



Boko Haram: The Psychology of a Murderous Sect

By Sanya Osha



Perhaps the most singular act of terror that thrust Boko Haram into the global spotlight was the 2014 mass abduction of 276 girls from the Government Secondary School in Chibok, Borno State. A global outcry ensued that Boko Haram, for the most part, ignored. Although some of the girls managed to escape (57 of the girls managed to flee in 2016) to freedom, all of them were most probably molested in various ways, including sexually. This brazen act gave rise to an international outcry under the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls.

However, this unfortunate incident is not the first act of Boko Haram's distressing trail of terror randomly targeting and slaughtering students. On July 6, 2013, 42 students at the Government Secondary School in Mamudo were killed. In the same year, on September 29, about 50 students were murdered during an attack on the College of Agriculture, Gubja. The Nigerian president, Muhammadu Buhari, assumed the presidency based on widespread expectations that he would be able to curb the spiralling activities of Boko Haram.

The Boko Haram Reader: From Nigerian Preachers to the Islamic State (2018), edited by Abdulbasit Kassim and Michael Nwankpa, is a broad compendium of texts culled from video recordings, lectures, numerous rants and different interpretations of the Islamic faith based on the Holy Qu'ran and the teachings of the Prophet Mohammed. These various texts provide a panorama through

which to read the psychology of Boko Haram, the terrorist sect operating mainly in Chad, Cameroon, and Niger, and which has been pulverising the north-eastern parts of Nigeria for a decade.

The supposed mind of Boko Haram is terrifying to say the least because it contains its own self-exculpatory and complete justification regarding what it recognises as its manifest destiny, which upholds the mass slaughter of perceived infidels - in short, the waging of total war against all of those it considers to be enemies of Islam. In this self-contained and self-absorbed fundamentalist cocoon, the idea of toleration, compromise and alterity is deemed to be anathema and idolatrous, and therefore worthy of the wrath and vengeance of a *jihad*.

If Boko Haram views its enemies with utter disgust and contempt, it then becomes possible to follow a rigid mindset down an unforgiving path of death and destruction to all infidels. *Jihad*, all through and through, is deemed a supreme necessity.

Faith by dogma

Most of the teachings of Muhammed Yusuf, who was killed by Nigerian law enforcement authorities in 2009, and the current Boko Haram leader, Abubakar Shekau, are what form the key tenets of the sect. Boko Haram denounces the Nigerian state and its constitution, together with all its organs and agencies of governance. It also disapproves of Christianity, Judaism, Western education, and secularism, that is, anything that does not fall within an insufferably narrow radius of its definition of Islam. And through exhortations and inexorable doses of indoctrination, the sheer blindness of dogma becomes clearly evident.

There is also a powerful anti-Semitic streak in the numerous public pronouncements of the leaders of Boko Haram. Sometimes this antipathy is conflated with an equally virulent dislike for Europeans, who are dismissed in the following terms by Yusuf:

"It does not escape any Muslim, upon whom Allah has bestowed understanding, the severity of the Jews' and Christians' enmity towards the Muslims. They will never stop their onslaught on Islam and Muslims day and night. They have taken different measures and attempted to find every means to wreak havoc on the Muslims. They want to remove the Muslims from their religion of truth towards the abyss of misguidance. They fought Muslims with weapons for many years during the time of colonial rule. Then they came to teach the lessons of scepticism, in the minds of Muslims, scepticism about their religion, their Qu'ran and their Prophet Muhammed." (p.17)

The quotation above reveals a chronic persecution complex to which the sect always resorts in justifying its mayhem and carnage and which it employs in describing what it perceives to be its unacceptable plight within the shores of Nigeria:

"Now, they have also killed children, burnt and roasted them. In the face of all these killings, they still claim that we do not have power to do anything. It is a condition. Is it until they finish their killings? There is nothing that will prevent these killings except jihad in Allah's path, but they said they will not allow us. They made all efforts to perceive us by taking reports about us to the SSS [State Security Service]. They will inform the SSS to be careful about us." (p.115)

Nothing best defines the *modus operandi* of Boko Haram than the constant infliction of faith by dogma. Once the power of dogma takes hold, it becomes impossible to view the world through an alternative lens, or at least, without the risk of death. At times, Boko Haram tries to portray itself as a victim tearing asunder swathes of north-eastern Nigeria and other countries in the region and it is apparent that its intention has never been to live in peace with its neighbours and those who

subscribe to different belief systems. Its beliefs are couched in a sordid, monochrome hue that forbids the admission of alterity, non-conformity or dissent. It is as such against all that we have to come to historically define as civilisation and what we understand it to mean today.

