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# The Boko Haram Uprising and Islamic Revivalism in Nigeria

Abimbola Adesoji

**Abstract:** From the 1980 Maitatsine uprising to the 2009 Boko Haram uprising, Nigeria was bedevilled by ethno-religious conflicts with devastating human and material losses. But the Boko Haram uprising of July 2009 was significant in that it not only set a precedent, but also reinforced the attempts by Islamic conservative elements at imposing a variant of Islamic religious ideology on a secular state. Whereas the religious sensitivity of Nigerians provided fertile ground for the breeding of the Boko Haram sect, the sect's blossoming was also aided by the prevailing economic dislocation in Nigerian society, the advent of party politics (and the associated desperation of politicians for political power), and the ambivalence of some vocal Islamic leaders, who, though they did not actively embark on insurrection, either did nothing to stop it from fomenting, or only feebly condemned it. These internal factors coupled with growing Islamic fundamentalism around the world make a highly volatile Nigerian society prone to violence, as evidenced by the Boko Haram uprising. Given the approach of the Nigerian state to religious conflict, this violence may remain a recurring problem. This paper documents and analyses the Boko Haram uprising, as well as its links with the promotion of Islamic revivalism and the challenges it poses to the secularity of the Nigerian state.

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**Keywords:** Nigeria, uprisings/revolts, Islam, Islamic law

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The outbreak of the Boko Haram uprising in Nigeria in July 2009 marked yet another phase in the recurring pattern that violent uprisings, riots and disturbances have become in Nigeria. Given the heterogeneous nature of Nigerian society, the religious sensitivity of Nigerians, and the prolonged military rule that ended with the advent of civil rule in 1999, (but during which a significant section of the society was highly militarized), the situation could perhaps not have been different. But what is alarming is the forceful attempt by Islamic fundamentalists to impose a religious ideology on a constitutionally recognized secular society.<sup>1</sup> Obviously a manifestation of the growing religious sensitivity and ineffective deterrence measures in the past, the effects of the riots on the country are legion. Aside from the continued loss of lives and property, the growing fear and animosities among Nigerians, particularly about the threatened secularity of the Nigerian state, and the likelihood of recurrence given the growing religious revivalism around the world are enough justification for a careful consideration and documentation of the phenomenon that the Boko Haram uprising represents.

The Boko Haram uprising was not the first forceful attempt to impose a religious ideology on a secular Nigerian society, but like the first major attempt and subsequent small-scale attempts, it widened the scope of the efforts at Islamic revivalism. More significantly, despite the brutal suppression of previous attempts, the gallantry of the Boko Haram soldiers, the spread and swiftness of its military organization, and the belief of its leadership – and perhaps its membership – that it could successfully engage a modern state in a military duel all show an extraordinary commitment to the cause. Yet, the Boko Haram uprising attracted attention not only because the legitimacy of a state was challenged in the course of promoting Islamic revivalism, but also because its outbreak was an indictment of the state, whose seeming ineptitude was becoming apparent with regular outbreaks of violence of many kinds despite the state's continuous promises to check them.

## The Boko Haram Uprising: Building on Precedents

The Maitatsine uprisings of 1980 in Kano, 1982 in Kaduna and Bulumkutu, 1984 in Yola and 1985 in Bauchi, obviously the first attempts at imposing a religious ideology on a secular, independent Nigeria, marked the beginning of ferocious conflict and crises in Nigeria (Isichei 1987: 194-208; Ibrahim 1997: 511-512). Following the Maitatsine crises, or interspersing them, were several

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1 Part II Section 10 of the 1999 Constitution states expressly that “the Government of the Federation or of a State shall not adopt any religion as State Religion” (see <<http://www.nigeria-law.org/ConstitutionOfTheFederalRepublicOfNigeria.htm>>).

