

## THE USE OF RELIGION AS TOOL FOR IDEOLOGICAL INDOCTRINATION BY BOKO HARAM: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE

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Received: 09.11.2019

Revised: 11.12.2019

Accepted: 13.01.2020

### Abstract

Boko Haram came to limelight in 2009 as a result of its violent confrontation with the Nigerian government. However, its genesis could be linked to the effects of colonialism and the subsequent socio-economic reality of north-East Nigeria. The activities of the group resulted in the death and displacement of many people in the Lake Chad area with significant damage to Nigeria. As a terror group claiming to be operating under the principles of Islam, the ideology of Boko Haram centred on the Rejection of western education, condemnation of secularism and westernisation and the incompatibility of Islam with democracy. These gave rise to discourses on the fields and settings of acquiring knowledge in western oriented schools, the concept of *taghut* (polytheism), employment under a secular government, and the issue of *khawarijism*. Thus, to blunt the narratives of Boko Haram and to contain the rise of similar groups, this paper recommends that religious activities such as preaching, delivery of sermons, informal Islamic schools and all religious institutions have to be centralised and strictly controlled by the government. Also, a counter narratives campaign has to be embarked by the government by using the existing religious and traditional institutions to deradicalise the mind of the brain-washed people more especially the youth. The Social media is recommended to be the appropriate and effective channel.

**Keywords:** Boko Haram, Ideology, Narrative, Tenet

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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.31838/jcr.07.02.148>

### INTRODUCTION

The proximate origin of Boko Haram could be traced back to the 1980's, during the golden days of the movement of the Muslim Brotherhood in northern Nigeria. The movement was also called *Tashayyu* (Shi'a) and was under the leadership of Ibrahim Zakzaky. The movement absorbed a considerable number of Muslim youth, due to its radical and inspirational sermons and preaching against what they described as corrupt and unfair Government of Nigeria. Among the vehement followers of the movement was the young Muhammad Yusuf; who later became the leader of Boko Haram. As time passed by, due to internal disharmony, the movement split into separate groups. Some members of the Movement remained under the banner of Ibrahim Zakzaky, while others form other Islamic movement groups. One of the popular of such groups in those days was the "Jama'atu Tadjimul Islami" (The Movement for Islamic Revivalism) (Aliyu, Moorthy, & Bin Idris, 2015; Murtada, 2013; Varin, 2017).

As the Muslims Brotherhood Movement continued to disintegrate through the 1990s, another group emerged in 1995 under the name of "ahl al-sunnah wa jama'a al-hijrah" (the People Committed to hijrah and the Prophet's Teachings), with Lawan Abubakar as their leader. The group started as a non-violent socio-religious movement in Maiduguri, Borno state. However, in 2002, under the leadership of Muhammad Ali, the group made a declaration that, Maiduguri is irredeemably corrupt, and intolerable under the un-Islamic Nigerian political structure. Hence, a *hijrah* (migration) is necessary going by the Prophetic account, who migrated from Makkah to Madinah following the oppressions and persecutions of Muslims during the early days of Islam (Anyadike, 2013).

Consequently, the group migrated to a hamlet known as Kanama in the neighbouring state of Yobe in north-east Nigeria along the Nigeria – Niger border. The migration was generally under the notion of rejecting the decaying nature of the secular Nigerian society and an attempt to establish a community of worshipers that will be based on their comprehension and interpretation of Islam and be governed by Sharia. Also, to be far away from the influence and intoxication of the western ideologies. Thus, the group called on all Nigerian Muslims to stand against the secular Government of Nigeria, and struggle for the establishment of a system of governance based on the Islamic principles. During this period, the group was fondly nicknamed as the "Nigerian Taliban" (Barkindo, 2013; Mohammed, 2014; Walker, 2012).

In 2003, an indigene/settler clash occurred over the rights of fishing in Kanama between the indigenous people of Kanama and the Borno migrants. This culminated into a serious conflict, which necessitated the intervention of the Nigerian police force. The group clashed with the security forces to the point of seizing some arms and ammunition from the police. Consequently, the Nigerian Army were charged to bring back normalcy in the area. This led to the usage of force to crack down the group. In response, the group dug trenches and prepared sandbags as a defence mechanism against the Nigerian Army. In the wake of the summary execution of the group's leader Mohammed Ali, and more than 70 of his followers by the Army, the group turned violent by carrying out attacks on Government-owned institutions and properties, such as police stations, and some other Government establishments. From December 2003 to January 2004, the group had carried out several attacks on police stations; and made many prison break attempts and unleashed terror on

some five local government areas in Yobe state, including the state capital of Damaturu (Hansen, 2017).

