' (my emphasis).[xix]

In a similar vein, whilst the recurrent violence in Jos has been portrayed as Muslim-Christian violence, it is

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fundamentally a land dispute between ethnic groups who happen to also belong to different faiths. Interestingly, residents of Jos are more aware of the complexity of the conflict than analysts. Commenting on the origins of the conflict Mohamed Yakuba, a Hausa-Fulani and Muslim resident of Jos, stated, 'It is the Berom who cause the problem, trying to get their land back'.[xx] Another Jos resident, Toma Davou, a Christian Berom, also speaking on the origins of the conflict argued, 'The Hausas want to push us out, and although it is about land occupation, they say it is religious so that they can get the sympathy of Saudi Arabia and Al Qaeda. Christians should arm to the teeth to meet this threat from them and Boko Haram'.[xxi]

Despite the religious overtones of the conflict which Boko Haram has encouraged in Jos, the reality is that the dispute is primarily one over land among people who happen to be divided along lines of both ethnicity and religion. Vanda Felbab-Brown and James Forest[xxii] also make the point that much of the conflict in northern Nigeria emanates from the migration by the ethnic Hausa Fulani into Yoruba lands. They go on to note that the '…fact that the Yoruba are predominantly Christians and the Hausa Fulani Muslims matters only secondarily. Rather, the Hausa-Fulani Boko Haram is infusing religion into a long-churning brew of grievances about wealth and power distribution…'.[xxiii]

Conclusion

For social scientists, the preceding urges us to be wary of labelling a conflict as religious merely on the basis of its religious overtones. To the contrary, the terrorist dimension of Boko Haram's operations in Jos underscores the argument that no amount of militaristic counter-terrorism instruments will resolve the religious tensions generated without other efforts aimed at addressing the land issue.

Increasingly counter-terrorism experts are coming to understand that history and context matters. RAND's Project AIR FORCE, for instance, urges policy makers to adopt a long-term perspective seeking to eradicate the conditions which give rise to terrorism or extremist elements. RAND's Senior Policy Analyst, Angel Rabasa eloquently argues, 'This will occur only if hard security measures are linked with a broader array of policies designed to promote political, social and economic stability. Otherwise, there is little chance that counter-terrorism efforts will work'.[xxiv] General Carter Ham, Head of the United States' African Command or AFRICOM, seems to have understood this, by employing not only combat soldiers and intelligence officers, but also aid specialists.[xxv] Unless more of this thinking takes place and unless policy makers view movements like Boko Haram as the complex phenomenon that they are, there is no hope of defeating the recurrent insurgencies in northern Nigeria.

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[i] *Nigeria: Boko Haram Widens Terror Campaign*. Human Rights Watch, 23 January 201. Internet: http://www. Hrw.org/news/2012/01/23/Nigeria-boko-haram-widens-terror-campaign. Date Accessed: 31 January 2012.

[ii] A. Burns, *History of Nigeria*. George Allen and Unwin Limited. 1969. London, p. 265.

[iii] Eliza Griswold, *The Tenth Parallel: Dispatches From the Fault line between Christianity and Islam* . Penguin Books. 2010. London, p. 21.

[iv] A.O. Adesoji, "Between Maitatsane and Boko Haram: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Response of the Nigerian State," *Africa Today*. Vol. 57 No. 4, 2010a. p. 96.

[v] *Ibid.*, p. 97.

[vi] A. Adogame, "How God became a Nigerian: Religious impulse and the unfolding of a nation,"*Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 4, October 2010, p. 489.

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[vii] *Ibid.*

[viii] Toni Johnson, "Boko Haram," *Council on Foreign Relations*. 27 December 2011. Internet: http://www.cfr.org/africa/boko-haram/p25739. Date Accessed: 21 January 2012, p. 3.

[ix] Starting in 1945 ethno-religious conflict has been the bane of Nigeria. These include the Jos riot of 1945, the Kano riot of 1953, the Tiv uprisings of 1959 and 1960-1964, violence in the Western Region in 1962, ethnic massacres within the Nigerian army which preceded the civil war in 1967, the civil war of 1967-1970, the Maitatsine Crisis of 1980, the Ife/Modakeke war of 1981, the Fagge crisis in Kano in 1982, the Tiv/Junkun conflict of 1990, the Reinhard Bonke crisis of 1991, the Zangon Kataf conflict of 1992, the Mangul Bokkos conflict of 1992-1995 and the recurrent ethno-religious conflict in Jos beginning in 2001 (See Adora, 2010).

[x] Quoted in W. Adebanwi and E. Obadare, "Introducing Nigeria at Fifty: The Nation in Narration,"*Journal of Contemporary African Studies* Vol. 28 No. 4, October 2010, p. 382.

[xi] Said Adejumobi, "Identity, Citizenship and conflict: The African Experience," in W.A. Fawole and C. Ukeje (eds.) *The Crisis of the State and regionalism in West Africa* . Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA). 2005. Dakar, Senegal, p. 19.

[xii] *Ibid.*

[xiii] A.O. Adesoji, "The Boko Haram Uprising and Islamic Revivalism," *Africa Spectrum*, Vol. 45 No. 2, 2010b, pp. 101-102.

[xiv] A. Ikelegbe, "The Construction of a Leviathan: State Building, Identity Formation and Political Stability in Ngieria," in Fawole and Ukeje, *op.cit.*, p. 71.

[xv] Peter Mandaville, *Global Political Islam*. Routledge. 2007. London, p. 17.

[xvi] Adejumobi, *op.cit.*, pp. 28-29.

[xvii] C. Unigwe, "Boko Haram is Nigeria's enemy," *The Guardian* 22 January 2012. Internet: http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/jan/22/boko-haram-nigeria-enemy-religion? Date Accessed: 28 January 2012.

[xviii] *Ibid.*

[xix] Human Rights Watch, *op.cit.*

[xx] Colin Freeman, "Nigeria's descent into holy war," *Daily Telegraph*, 8 January 2012. Internet: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianoceans/nigeria/89999758/N. Date Accessed: 9 January 2012.

[xxi] *Ibid.*

[xxii] Vanda Felbab-Brown and James Forest, "Nigeria's Boko Haram attacks are misunderstood as regional Islamist threat," *Christian Science Monitor*, 12 January 2012.

[xxiii] *Ibid.*

[xxiv] David Merklinghaus, "The Forgotten Front in the Global War on Terror," Military Technology No. 9, 2009, p. 19.

[xxv] Alex Perry, "Threat Level Rising," *Time International (Atlantic Edition)*, Vol. 179 Issue 24, 19 December 2011,

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