

WHY IS WESTERN EDUCATION FORBIDDEN? THE IMPACT OF COLONIALISM ON THE RISE OF BOKO HARAM IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

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During his campaigning efforts for the current election in Nigeria, President Mohammadu Buhari announced that the infamous militant terrorist organization widely known as Boko Haram has been “fully decimated”. Maybe overly optimistic, or simply disillusioned, he neglected the reality of what is happening in Northern Nigeria and the ongoing fights with the Islamic State in West Africa, a faction of Boko Haram. The rise of the Boko Haram movement, which started in the early 2000s, led to its sudden transformation into a brutal terrorist organization after the death of its former leader and founder Mohammed Yusuf in 2009. This was followed by the organization’s expansion in West Africa, with the mass abduction of 276 school girls in the Nigerian town of Chibok in 2014 as an example. The incident resulted outrage and a campaign dubbed “#BringBackOurGirls” was established, demanding action for the wellbeing of the school girls.

A few attempts to understand Boko Haram in its historical and cultural context had been put forward, though most of those simply link the rise of the terrorist organization to the unfortunate history of Northern Nigeria’s sectarian violence during the second half of the 20th century.

So far, not a single comprehensive study establishing a convincingly cohesive contextual link between the several movements, factions or conflicts, let alone Nigeria’s history before gaining independence in 1960 had been written. This article tries to provide a first step to do so and highlights the factors, which find their roots within Nigeria’s colonial history, in an attempt to put forward an explanation to the rise of Boko Haram movement.

Divide et Impera: Colonialism and its consequences for modern Nigeria

Ever since the amalgamation of the colonies of Northern and Southern Nigeria into one state in 1914, a multitude of different ethnic, linguistic, cultural and sectarian groups were coerced together into the new administration of the colonial state, which naturally laid the groundwork for social tension on all societal levels (Ofongo, 2016). In fact, colonialism even furthered those tensions within the North by appropriating certain practices such as the encouragement of immigration without proper integration incentives, limited proselytisation zones for Christians, or sponsoring the Hausa-Fulani hegemony (Bolaji, 2013). Typically, British colonial administration would build on pre-colonial elites, who oftentimes were the rulers of the former Emirates of the Sokoto Caliphate in the North. The regime would gladly incorporate those power structures in the lower end of their administration to ensure a smooth transition of power and exert a tight grip over all of Nigerian society. As long as the prescribed tributes were paid and no major political disturbances were taking place, the elite could handle business as they like with strong support by the colonial regime. Naturally, this opened the possibility for arbitrary exploitation of the population and laid the groundwork for widespread corruption in Northern Nigeria (Pierce, 2006).

Transitional justice even preserved those colonial power structures to sustain the status quo for the ruling elite in the former colony. (Yusuf, 2018).

British colonial administration was aggressively pushing for the exploitation of natural resources by shifting agriculture from a subsistence-based economy to the promotion of cash crop farming in the north and heavily investing into the mining sector with a special focus on coal extraction, particularly within the south. With that, colonialism laid the groundwork for an ever-growing economic



discrepancy between the two parts of the country as the south experienced a rapid increase of its exploitative but still productive industry, whereas the north faced the destruction of its traditional subsistence-based farming economy in favour of a heavily extractive form of colonial agriculture, neglecting its own riches in mineral resources. The southern coal industry as one of Nigeria's most important industry sectors enjoyed a monopoly on the country's energy market, which led to a full dependency of the developing northern industry on South Nigeria (Chimee, 2014). Though, after the discovery of oil in the early 60s, coal production plummeted from 98% to 1.6% and came to a complete halt after the civil war of 1967, the major energy industry now focusing on the country's vast oil reserves was still located in the south and didn't bring an end to the economic dependency, though actually worsened as an overemphasis of government revenue projections by the northern states led to a focus on seeking crude oil rents from the south, a process which was continued after the establishment of democracy in 1999 (Suleiman, 2015). Those developments, beginning with colonialism and being catalysed by mismanagement and corruption of the subsequent ruling elite, left Northern Nigeria with huge untapped potential in mineral resources, which opened the doors for illegal mining activities by foreign enterprises of all kinds and deteriorated the agricultural economy as well as an underdeveloped energy infrastructure, that hinders the cultivation of other industry sectors. On top of that, the dependency on southern oil revenues led to a lack of diversification and the resources to build up an independent industry as well as overall economic instability with the concentration of wealth within the hands of a small portion of the ruling elite.