After the execution of Mohammed Ali, Mohammed Yusuf ascent to the leadership of the group and returned to Maiduguri together with some members of the group that survived the military counter-insurgency. Yusuf recruited more members and created a network of followers across north-east Nigeria. The activities of the Kanama group spilt over to Borno state, where similar anarchy that was unleashed on Yobe state was also witnessed in Borno state. In October 2004, the group capture 12 police officers as hostages in Kala Balge Local Government area of the state; and moved to Mandara mountains along the Nigeria - Cameroon border together with their captives; before the insurgents were mercilessly dispersed by the Nigerian armed forces. During the conflict, Mohammed Yusuf exiled to Saudi Arabia, under the pretext of performing Hajj (pilgrimage). When Yusuf returned from a self-imposed exile in Saudi Arabia in 2005, the remaining surviving members of the Kanama revolt and others joint him to form the Yusufiyya ideological movement (Cook, 2011; Mohammed, 2014).

Though, it is believed that Muhammad Ali, as one of the mentors of Mohammed Yusuf was to a larger degree responsible for the indoctrination of Yusuf; but it has been established that Yusuf's interaction with Sheikh Jaafar Mahmud Adam, a Salafi Islamic scholar in northern Nigeria further radicalised him. Yusuf became radicalised to the point of even superseding and challenging his mentor Sheikh Jaafar Mahmud Adam. Yusuf's worldview and his conception and approach towards constituted authorities contradicted with that of Adam. This resulted in ideological conflict between Yusuf and Adam. The ideological difference between them is largely believed to be the cause of the later assassination of Adam by unknown gunmen in April 2007 while leading the early morning congregation prayer in a mosque (Thurston, 2016).

#### The Period of Da'awah and the Resurgence of the group

Since the return of Yusuf from exile up to 2009 when Boko Haram came again into a clash with the Nigerian security forces, the group had no official name. The claimed motive of the movement was *da'awah* based on the doctrine of "ahlus Sunnah wal jama'a," a doctrine based on the Salafi Islamic ideology. However, following Boko Haram increasing opposition to the authorities and crackdown by the State, in September 2010, the group came up with its preferred name as "Jama'atu Ahlus Sunnah liddawa'ati wal Jihad" (Pérouse de Montclos, 2014). The name "Boko Haram" is a nickname given to them by the people due to the Group's narratives of strongly condemning western education. "*karatum boko*" or simply shortened as "*boko*" refers to western education in the Hausa language, while "*haram*" means forbidden or sinful. Though, the word "*haram*" has been originally borrowed from Arabic by the Hausa language as result of Hausa's contact with the Arab Muslims centuries ago (Newman, 2013).

Da'awah has a positive connotation in orthodox Islam and among the mainstream Muslims. Da'awah in Islam means an organised, determined and consistent efforts of inviting, convincing people and society in general to the sole servitude of Allah and accepting Islam to guide the political, and socio-economic life of the society (Salleh, M.A. et al, 2017). Yet, da'awah is identified to be one of the major strategies used by radical Islamists globally. Usually, radical Islamists' da'awah is a combination of propaganda, dissemination of distorted education, inciting violence, and some philanthropic efforts to sway the minds of the people. This explains the reason why some authorities are very sceptical when it comes to the issue of da'awah (Sivan, 2003).

Like most radical Islamists across the world, Mohammed Yusuf subscribed to same tactics of modifying the original approaches of da'awah which peaceful and appealing in

nature to his own radical and violent ways, which ultimately called for bloody jihad. During this period of the so-called da'awah, Yusuf developed the narratives of the group mostly via propaganda, distorted comprehension and dissemination of fabricated Islamic teachings. The media used by Yusuf's movement was mostly audio and video tapes, public lectures and sermons. Unlike the Kanama uprising, this period of Boko Haram's metamorphosis (the da'awah period) was mostly limited to Maiduguri, the Borno state capital (Mohammed, 2014).

#### The Tenets and Narratives of Boko Haram Ideology

Boko Haramism as an ideology is directly linked to the global web of radical Islamists' ideology and discourse. The tenets of Boko Haramism were derived from the mainstream radical Islamist ideological narratives, to which Yusuf is inclined. Boko Haram's ideology was based on the major principles of rejecting Western education, condemnation of secularism and westernisation, and the incompatibility of Islam with democracy (Walker, 2012b).