Also troubling is the fact that Boko Haram refuses to acknowledge the possibilities inherent in inter-religious and intercultural dialogue and instead is confined to a tunnel vision that perennially absolves it of responsibility and culpability for wrongdoing and violence committed in its name. If groups and communities outside its fold bear the brunt of its random violence, they in turn are responsible for it. In other words, apart from the impossibility of entering into a dialogue with it, it further turns logic upon its head by the unprecedented scale of its capacity for violence.

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As mentioned earlier, another unlikely twist in this violent logic is Boko Haram's constant ability to cast itself as victim – a victim of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, and a victim of the mindless violence of the Nigerian army which kills, maims and rapes Boko Haram's adherents. Boko Haram approaches the same Nigerian authorities it labels anti-Islam in a voice that appears conversant with the rules of reason as it recounts its woes, hoping to perhaps soften the infidel heart of the Nigerian state. So where it is possible that deceptive and cheap populism might work, then it is best to employ it. Here, it also becomes apparent that power is the ultimate goal of Boko Haram, a kind of power that defined the ethos established by the Taliban of Afghanistan.

Boko Haram adopts uncertain strategies of accommodation and half-hearted dialogue when it is obvious that it is losing momentum and it is somewhat vulnerable. But this ploy is exactly what it is, a ploy to deflect attention from its vulnerability in order to regain larger grounds and further entrench itself. But in between periods of ascendancy, redundancy and vulnerability, it never fails to shift its rhetoric from tones of accommodation to unbridled absolutism accordingly.

Muhammed Yusuf, who founded Boko Haram in 2002, is variously described as somewhat erudite, eloquent and analytical. Arguably, his extrajudicial murder by Nigerian law enforcement operatives was badly planned and misguided because it drove the Islamist movement underground where it was able to re-group, re-arm and radicalise itself and then embark on its own murderous rampage against the Nigerian state. The psychotic disposition of Abubakar Shekau, who came to prominence after Yusuf's death, propelled Boko Haram into depths of maniacal depravity that entailed casualised beheadings, public humiliations and floggings of supposed wrongdoers, public executions, amputations, mass rape, kidnapping and human trafficking, slavery and the generalised infliction of pain and trauma on an unprecedented scale.

Under such unimaginably agonising conditions, it is often difficult to see the movement attracting a sizeable following as it roams about the wilds of multiple national jurisdictions on its killing sprees, fuelled, for the most part, by what appears to be maniacal glee aimed against non-believers. The traumatised lives and shattered dreams it leaves in its wake cannot be described by mere words. Even amid the involuntary acceptance that comes with deeply lodged trauma, those forlorn faces brazenly etched by Boko Haram's wrath seem to ask how Allah could allow this to happen. What is the meaning of this hellish madness? When will this abominable nightmare end?

In leaving behind such a disconcerting trail of mayhem and trauma, Boko Haram has demonstrated

that it isn't a sect that builds or transforms society. It promises to establish a holy society of the faithful at the expense of the mass extermination of infidels; it also promises entry into paradise for its adherents who die in the pursuit of *jihad*. But eventually, people would have to figure out this spectre of gloom and despair. They would be led to ask: How many lives must be extinguished in order to create a society of supposed purity? Rather than attain allegorical purity, desolate landscapes are left littered with discarded limbs, fragments of skull and flesh and abject, mangled bodies. This must be Shekau's most piercing legacy.

Fanaticism and paranoia

Wole Soyinka, in his book, *The Climate of Fear*, correctly notes that a major shift in Nigeria's surge towards Islamic fundamentalism occurred after the May 2003 general elections when the northern state of Zamfara, shortly followed by nine other states, adopted the *Sharia* legal code, in effect, questioning the secular character of the Nigerian federation. Boko Haram can be regarded as being part of, as Soyinka writes, "the principal agents of the season of rhetorical hysteria that now seek to bind and blind the world within our climate of fear?" (p.67)

The not altogether unsurprising after-effect of mass scale terrorism is that it instigates excessive paranoia, which in turn leads to equally violent reprisals in the so-called free world as we have observed in the United States, which describes "othered" political and ideological adversaries as "The Evil Empire" or "The Axis of Evil".