With economic underdevelopment comes a huge discrepancy between the North and South in terms of levels of education, health issues and poverty rates (Suleiman, 2015). Those factors increased tensions within the Nigerian civil and political society on three levels: First, the discontent of the Hausa majority population of the north towards the Fulani ruling elite. Second, the dissatisfaction of the northern society as a whole towards the central Nigerian government. Third, an overall disaffection from the predominantly Muslim society of the north towards the Christian south, which was increasingly interpreted along sectarian lines of conservative Sunni Islam over any other form of religion. In fact, when analysing the cultural and political context of Boko Haram as well as their demands, it becomes apparent that it gained so much initial support by the northern society by appealing to all three of those societal chasms within the country.

Corruption, Poverty, and Politics: Boko Haram's appeal to Northern Nigerian society

The popular discourse in Northern Nigeria addressing the relation between the population with state officials is mostly thematising governmental mismanagement and the widespread corruption to explain the economic hardships of everyday life (Pierce, 2006). The popular discourse often implies that this can be traced back to southern Christian heteronomy over the north, which in turn caused a moral deterioration of Islamic society. Following that, a strong demand to reform the north along Islamic lines would eradicate the economic hardships of everyday life and the moral corruption of civil society (Hansen, 2017). This sentiment led to widespread denunciations of governmental, democratic institutions and facilities propagating secular, western education, which became the symbols for southern, Christian heteronomy over Northern Nigeria. The concept of western education, especially for women, became a huge topic of discussion mostly brought into the public sphere by the Yan Izala movement, which propagated for either a reconciliation between traditional Islamic learning and the western style of teaching, or the complete eradication of modern, secular education in civil society as a form of protection of Islamic values (Roman, 2012; Ben Amara 2011). In addition, over a dozen northern states established sharia law within their federal system during the early 2000s, mirroring the trend of sentiment in their respective Muslim population, which called for a strengthening of traditional Islamic practices of conduct to protect society from corruption and Christian heteronomy (Hansen, 2015). Though, to the anger of

sharia proponents, the reforms apparently didn't bring the anticipated restoration of morals, as some of the practices of the ruling elite stayed more or less abhorrent in the eyes of traditional Shariatic moral concepts. This found its high peak after a high-ranking government official was recorded giving money to a prostitute in Dubai (Suleiman, 2015).

Boko Haram can be seen as the very result of those issues. It opposed most governmental institutions and negated the legitimacy of federal governments, although they have formerly introduced traditional Islamic legal practices, by advocating for an even more extreme adoption of sharia in all parts of society (Suleiman, 2015; Hansen, 2017). Yusuf, who called for a thorough reform of the entirety of Nigerian society along the lines of the Sharia Law in order to rid it completely from southern, Christian heteronomy, as well as its alleged moral corruption (Adediji, 2016). He called for performing hijra (Hegira; which refers to the migration of Prophet Mohammad and his followers from Mecca to Yethrib, according to Muslim belief) and jihad alluding to the hijra of the prophet Mohammed, and echoing Mohammad Dan Fodio, the founder of the Sokoto Caliphate, in his appeals to the Muslim Hausa population of Northern Nigeria (Iyekekpolo, 2016; Nachande, 2017). Both of those notions carry strong connotations of a delegitimized, morally corrupt society or postcolonial state structure (Pierce, 2006), which shall either be reformed, destroyed and replaced or evaded by the Islamic community (Roman, 2012). Some of Mohammed Yusuf's disciples even withdrew themselves completely from Nigerian society by founding their own ultra-religious, autonomous communities, from which they carried out attacks against state institutions, which gained the movement the nickname "Nigerian Taliban" in mass media (Adediji, 2016). Further, the intellectual origins of Boko Haram might be traced back to the Yan Izala movement, as Mohammed Yusuf was in contact with several of its proponents (Roman, 2012).