other crises. These include the Kano metropolitan riot of October 1982, the Ilorin riot of March 1986, the University of Ibadan crisis of May 1986, the nationwide crisis over Nigeria's membership in the Organisation of the Islamic Conference in January/February 1986, the Kafanchan/Kaduna/Zaria/Funtua religious riots of March 1987, the Kaduna Polytechnic riot of March 1988, the acrimonious, nationwide debate on Sharia (Islamic law) at the Constituent Assembly in October/November 1988, the Bayero University crisis of 1989, the Bauchi/Katsina riots of March/April 1991, the Kano riot of October 1991, the Zangon-Kataf riot of May 1992, the Kano civil disturbance of December 1991 and the Jos crisis of April 1994 (Imo 1995: 21-23; Ibrahim 1997: 512-516; Enwerem 1999: 124). Similarly, between 1999 and 2008, 28 other conflicts were reported, the most prominent being the Shagamu conflict of July 1999 and the recurrent Jos crises of 2001, 2002, 2004 and 2008 (Ompidan 2009: 5-6; Akæze 2009). The crisis recurred in January 2010.

Virtually all these crises, many of which took a violent form, have been explained or justified by one reason or the other. Where the crisis was not borne out of the need to curb the excesses of some groups, prevent them from being a security threat, or contain their spread – as was the case with the Maitatsine riots (Albert 1999a: 285-286; Ladan 1999: 101) – it arose out of the conversion driven by one religious group and the resistance by another religious group of its perceived stronghold. This was the case with the Kano riot of 1991 during which Muslims complained of preferential treatment in the approval of conduct of a religious crusade by Christians and the use of Kano Race Course earlier not approved for Muslims to hold a similar programme (Albert 1999a: 291-292; Williams 1997: 33-49). In some other cases, it was the seemingly unresolved indigene-settler problem that was at its root. The Zangon-Kataf riots and the recurrent Jos crises fall into this category (Nwosu 1996: 141-152; Williams 1999; Ibrahim 1998: 39-66; Uchendu 2004: 132-144; Human Rights Watch 2005: 7-10). Although almost all the crises have been subsumed under religion and explained by even some authors as religious factors, it is apparent that other extraneous and underlying factors like economic disequilibrium/inequality, envy, poverty among youths (who easily became willing tools in the hand of patrons), and the unhealthy contest for political offices have all played parts (Ibrahim 1997: 521-524; Human Rights Watch 2005: 48; Sulaiman 2008: 20-26). The assertion of Ibrahim, corroborated by Ladan, that all ethno-religious crises have behind them a perceived domination by supposedly external or illegitimate groups, is quite accurate in this case (Ibrahim 1998: 51; Ladan 1999: 105).

Specifically, the Maitatsine uprisings – to which those of Boko Haram compared in terms of philosophy and objectives, organizational planning

and armed resistance, and *modus operandi* – have generally been explained by a combination of factors like economic dislocation, deprivation, and income inequalities, as well as poverty aided by local disasters like drought and a rinderpest (cattle plague) pandemic, all with links to Islam. Other contributing factors were the rejection of the secular nature of the Nigerian society and the impact of the success of the 1979 Ayatollah Khomeini revolution in Iran (Hickey 1984: 251-256; Lubeck 1985: 369-390; Hiskett 1987: 209-223; Usman 1987: 11-25; Isichei 1987: 194-208; Clarke 1987: 93-115; Kastfelt 1989: 83-90; Ibrahim 1997: 509-534; Albert 1997: 285-325; Falola 1998: 137-162; Albert 1999a: 274-309; 1999b: 19-36; Stock 2004: 415-417). Significantly, many of the explanations offered for the outbreak of the Maitatsine uprisings in the 1980s are relevant to the Boko Haram uprising.

## The Boko Haram Uprising and Islamic Revivalism

The Boko Haram riots lasted from 25 July to 30 July 2009 and spread across the four states of Bauchi, Kano, Yobe and Borno, the latter of which saw the most extensive rioting perhaps because it was the leader of the movement's base. The immediate cause of the riot was the sacking of the sect's hideout at the Dutsen Tanshi area of Bauchi on 26 July 2009 by a joint security team, during which nine of its members were arrested and materials for making bombs and other weapons confiscated. This led to reprisal attacks two hours later by the sect members on police formations in Bauchi and eventually in the other three states (Bakare, Adedeji and Shobiye 2009: 5; Owuamanam, Falola and Shobiye 2009: 2-3; McConnell 2009; Hines 2009). The riot was eventually quelled after the capture and killing – supposedly in police custody – of its leader, Ustaz Mohammed Yusuf, and a fierce battle with his followers, some of whom were arrested (Adedeji 2009; McConnell 2009). It is estimated that over 700 people, mostly sect members, were killed, and public buildings like police stations, prisons, government offices, schools and churches were destroyed (Nwankwo and Falola 2009: 2; Oyegbile and Lawal 2009: 67-71).