Most literature attributed the rejection of secularism, westernisation and its replacement with pure Sharia, which is the bedrock of most radical Islamists to the writings of the 14<sup>th</sup>-century Islamic scholar and philosopher Ahmad Ibn Taymiyyah. Ibn Taymiyah lived during the era of the invasion of the Muslim Empire by the Mongol Barbarians. He championed for his religious ruling (*fatwa*) that jihad is mandatory on every Muslim to protect Islam against the invading Mongols. (Abdullah, K. and Salleh, M.A., 2015). Ibn Taymiyyah is said to have even placed jihad above the obligatory fasting and the pilgrimage (Bukay, 2006). Ibn Taymiyyah is considered to be the key figure that influenced the contemporary Wahhabism, Salafism, and even Jihadism (Wiktorowicz, 2001).

Mohammed (2014) further noted that even the mainstream Islamic scholars in Nigeria that opposed Yusuf's ideology did not attack him on his condemnation of democracy; but focused on the issues of western education, westernisation and secularism and the inappropriateness of Muslims being under the employment of a secular government. Apparently, this makes the issue of incompatibility of Islam with democracy settled among them.

Yusuf's da'awah was centred around a very submissive and loyal group of his followers, who strongly believe in the righteousness of the cause and the struggle ahead. Yusuf believed in what he was leading his followers into, and he was confident that his path was the only way left to salvation and earn God's love. Yusuf frequently told his followers that, the path to salvation and gaining Allah's love is not going to be plain to dwell on, but a road full of thorns. He prepared the minds of his followers for the envisioned difficulties and challenges ahead, but he usually motivated them that only a few selected and guided by Allah could hold on the struggle and reach the end of it, and those that will die in the process will be rewarded with the paradise. In one of his series of preaching to his followers in June 2006, Yusuf was quoted to have said that:

In this dawah we agreed that we are going to suffer like Bilal was dragged on the ground, just like Ammar Ibn Yasir was tortured, just like a spear was thrust unto Summayyah's vagina. These are trials we are awaiting ... These are the hurdles we want to cross. Anyone who dies in the process goes to Paradise. This is our dawah (Mohammed, 2014).

He constantly encouraged his followers through his religious inspirational sermons. He told them to persevere and prepare their minds in anticipation of the worse, but assure them of victory in the end, both in this world and the hereafter. Yusuf further said:

In the process they will abuse you, call you names and some of you may even die. They will shoot some of you, and we will

just pray “may Allah give you aljanna” [Paradise] and proceed without any qualms. Can we endure? We ought to endure. May Allah give us the will to endure? This is how our dawah is. Patience: this is what we need, brothers. And perseverance upon the truth. Allah is watching us. Victory is certain. What we lack are the helpers. We are not yet primed for victory, but we are working towards getting ready for victory. This is what we are looking for, brothers. This is an incipient dawah, but it cannot be crushed. It cannot be killed. If we really stand by what the Prophet says we should stand by, even if we die in the process, this dawah will continue - even after a hundred years (Mohammed, 2014).

The narratives of Yusufiyah da'awah, which are the pillars upon which the ideology of Boko Haram is based revolved around four major tenets. Though, these are not the exclusive pillars of Boko Haramism but are the major ones. First, the concept of *taghut* (polytheism and idolatry), under which Yusuf placed the issue of democracy and the accompanying notions of partisan politics and secularism. Second, is the issue of western education and westernisation. Third, is the illegitimacy of being under the employment of a government that does not function according to Sharia. The fourth issue centred around the rejection of the labelling of Yusuf and his followers as Khawarij by the mainstream Islamic scholars, more especially from the Izala sect (Kassim, 2015).

Taghut is a terminology in Islam which denote anything living or non-living, that is being worshipped other than Allah. The thing could be human, idol, jinn, or any system that could deviate one from absolute servitude to Allah. Hence, the rejection of taghut and its replacement with Allah's law and Commandments (Sharia) is a common denominator in the global narratives of radical Islamism (Abdullah, K. and Salleh, M.A., 2015). As highlighted above, the resurgence of the concept of taghut in Islamic discourse is widely believed to have been amplified by Ahmad Ibn Taymiyyah who is a 14<sup>th</sup>-century puritan Islamic theologian and jurist. During his time, Ibn Taymiyyah, strove to purify Islam from negative innovations and revive the orthodox teachings and practice of Islam (Adam, F., et al, 2016). Mohammed Yusuf is said to have been influenced and derived most of his ideological tenets from Ibn Taymiyyah. Even the Yusufiyah centre in Maiduguri was named after Ibn Taymiyyah (Markaz Ibn Taymiyyah) (Barkindo, 2013).

