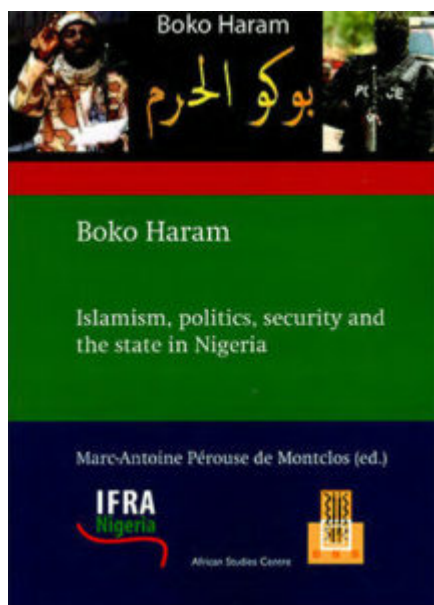


Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos

~ Boko Haram: Islamism, Politics, Security And The State In Nigeria

~ Introduction And Overview



Introduction and Overview

As I write this introduction in November 2013, Boko Haram is making the headlines. Paradoxically, it is seen in the media as clandestine and invisible, according to Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan, who said he would not negotiate with “ghosts”. The sect of Mohammed Yusuf was not always famous, however.

When I began to investigate the so-called Taliban on the Niger-Nigeria border in 2005, no academics had written anything on Boko Haram. At that time, security analysts focused on violence in the oil-producing Niger Delta, and very few paid attention to a marginal group of extremists in remote Borno and Yobe states.

Since then, the sect has become a fashionable topic of research as well as an international issue. More so than the Maiduguri uprising of July 2009, the attack on the UNDP office in Abuja in August 2011 attracted much attention. Thus a considerable number of articles on Boko Haram are now being written in the field of security studies. Many of them speculate on an Al-Qaeda franchise in Nigeria and possible links with AQIM (Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb) in Mali. **[i]**

Some even suggest that the US should fund the Qadiriyya and Tijaniyya brotherhoods to counter radical Islamism (Hill 2010). Such articles are oriented towards policy making. Accordingly, they make recommendations on the way to fight terrorism in the Nigerian context (see for instance Waldek & Jayasekara 2011; Aghedo & Osumah 2012; Forest 2012; Onuoha 2012; Idowu 2013; Sampson

2013). But they do not investigate Boko Haram from a political, sociological, religious, and anthropological academic perspective.

Hence the necessity for a different type of analysis. Written by Nigerian, French, British, German, and American contributors, this book is the first of its kind. It not only offers different perspectives from northern and southern Nigeria, but also combines fieldwork and theory, qualitative and quantitative analysis.

Moreover, it is not just another monograph study on Boko Haram. Rather, the following chapters investigate how radical Islamism destabilises the Nigerian state and challenges its secularity. In a pluralistic society, the jihad of Boko Haram raises many fears regarding Shariah, freedom of religion, the clash of civilisations, and the prospect of a civil war with Christians. Yet all these issues are usually oversimplified in the rhetoric of the war on terrorism.

Shariah, for instance, is a whole way of life for Muslims. It should not be reduced to criminal law. Likewise, jihad is first and foremost an internal spiritual struggle, rather than a holy war against Christians (Cruise O'Brien & Coulon 1988; Westerlund & Rosander 1997; Levtzion & Pouwels 2000; Vikør 2005; Soares 2007; Hefner 2011). As for freedom of religion, it is often understood by legal practitioners as a right to follow a rite, to preach, to express religious beliefs in public and, more generally, to be allowed to build a church, a mosque, or a temple.

However, argues the French philosopher Rémi Brague, it is also the freedom to enter ... or to leave a religion (AED 2013: 13). It is the right to convert, to be an atheist or to dissent within a religion, drawing the limits to a core doctrine, up to 'excommunication', anathema, and apostasy. In this regard, Boko Haram is above all a challenge to mainstream Islam in Nigeria. The sect tells the story of a dissent and a fight between Muslims. So it would be misleading to understand Boko Haram as a struggle to convert Christians to Islam. From its very beginning in the late 1990s, the sect mainly aimed to enforce a strict form of Shariah law. It began to target Christians at a much later stage, since 2009.

In other words, the classical views and fears about a Nigerian war between religions reveal a very poor understanding of the doctrine and the fundamental drivers of Boko Haram. The secretive, mysterious, and stunning nature of the sect does not help either. In fact, analysts do not even agree on the name of the group.