With the death of its leader and known sponsor Alhaji Buji Foyi and the scattering of its members, and in the absence of any official report so far, it is difficult to obtain precise information on the sect. From what is available, however, it would appear that the group has been around for some time, as long as ten or fifteen years, and had operated under different names in the past. Such names included *Ahlusunna wal' Jamma Hijra*; the Nigerian Taliban; and the *Yusufiyya* (Fasure 2009: 2; Omipidan 2009b: 48; Sunday Tribune 2009). Indeed, its leader Yusuf claimed to be part of the Shiites under the leadership of Ibrahim El-Zakzaky originally, and when the Kano-based

*Jama'atul Tajdidi Islam* (JTI) of Abubakar Mujahid broke away from the Shiites in the 1990s, Yusuf also became a member of the JTI and was even the *amir* (leader) of JTI for Borno State (Suleiman 2009: 19-23). The Shiites, also known as the Islamic Society of Nigeria, emerged in Nigeria in the late 1970s under the leadership of Ibrahim El-Zakzakky. Its objective is the establishment of an Islamic state governed by the Sharia through preaching and subtle influence on society. It also sympathizes with the state of Palestine and abhors Israel and the United States of America. The Shiites did not hide their disdain for the state police and the judiciary, both of which it considers instruments of Satan (Olugboji 1995:6). Although this sect is elitist and appears less dangerous than either the Maitatsine or the Boko Haram movements, its goal is revolutionary/reformist and its members could resort to carrying arms or engaging in armed conflict if the sect's present strategies of preaching and exerting subtle influence on society do not work. Its predisposition to violence, even when not professed, and as seen in its clashes with other Islamic groups, is pertinent. For instance, the Shiites engaged their breakaway group, the *Yan Tauri* – and other Muslims it considered liberal – in violent confrontation in 1996 and 1997, among other instances. Also, the Shiites' regular clashing with policemen during their processions and anti-West protests is an indicator of what the group is capable of (Albert 1999a: 286-288; Akhaine and Abuah 2009: 1-2).

Yusuf's revolutionary transformation, borne out of his long-term dream of reforming society, could explain the radicalization of the group under his leadership, the group having assumed a hard-line position after its erstwhile leader, Abubakar Lawal, left to study at the University of Medina, Saudi Arabia (Oyegbile and Lawal 2009: 68). A different claim was that Yusuf left the Taliban because of its extremist tendencies but vowed that his group would not relent until an “independent and a just State devoid of anything haram (ungodly or sinful) had been established” (Omididan 2009a: 43-44). It would appear that Yusuf prepared himself for the leadership role that he later played in the Boko Haram sect with his membership in other fundamentalist groups. It is also not impossible that the Boko Haram sect was just one facet of the multifaceted and well-linked fundamentalist movement, the true extent of which has yet to be fully determined. The reason that Yusuf decided to sever his ties with the Taliban – if in fact, he actually did – could have been informed not by his opposition to their extremist tendencies but rather by his desire to realize his long-term dream of reform, which, perhaps, was being slowed down by others who were not as passionate as he was.