Indeed, this is reflected by its very Name "Boko Haram", the connotation would be somewhere near "Western Education is forbidden": "Haram", though nowadays a common word in the Hausa language, references the juridical Arabic terminology of Sunni Islam and alludes to something which is "forbidden", "sinful" or "to be avoided". The Hausa term "Boko" carries two connotation dimensions stemming from the early period of 19th-century colonialism in Nigeria. Originally denoting a "lie", "duplicity" or something "inauthentic", it was soon used for western, i.e. British colonial, oftentimes Christian education, when it began challenging traditional Islamic scholarship, the *sine qua non* in the upper hierarchy of public life during the Sokoto Caliphate (Iyekekpolo, 2016). This led to the association of the Hausa "Boko" with the English "Book" on phonetical grounds (Hansen, 2017). Those, who valued "Boko", i.e. the books of British education were seen as duplicitous collaborators with the colonial regime (Iyekekpolo, 2016). Over the course of the 20th century, the term transitioned from being a mere derogative to expressing not only colonial, Christian but also all kinds of modern and secular education.

Mohammed Yusuf used the term to point to the corrupted ruling elite, which was not only perceived as using their education to exploit the common people but was most probably corrupted by the very same education in the first place (Hansen, 2017). Especially the almajirai, graduates from traditional Islamic institutions of learning called mallams were drawn to the teachings of Mohammed Yusuf. Due to their traditional roots in society and low-cost education, the mallams are oftentimes the only possibilities for Northern Nigerians to gain at least some degree of education, which is simply memorising and reciting

the Qur'an. The almajirai, who, because of their inability to find work due to their lack of secular education, constitute a massive recruiting pool filled with deeply religious youngsters struggling under the deteriorating economy, perceiving western education as a threat to their livelihoods (Ofongo, 2016). Interestingly, Yusuf used a radical Sunni Islamic rhetoric with a Hausa twist to it, by referring to concepts like boko, hijra or jihad. This rhetoric was born out of Northern Nigerian eschatological Mahdist (Mahdism, a belief in a person who claims to be the "guided one" or the "Messiah") discourse on colonialism during the Sokoto Caliphate (Umar, 1999).

Lastly, one factor playing into the rise of Boko Haram was its affiliation with several northern politicians as those used the movement to gain power within the context of Nigerian politics. For instance, former governor of Borno State Ali Modu Sherif appointed Buji Foi, a disciple of Yusuf, as Commissioner for religious affairs, which enabled the movement to be financed through the federal budget. Yusuf himself was appointed as a member on the committee responsible for selecting Muslims for Hajj and there is cause to speculate that regular payments to Boko Haram leaders were made by the All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP) through official party funds (Iyekekpolo, 2016). Some scholars even suggested that Boko Haram played an important role within the competition of north and south to control the whole country. Some scholars even suggested that Boko Haram played an important role within the competition of North and South to control the whole country as, after the assumption of office by former president Goodluck Jonathan, who allegedly disrupted a tacit term based power-sharing arrangement between the southern and northern ruling elites, the increase of terrorist attacks and statements of several state officials supported this suspicion (Mbah, 2017).

Conclusion

Though a more thorough historical analysis of the rise of Boko Haram and the legacy of colonialism in Nigeria has to follow, this article serves as an initial attempt to connect the two. By observing colonial policies and their present-day consequences, as well as Boko Haram's *raison d'être* and its appeal to Northern Nigeria's society, the following insights can be gained concerning the impact of colonialism on the rise of the movement:

The roots of Northern Nigeria's main issues such as economic underdevelopment, widespread corruption, and dependency on the southern oil industry as well as the resulting political, sectarian and social chasms can be traced back to policies of the British colonial regime. Boko Haram profited from the resulting societal tensions by appealing to the popular discourse on economic underdevelopment, moral corruption, southern heteronomy, and modern education, initially even playing an important political role in the power game between North and South while using a rhetoric which is grounded on an anti-colonial Sunni Islamic terminology with historical allusions to the Sokoto Caliphate and the early days of colonialism during the 19th century.

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