Soyinka argues that "fanaticism remains the greatest carrier of the spores of fear, and the rhetoric of religion, with the hysteria it so readily generates, is fast becoming the readiest killing device of contemporary times." (p.76)

In addition, intolerable social and economic conditions can degenerate into a much deeper social malaise whereby the possibilities for toleration, dialogue and compromise become notoriously undermined and are replaced by escalating paranoia, unbridled violence, despair and despondency on all sides.

In such contexts, the fabric of civilised existence becomes frayed as brutal Hobbesian realities, or what Soyinka terms "the psychopathology of the zealot" (p.103), take hold. Of course, Soyinka reminds us that this inimical psychopathology bears no relation to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Instead the implacable credo of the fanatic ultimately leads to the chilling equation: "I am right, you are wrong, and therefore you are dead."

If W.E.B. Dubois had argued that the question of race would be the central issue of the 20th century, Soyinka, on his part, argues that religion is the main socio-political conundrum of the 21st century. He concludes by stating that "the zealot is one that creates a Supreme Being, or Supreme Purpose, in his or her own image, then carries out the orders of that solipsistic device that commands from within, in lofty alienation from, and utter contempt of, society and community." (p.118)

The leaders of Boko Haram do nothing to disguise the sect's fanaticism. They denounce names of month, such as January and July, as the cognomens of idols. Furthermore, Western education must be rebuked as unbelief; the same goes for the national constitution. Polytheism is regarded as a sin that goes contrary to nature and the entire world itself. Nothing explains the dominance of polytheism in world affairs than the American defeat and occupation of Iraq. This development has meant that the United States seeks to dictate what happens in Iraq regarding matters of land, and foreign and domestic affairs, including having a hand in the appointment of those who run these various spheres. Unbelievers can thus not be allowed to manage the national affairs of those who remain faithful.

The intellectual arbiters of radical and extremist Islamic thought posit that there are three main categories of knowledge: knowledge that corroborates the strictures of the Qu'ran; knowledge that contradicts the teachings of the Qu'ran; and finally knowledge that neither confirms nor contradicts the dictates of the Qu'ran. This view lends the realm of knowledge a totalitarian cast; meaning everything is already known, discovered, and therefore nothing in relation to knowledge is exploratory or open-ended.

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Inquiry and experimentation, which are fundamental aspects of the knowledge-making enterprise, then become unnecessary. Everything is known hence nothing is left to be discovered in the present physical world, not to mention the ever-contested domain of metaphysics. Indeed a universe so irreversibly compartmentalised, so absolute in its conceptual finality is akin to a nameless and infinite continuum of death; a form of death that needs to be constantly actualised through motions and mechanisms of ceaseless terror.

Freezing up of history

Boko Haram is undoubtedly against democracy and freedom of expression; many violent incidents and massacres have occurred on account of perceived insults to the Prophet Mohammed. Also, any form of collaboration with the Nigerian state is regarded as an act of infidelity to the "true" principles of Islam and must therefore not be condoned. Yusuf, the founder of sect, who even in death continues to serve as its guiding light, reasons thus:

"Why is it that whenever these events happen, they would say: "Sorry, you should exercise patience, wait for what the government will do or let us plead to the government to take measures." Always that is what they say. Then Allah made me to understand that it is not like that. What will stop them from insulting the Prophet or killing the Muslims is jihad. But how are we going to carry out the jihad? With whom are we going to carry out the jihad? Allah made me to understand that first and foremost, we must embark upon the preaching towards Islamic reform. Then, we will have to be patient until we acquire power. This is the foundation of the preaching towards Islamic reform. It is founded for the sake of jihad and we did not hide this objective from anyone." (p.94)

Boko Haram's most distinctive hallmark is its complete discomfort with the modern world and the entire project of modernity itself. As Yusuf hinted in the excerpt above, it is against the nation, the idea of constitutionalism, an entire spectrum of modern institutions, the notion of democracy, polytheism, atheism, the modern conception of law and order, technological progress and even gender equality. Within this broad dragnet, the idea of human rights gets questioned, undermined and ultimately abandoned because in respect to the *Sunni* (practice), any form of deviation from the faith warrants utter repudiation, and in the final analysis, death.