It seems that the group might not have explicitly given the name “Boko Haram” to itself; rather the name could come from the external view of its

basic beliefs: “Boko Haram” is derived from a combination of the Hausa word *boko* meaning “book” and the Arabic word *haram* which is something forbidden, ungodly or sinful. Literally, it means “book is sinful”, but its deeper meaning is that Western education is sinful, sacrilegious or ungodly and should therefore be forbidden. Characteristically, the sect not only opposed but outrightly rejected Western education, Western culture and modern science. Alternatively, it embraced and advocated the propagation of and strict adherence to Islam by all and sundry regardless of anyone’s personal wishes. In line with this objective, the sect sought to impose Sharia across all Nigerian states (Bumah and Adelokun 2009: 40; National Life 2009). Ironically, Yusuf, the sect leader, enjoyed the best that Western technology offered in the form of exotic cars, the latest communication equipment and the best medical services. In addition, his desire to fully prepare for his jihad encouraged his sending people abroad for medical training, a development that alienated some of his members (Madunagu, Shobiye and Chiedozie 2009: 2). The sect’s membership cut across the broad spectrum of society, but a preponderant number of members came from its poorest groups. Thus, beyond former university lecturers, students, bankers, a former commissioner and other officers of Borno State, membership extended to drug addicts, vagabonds, and generally lawless people. Although the common denominator among all members was their desire to overthrow the secular government and to propagate Islamic law, the oratory prowess of Yusuf arguably contributed to their mobilization and participation (Michael and Bwala 2009: 3; Omipidan 2009a: 43-44; Olu 2009: 9).

The wide gap in time notwithstanding, the socio-economic conditions that sustained the Maitatsine uprisings in 1980 are relevant to the Boko Haram situation. In some cases, the situations had got worse: There was mass poverty; inequality in educational, political and employment opportunities; ignorance due to limited educational opportunities; growing unemployment; and governmental corruption, including the misuse of resources, by which the people were repulsed (Usman 1987: 21; Enwerem 1999: 125; Ale 2009: 8). These problems swelled the army of vulnerable people whose disillusionment and impoverishment made them easy prey in the hands of a demagogue like Yusuf. In particular, with the notorious corruption among the political elite, the country’s vast wealth has failed to improve the lives of citizens. This, coupled with stolen election mandates, has led to a growing disenchantment with the Western system of governance, particularly among jobless young men (McConnell 2009). The *London Times* saw the uprising as a symptom of the social breakdown that has made Nigeria so prone to violence (Anonymous 2009). Interestingly, fanatical uprisings have mostly originated in the North, arguably the poorest part of the country (Ibelema 2009:

18; Makinde 2009: 6). Indeed, out of the 178 clashes that have taken place in Northern Nigeria between 1980 and 2004, 104 were related to religion (Sani 2007).

Although there is no conclusive link with jihadist movements outside Nigeria, the *modus operandi* of the sect, fashioned after the Taliban in Afghanistan, has generated some curiosities. Given its large following and the claim that it had sent members to Afghanistan, Lebanon, Pakistan, Iraq, Mauritania and Algeria for training, it could be that the Boko Haram modelled itself after the Taliban simply to acknowledge its source of inspiration. It could also be that it was meant to attract sympathy and support from the Taliban or related groups. Viewed from another perspective, it could also be that the links actually exist but have not been conclusively proven. The loud speculation in the Nigerian and foreign press about the activities of such groups as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) in Algeria, Tablighi clerics from Pakistan, and Wahabist missionaries from Saudi Arabia in Northern Nigeria, as well as the reported training of some fundamentalists in Al-Qaeda camps in some foreign countries, offer proof of Boko Haram's links with fundamentalist groups around the world, however tenuous (Alli 2009: 1, 8; Oyegbile and Lawal 2009: 69; Soboyede 2009: 14; Clayton 2010).

But there was financial support for the sect also from within Nigeria. Although many of them are not yet known, the support of Alhaji Buji Foi, a former commissioner in Borno State, is commonly acknowledged. There were also other speculated sponsors, from prominent religious leaders to businessmen from the North. Motivations for such support could include belief in the sect's cause, desire to promote religion, or sowing the seeds for future reciprocity of goodwill. The givers could also be disciples, admirers, partners or associates of Yusuf. They could also be underestimating the potential ramifications of the sect's agenda (although that is doubtful), but through their support, they became part of the Islamist agenda to launch a revolution that would entrench Islamic doctrines and practices in Nigeria like the jihadist organizations outside the country.