Though, there are controversies as to whether Yusuf misconceived and misinterpreted Ibn Taymiyyah's position; and the context in which Ibn Taymiyyah gave his religious ruling (fatwa) or not. Ibn Taymiyyah lived during a period of deep spiritual and political turmoil between the Abbasid Empire and the Mongols. In that era, the Abbasid Empire was the spiritual and political heart of the Islamic world. In the year 1258 CE, the Mongols invaded and pillaged Bagdad which was the capital of the Empire. These developments and the barbaric atrocities committed against Islam by the Mongols pushed Ibn Taymiyyah into giving defensive rulings against the invading barbarians. Ibn Taymiyyah's verdict against the Mongols is believed to have influenced some of radical Islamist groups including al-Qaeda headed by Osama Ibn Laden (Barkindo, 2013; Brown, 2010)

Consequently, Mohammed Yusuf viewed any system or ideology that is not directly derived from Sharia as *taghut*. This is the reason behind Yusuf's condemnation of democracy, partisan politics which is practised in Nigeria and other western norms and values such as secularism. Yusuf's opposition to the Nigerian secular legislative, executive and the judicial system made him described the Nigerian executives, the judiciary and the legislative arms of government as *taghut*; since these arms of government are the formulators of the un-Islamic laws that people adhere to in Nigeria. In 2009, Yusuf was quoted to have asserted that:

Those who formulate evil laws in their parliaments have made themselves partners to Allah, whether or not they feel it, whether or not they agree to this or disagree, whether or not they meant it ... Those who follow the legislative [sic] system and agree to take their cases to these courts are in agreement with taghut and are idolaters (Mohammed, 2014)

Going by Yusuf understanding, allegiance to the constitution of Nigeria and accepting it to be supreme means the rejection of the Sharia which to him is an act of disbelief or apostasy. Under these bases, he legitimised the killing of not only non-Muslims but Muslims that have a divergent opinion with him. This is the reason behind the paradoxical killing of Muslims by Boko Haram. To Boko Haram, any Muslim who does not share the same comprehension of Islam with them, that Muslim is considered to be an unbeliever, hence, legitimised the shedding of his blood.

On the issue of being under the employment of an un-Islamic government, Yusuf argued that, if a government is not based on Sharia, then that government is an illegitimate one. Therefore, working for such un-Islamic government is also forbidden. In one of his sermons in 2009, He posited that:

Our call refuses employment under the government which does not rule by what Allah has revealed such as the French law, the American law, the British law or any other constitution or system that goes against the teachings of Islam and negates the Qur'an and Sunnah (Mohammed, 2014).

The other key tenet of Boko Haram is the rejection of western education. Even the nickname of the group in the Hausa language “Boko Haram”, (meaning: western education is forbidden) came from this tenet. This position of Boko Haram on the illegitimacy of western education and working for an un-Islamic government of Nigeria generated heated debate and criticisms more especially from the Muslim scholars in the *Izala sect* in Nigeria. Mohammed Yusuf was so stringent in condemning western education and working for the secular Nigerian Government to the point of concluding that embracing western education and working for the Government that is not based on Sharia could even amount to unbelief. He cited examples of some topics that are products of western education such as the Darwinian theory of Evolution, and the process of rainfall which contradicted the Qur'anic accounts, to back up his position. In 2006 Mohammed Yusuf made a categorical declaration that:

Western education is destructive. We didn't say knowledge is bad but that the unbelief inside it is more than its usefulness. I have English books in my possession which I read regularly. I didn't say English amounts to unbelief but the unbelief contained therein and the polytheism inside. In the process of becoming educated, you become a mushrik [idolater]. This is our only fear ... Destruction is destruction, whoever it comes from. Because it is the white man that brought it, does it amount to civilisation? Yes, our own is traditional, as you call it, but yours is 'shirkasiation' (Mohammed, 2014).

Another key narrative that the Boko Haram group dissociated itself from is Khawajism. Most Sunni scholars in Nigeria, more especially from the Izala sect, linked Boko Haram ideology to khawarijism, which was rejected by Mohammed Yusuf and his followers. Yusuf's Book entitled “Hazihi Aqeedatun wa Minhaju Da'awatuna” (This is our belief and method of call) is undoubtedly written to reject the linkage of khawarijism to the ideology of Boko Haram (Aliyu et al., 2015). In the Book, Yusuf clearly refuted the khawariji and other charges against them. He said:

When I saw some people talking about us and our call attempting to relate us to some beliefs - which Allah knows we are innocent of - such as al-Khawarij, Shi'ite, Quraniyun, or some secret groups ... I set out to explain our belief and method of call/propagation because this is what explains the

way for us and for anyone who wants fairness for himself and for others (Mohammed, 2014).