Followers of Mohammed Yusuf see themselves as the “People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet’s Teachings and Jihad” (Jama’atu Ahlis-Sunnah Lidda’awati Wal Jihad). Boko Haram, explains Andrea Brigaglia, is only a nickname which “captures all the stereotypes that have daily currency in islamophobic discourses”: obscurantism, primitivism, and the essentialist ferocity of Muslims (2012: 38).

Moreover, specialists contest the meaning of Boko Haram, which is often translated as “Western education is a sin”. According to Roman Loimeier, for instance, ‘sin’ is a Christian concept that does not exist in Islam, and the Arabic term haram should be translated as ‘forbidden’, with a meaning of shame attached to it (2012).

Boko, adds linguist Paul Newman, does not come from English and never meant ‘book’; it refers rather to a sham, a fraud, and the Western type of education, karatun boko in Hausa (2013).

Another challenge is to find reliable and relevant evidence on Boko Haram. Since 2009, the volatile security environment makes it very difficult to access Borno and Yobe states in order to conduct interviews and cross-check oral testimonies.

The problem is also to analyse the sketchy material on the sect: writings, audio and video recordings, communiqués, and so on. Mohammed Yusuf’s only book is an important source, but authors do not agree on the date of its publication - sometime between 2005 and 2009. As for public statements, few researchers have attempted to use them as primary data (for an exception, see Eveslage 2013). Many communiqués of Boko Haram in Hausa or Arabic are not properly and fully translated by the media. As a result, their analyses are sometimes misleading.

Professor Ricardo Laremont, for instance, claimed that in 2010 the head of the sect Abubakar Shekau pledged allegiance to AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdel, when actually he expressed his solidarity only with jihadist fighters in northern Mali (2011: 245).

The same problem applies to Ansaru, the dissident group of Boko Haram, whose self-proclaimed spokesman, Abu Ja’afar, had to send an email to correct distortions in the translation of their video in the Nigerian newspaper Desert Herald on 1 June 2012 (McCaul 2013: 16). The controversy concerned the fate of Christians, who were indeed a prime target of Ansaru - unlike those of Boko Haram. To set the record straight, it was thus necessary to add in the Annexes to

this book translations directly from Hausa and Arabic of the original video and charter of Jama'at Ansar Al Muslimin Fi Bilad al-Sudan, a.k.a. Ansaru, respectively by Nathaniel Danjibo (University of Ibadan) and Mathieu Guidère (University of Toulouse).

Regarding both Ansaru and Boko Haram, secondary sources and oral testimonies are also rather confusing. As a matter of fact, they often contradict each other. For instance, there are different versions of the burial of the Boko Haram victims of a car accident that led to a first clash with the security forces in June 2009 and, ultimately, to the uprising of July. At the time of the event, the press reported that the police shot at members of the sect but killed no one. Since then, however, some analysts refer to a number of fatalities during the burial, without providing any evidence so far.

Military propaganda and the war on terrorism have also contributed to blurring the line between reality and fantasy. Security is a profitable business, and some attacks have been credited to Boko Haram without clear evidence and with no judicial follow-up. Popular rumours have also played a role. The fear of jihad and a Muslim invasion of the South sell well in Nigerian and international media. In Europe, for instance, attacks on Christian minorities in the North often make the headlines, but the massacres of Muslim communities go underreported. The same bias exists within Nigeria, where the press is based mainly in the South. In other words, there is always a marked difference between oral interviews in the North and written material in the South. Narratives from the North and the South are conflicting and confuse the whole story (Adibe 2012). Developed in the first part of this book, a major challenge is thus to understand what exactly Boko Haram is from the available evidence we have.

Writing from the North-East, Mohammed Kyari brings an important insight in this regard, showing that the radicalisation of the sect of Mohammed Yusuf paralleled the brutality of its repression by Nigerian security forces. Both contributed to the escalation of violence, up to the emergence of Ansaru and a modern global form of terrorism. Of course, local politics also played a role. Writing from Yobe State, Johannes Harnischfeger analyses how Muslim clerics and politicians were deeply entangled in a "web of corruption" that linked villagers with the Nigerian administration. That might explain why Boko Haram did indeed enjoy some popular support. Yet the doctrinal vision of Mohammed Yusuf was so extreme that it had very little appeal. In fact, Boko Haram divided and weakened the Muslim

community.

Such views obviously contradict current stereotypes on jihad, forced conversion, imported terrorism, and a Muslim invasion of the South. Using the case of Kano, for instance, Hannah Hoechner argues that there is no evidence to substantiate the claim that Quranic students (almajirai) are the “foot soldiers” of Boko Haram. There is no predisposition to terrorism, only prejudice against the poorest elements of society. As for Henry Mang, he analyses Christian perspectives from Plateau State, a place where recurrent fighting with Muslim minority communities also exacerbates stereotypes, misunderstandings, hard feelings, and the rhetoric of the “clash of civilisations”.