The role that partisan politics and political patronage play in the sustenance of the sect is obvious. It would appear that the introduction of Sharia in some Northern states beginning in 1999 encouraged closeness between Yusuf and some of the ruling and/or aspiring politicians as their decision aligned with his plan to promote strict adherence to Islamic law. But he was perhaps disappointed by the type of Sharia that was introduced across some Northern states that fell short of his standards. He may have believed either that the office-holders were not serious Muslims or that their Western education was hindering or limiting their commitment. In addition, his fraterni-

zation with the political class possibly informed his willingness to use his group to assist the political elite to secure political power that would, in turn, be used to protect and possibly advance his career (Omipidan 2009a: 44). The disappointment he felt following his abandonment by the political elite could have hastened his desire to effect a change through violence. Another dimension could be the failure to attach the Sharia-based law to social welfare schemes – with the dividends of Sharia seemingly not forthcoming, radicals thus had the opportunity to step in and demand a fully beneficial Islamic state (McConnell 2009). When the fact that the Maitatsine riots broke out during the tenure of a civilian president in 1980 is considered, the link to Yusuf's rise to political patronage could be understood. The thesis that politicians who patronize religious leaders, either for support or protective charms, use them as a tool and later discard them or unleash them on innocent people best describes Yusuf's situation (Adam al Ilory 2009: 23). Most of those who backed violent and revolutionary sects were politicians who needed the sect members' violent disposition to achieve their political and, by extension, economic ends (Muogbo 2009).

## Concluding Notes

Given its abhorrence of the evil that Western civilization and its products represent, and given its strong commitment to the promotion of conservative Islam, whose agenda constitutes a threat to the corporate existence of the secular Nigerian state, a clash was inevitable. As a group that desired to facilitate change by any means possible, Boko Haram's acknowledgement of and actual use of violence became a foregone conclusion. Beyond being an organization with elaborate plans, the intensity, spread and gallantry of the sect members serve as evidence of their remarkable commitment to their cause. Buji Foi selling his properties and donating the proceeds to the sect was the height of his commitment to the cause (Oyegbile and Lawal 2009: 71). But it also shows the hollowness and the futility of implementing a religious agenda and engaging a modern state in combat or warfare, particularly when the means are limited and the level of support is low. In June 2009, some Boko Haram members who were travelling for a funeral had a clash with some policemen over the wearing of crash helmets. During the clash, some of them were killed, and Mohammed Yusuf responded by openly swearing revenge and vowing that nothing would dissuade him in his goals (McConnell 2009). Whereas the strength of the organization and the level of internal and external support could have informed this open challenge to a legally constituted government, the support was just not there, or it simply fizzled out when the chips were down. The denouncement of Yusuf

by mainstream Islam is pertinent. Mainstream Islam's ambivalence, according to Hickey (1984: 254), was caused by the vague or ambivalent attitude of some vocal elements within Islam who, though they would not actively embark on insurrection, either did nothing to stop it from fomenting, or only feebly condemned it. The ambivalence was not due to mainstream Islam's lack of belief in the fundamentalists' position or ultimate aims, but rather due to differing opinions on the method of carrying out those aims.

Although the adoption of Sharia by twelve Northern states (beginning in 1999) appeared to pacify some conservative elements within Islam – contrary to Section 10 of the 1999 Constitution, which clearly defines the secularity of the Nigerian state) – its limited application was still condemned by the Boko Haram sect, which criticized the governors for their insincerity and for politicizing Sharia. This explains why the full implementation of Sharia not only in the North but in the whole of the country was the advertised cause of the jihad. Viewed from a broader perspective, the adoption of Sharia appeared to be an effort to pacify a section of Muslims who had consistently agitated against the secular nature of the country and who perhaps were seen either as a threat to the tenure of the political office-holders or as a support base that could not be neglected on the basis of political calculation. The undue emphasis on religion as a basis for differentiation and mobilization accounts for this, but the measure appeared not strong enough to appease these vocal but loose elements. The conservatives insist on a unitary view of society that recognizes no difference between state and religion, and they advocate making Nigeria an Islamic state administered according to the principles of Sharia law. For them, all Muslims belong to the *umma* (community), and the idea of a secular state is atheistic or syncretistic. Apart from challenging the Muslim affirmation of religious principles – especially the Sharia – the imposition of secularity, according to them, amounts to a cultural affront to a significant portion of the population and reduces them to the status of second-class citizens. Although this view is claimed to be a Quranic injunction, it does not enjoy popular acceptance among liberal Muslims who maintain that such a view does not imply the need for the Islamization of Nigeria nor does it endorse non-acceptance of the constitutional provision of the secularity of the state (Imo 1995: 58-59; Ibrahim 1998: 39-66; Ilesanmi 2001: 529-554)