However, despite the Boko Haram repudiation of being associated to Khawariji ideology, there exist evidence that pushed scholars from Izala sect to labelled them as such. It is in the tradition and practice of khawarij to easily and reluctantly tag other Muslims that do not share the same ideology with them as unbelievers. Another khawariji quality that is evident in Boko Haram ideology is the lack of clear distinction between sinning and the complete act of unbelief or apostasy. Boko Haramists are predisposed to kill easily even for offences that are minor Islamically. All these practices and belief are a reflection of khawarijism (Sule, Shettima, & Alkali, 2018).

### The Escalation of the 2009 Conflict

The proximate reason that led to the escalation of an open confrontation between the State and Boko Haram in July 2009 can be traced to the issue surrounding the 2007 governorship election of Borno State Governor Ali Modu Sherif. Mohammed Yusuf was known to have teaming followers of mostly youth and influential opinion leader in Borno state. Therefore, Sherif who was contesting for the Gubernatorial seat in the State sought for his support and assistance to win the election. Agreeing to Sherif request, Yusuf demanded that if Sherif wins he is going to give them fifty million Naira, fifty motorcycles for Yusuf followers, that Sharia will also be implemented in the state, and both sides agreed on the terms. After Sherif won the election he paid the promised amount of money, and he also gave the motorcycles as promised, but failed to implement Sharia in Borno State, as the number of non-Muslims in the state is almost equal to that of Muslims. As a politician, sheriff found himself in a dilemma of either forcibly implementing the Sharia and jeopardise his next re-election or to ignore Sharia and face problem with the group that helped him won the election. Sherif chose the former option, which led to serious fallout between Governor Ali Modu Sherif and Mohammed Yusuf. As a result, Yusuf labelled Governor Sherif as an apostate and started mobilising his followers for civil disobedience. Yusuf went to the extent of decreeing which laws his followers should follow and which not to; this indicated the emergence of a state within a state (Agbibo, 2013; Durotoye, 2015).

In 2009 the Government made it mandatory upon all motorcycle riders to wear safety helmets while on the road. The police arrested some followers of Muhammed Yusuf who were going to a funeral but refused to comply with the newly passed helmet law. As there was already a disdain feeling towards the Government, this insignificant event translated into a full-blown insurgency. The group started conflicting with the police, to the point of demolishing the group's mosque by the police and their houses were burnt. At this point, many members of Boko Haram were arrested, some were killed, the leader of the group Muhammed Yusuf was also arrested and later executed in the same year without trial (Sergie & Johnson, 2015).

This event of July 2009, dispersed the members of Boko Haram to different locations. Some are believed to have reached Somalia where they received militancy training from al-Shabab. After the execution of Muhammed Yusuf, one of his lieutenants known as Abubakar Shekau assumed the leadership of the group. From this period of crack down by the Government, Boko Haram went through a period of hibernation. However, in 2010, the group resurged and became more radicalised and sophisticated under its new leader Abubakar Shekau. The group carried out one of the largest prison breaks in Nigeria, where they freed most of their members arrested during the 2009 clash. The group started using sophisticated weapons such as AK-47 rifles, Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) and became more tactical in their attacks which included suicide bombings, ambush, raids, assaults, kidnappings etc. As a result, gradually by gradually,

the Group became integrated into the global terror groups (Varin, 2016).

### CONCLUSION

In sum, the Boko Haram crisis became violent in 2009. The Crisis has claimed the life of many innocent people and induced the displacement of the population. The crisis has its recent root in the creation of some tenets and develops some narratives from them to have an ideological basis in line with other radical groups globally. The ideology of Boko Haram centred around the rejection of western education, condemnation of secularism and westernisation and the incompatibility of Islam with democracy. These gave rise to discourses on the fields and settings of acquiring knowledge in western oriented schools, the concept taghut (polytheism), employment under a secular government, and the rejection of khawarijism which is attributed to them by the mainstream Islamic scholars. Before Boko Haram, there were other waves of and rises of radical groups in northern Nigeria such as Maitatsine. Thus, the lack or non-existence of government control over religious institutions and the informal Islamic schools (the Almajiri schools) is a key factor contributing to the emergence of such groups. Therefore, authorities have to step up and be firm to contain the current menace and truncate the rise of such groups in the future to avoid human suffering and insecurity which could have a negative effect on the development of the country in the long-run.

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