The perception of “Islam’s bloody corridors”, he writes, changes according to various Christian schools of thought, with a vast spectrum from conservative to liberal views. In the same vein, Portia Roelofs shows that competing discourses over the meaning of the Boko Haram uprising in 2009 are characterised by different conceptions of the state. In the media, some argue for a government that should provide development and order, but others emphasise the state’s secular role in containing expansionist Islam and helping mainstream Islam to control deviant sects. Hence the issue is not only to know what Boko Haram is, but also to understand what it stands for. In the second part of this book, we analyse the relationship of the sect to the ruling class and investigate how the fear of terrorism has transformed the political game.

I argue that, despite its religious background, Boko Haram is political in nature because it contests Western values, challenges the secularity of the state, and reveals the corruption of a system that relies on a predatory ruling elite. Yet its leaders have never actually proposed a political programme to establish a caliphate and govern Nigeria according to Shariah law.

In this regard, Boko Haram is first and foremost a challenge to a divided ummah that never succeeded in setting up a party to play the democratic game and contest elections with a religious programme instead of resorting to violence as an alternative channel for reform.

Writing from the National Defence College in Abuja, Freedom Onuoha then focuses on the international context of the global Salafi Jihadist ideology rather than on local dynamics. He shows that the professionalisation and the radicalization of the sect now pose significant threats to sub-regional security,

beyond Nigeria.

In his view, the audacity of Boko Haram reflects the weakness of the Nigerian state and its inability to build government legitimacy, to deliver public goods, to strengthen moderate Islam, and to implement a robust programme on countering ideological support for extremism and terrorism. By the same token, Rafael Serrano and Zacharias Pieri, from the University of South Florida, focus on the brutality of the JTF (Joint Task Force) and its inability to contain the sect and conduct a coherent strategy in an asymmetric war. In their chapter, the authors show that Nigeria ranks highest in terms of the ratio of militant to security force deaths compared with other counter-insurgency operations, in Northern Ireland, Colombia, and Chechnya. Their quantitative investigation also reveals that the ratio between arrests and killings has increasingly shifted towards killing, with a corresponding rise in abuses and collateral damage amongst civilians.

In the final chapter, Gérard Chouin, Manuel Reinert and Elodie Apard examine the targeting of Christians by Boko Haram. They first caution us against a quick reading of the body count. It is often difficult, they explain, to identify victims and perpetrators. In addition, the faith of most victims remains unknown. As a result, it is extremely perilous to discuss the relative percentage of victims amongst Muslims and Christians. The authors did not find any reports about Boko Haram attacks against Christians before the crisis of July 2009. They had to combine demographic studies and a careful analysis of fatalities recorded in the Nigeria Watch database up until December 2012 to provide some of the most refined tools available so far to discuss such a sensitive issue. Their findings suggest that the majority of the victims - around two thirds - were Muslims. Although it cannot be denied that Christians have been subjected to targeted attacks from Boko Haram militants since July 2009, their conclusion challenges the common wisdom on the crisis as a war between religions.

Note

[1] See for instance the papers of Sean Gourley, Valarie Thomson and Shannon Connell in the special issue of *Global Security Studies*, Vol. 3, N° 3, 2012. Without any evidence, authors like Robert Crowley and Henry Wilkinson even connect Boko Haram to drug trafficking in Mali (2013). As for Michael McCaul et al., they lobby so much for the sect to be listed as a Foreign Terrorist Organization that they quote Nigerian journalists of *Vanguard* (who never went to Mali) to pretend that Boko Haram participated in the attack on the Algerian consulate in Gao in

2012. In this same report, however, the US Representatives admit that the explosives used by the group within Nigeria were not supplied by foreigners but probably stolen from mining operations in the Middle Belt or construction sites in Yobe (2013: 18). In any case, the French military of Operation Serval in 2013 did not find any Boko Haram training camp in northern Mali, just a few individuals hailing from Nigeria. Very few witnesses can actually testify to a physical link between the two organisations. UN Special Envoy to the Republic of Niger and Canadian diplomat Robert Fowler is one of them (2013: 398). He was kidnapped by AQIM in 2008 and saw in their ranks a single unidentified Nigerian, presumably from a Boko Haram cell in Kano. For an opposite view according to which Boko Haram is unlikely to be a transnational organisation because the vast majority of its attacks and threats is directed against domestic targets, see also Eveslage (2013) and Pérouse de Montclos (2012).

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