One major factor in the recurrence of religious uprisings in Nigeria is the inability (or, perhaps, reluctance) of the government to deal decisively with past occurrences and the *dramatis personae*, including their backers. Implicitly, it would appear that once a culprit or a sect member avoids being killed during the suppression of their insurrection, it is all but sure that he will take part in the next one, all other things being equal. This non-deter-

rence has arguably encouraged a culture of impunity and promoted a circle of violence, hence the recurrent nature of religion-related crises in Nigeria. The Kala Kato riot of December 2009 is a pertinent example: Mallam Sale Badamasi, Kala Kato's leader, had criticized the unjust killing of Boko Haram members for preaching against what they considered to be the reality of religious permissiveness and laxity, particularly among those considered to be leaders (Abubakar and Mohammed 2010; Michael 2010: 13). Indeed, what could not be conclusively proved is if the Kala Kato riot was a continuation of the Boko Haram riot, a resurgence of the Maitatsine movement of the 1980s, or perhaps another face of the hydra-headed monster that Islamic extremism is gradually assuming in Nigeria.

The growing problem of Islamic fundamentalism appears to be more deep-rooted than the approaches adopted by the Nigerian government to address it. Given the danger it poses to the country and global security, and given the more serious response by nations around the world to terrorism-related events, comprehensive and drastic measures that aim to address the root causes should be fashioned. Wishing the problem away, pretending it is not there, or that it is not as serious as it is, is akin to sitting on a time bomb. The recurrent nature of intra and inter-ethnic religious crises with ethnic angles is a timely warning.

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## **Die Boko-Haram-Unruhen und die Wiederbelebung des Islam in Nigeria**

**Zusammenfassung:** Vom Maitatsine-Aufstand 1980 bis zu den Boko-Haram-Unruhen 2009 hat die nigerianische Bevölkerung unter den verheerenden menschlichen und materiellen Kosten ethnisch-religiöser Konflikte gelitten. Die Boko-Haram-Unruhen (Juli 2009) markierten allerdings eine qualitative Veränderung, denn sie stellten einen Präzedenzfall dar und verstärkten Versuche konservativer Anhänger des Islam, im säkularen nigerianischen Staat Elemente islamischer Ideologie einzuführen. Angesichts der Empfänglichkeit der Nigerianer für religiöses Denken konnte sich die Boko-Haram-Sekte schnell ausbreiten, erleichtert durch die nach wie vor bestehende ökonomische Polarisierung der nigerianischen Gesellschaft, die erneut heftig aufgebrochene Konkurrenz der Parteien um die politische Macht und die Ambivalenz einiger lautstarker islamischer Führer, die zwar nicht explizit zum Aufstand aufriefen, aber auch nichts zur Beendigung der Hetze beitrugen und diese nur vorsichtig verurteilten. Diese internen Faktoren und der gleichzeitige weltweite Aufschwung des islamischen Fundamentalismus führten in der hoch volatilen nigerianischen Gesellschaft zu den gewaltsam ausgetragenen Boko-Haram-Unruhen. Die im nigerianischen Staat strukturell angelegte Gefahr religiöser Auseinandersetzungen legt nahe, dass solche Gewaltausbrüche ein immer wiederkehrendes Problem bleiben könnten. Der vorliegende Beitrag dokumentiert und analysiert die Boko-Haram-Unruhen und skizziert ihre Bedeutung für die Wiederbelebung des politischen Islam und die damit verbundenen Herausforderungen für den säkularen nigerianischen Staat.

**Schlagwörter:** Nigeria, Aufstand/Revolution, Islam, Islamisches Recht