The public speeches of its key leaders are usually apocalyptic, often bearing secretive and intense messages meant only for the faithful. Boko Haram's credo contains a total repudiation of the idea of historical progress or movement; in other words, everything lies frozen in time, untouched by technological innovation or, as mentioned earlier, the accoutrements of modernity and so on. This is the kind of blind faith that consummates itself through the fatal consumption of the non-believer.

Conceptually, Boko Haram promotes a freezing up of history and social movement. Therefore, the idea of progress, which is integral to human evolution, science and technology, is completely anathema. Once this is well understood, the necessity to kill, maim and plunder on a mass scale and at a global level becomes perhaps slightly less difficult to digest even though it doesn't make it any more palatable.

Boko Haram's violent onslaughts against the Nigerian state, and by extension, nation, stems from the fact that it views the Nigerian constitution as being an infringement on the law of Allah. Allah is the sole provider and arbiter of the law and any other laws that do not bear His seal of approval are considered instances of apostasy inviting the retribution of a *jihad*, which in this case, is a multi-faceted form of cleansing (religious, social, cultural, political and psychological) until the law and the reign of Allah are imposed.

This conception of Islam is, to put it rather harshly, totalitarian since it offers strict injunctions on all aspects of human life, with the laws of Allah, the Qu'ran and the *Sunni* (practice) of the Prophet, in conjunction, being the guide and unchangeable framework through which life must be lived. Shekau describes the constitution as "a collection of man-made laws", and therefore the product of the minds of unbelievers.

Boko Haram considers it its supreme duty to launch an all-out war on those considered to be idolaters or even "moderate" adherents of Islam. Yet it considers it an act of grave injustice for state authorities to attempt to curb its violence by employing violent means.

If Boko (Western education) is Haram (forbidden), then the possibilities for conservation become highly constrained. In the absence of dialogue, violence and death become the norm and this is a reality and an outcome that the sect accepts wholeheartedly. Consequently, this is what makes the sect not only a formidable threat to the Nigerian nation but to all nations as they currently exist everywhere. Its version of Islam then replaces the nation as it seeks to expand its power and borders until it attains a borderless state.

In accomplishing the complete Islamisation of Nigeria and also of countries surrounding its north-eastern border, Boko Haram has run into a strategic impasse regarding how it intends to treat Muslims who are sceptical or half-heartedly committed to its uncompromising version of Islam. This impasse has created different factions within its ranks that have obviously impeded its overall organisational momentum and may possibly make it more difficult for Nigerian authorities to deal with the splintering that results in various often opposing sub-sects.

One of the central strengths of *The Boko Haram Reader* lies in presenting Boko Haram through its own words with lucid translations (by David Cook and Abdulbasit Kassim) of Hausa, Kanuri and Arabic texts of its leaders. In this manner, we wind our way through the unfiltered mind of Boko Haram, as it seemingly unself-consciously spews its rigid interpretation of Islam, the Nigerian political landscape and also the combustible civilisational fissures that define contemporary global politics. Its view of the world might be warped but for its adherents and sympathisers, it has managed to assemble a consistent hodgepodge of beliefs, opinions and Islamic and educational texts by which it is able to convince itself of its piety.

Unfortunately, there is hardly any instance of Boko Haram entertaining the possibilities of accommodation in relation to the Nigerian state. As noted earlier, in moments of vulnerability or periods of retreat, it might soften its rhetoric or modify its hardline stance. But these must be regarded as momentary withdrawals, tactical feints until it can regain its momentum in the gory march towards the Islamisation of Nigeria.

However, this mission extends beyond Nigerian Muslims in order to forge strategic alliances with Islamic brethren and *shaykhs* in the Maghrib, the warriors in the Islamic state of Mali, the *jihadis* based in the embattled territories of Somalia, the equally beleaguered brethren in Libya, the *shaykhs* in the splintered nation of Afghanistan, brothers and *shaykhs* in the maimed nation of Iraq and the Levant, fellow *jihadis* in Yemen, brothers in the sundered state of Palestine and all the other places where Allah's children endure oppression.

This ability to imagine and uphold a transnational vision of Islam, this interrogation of the possibilities for the establishment of a globalised Islam, is what makes Boko Haram so menacing. Its leaders are no parochial ignoramus merely intent on a return to medieval savagery and anti-intellectualism. True, its intellectual traditions, or better still, preferences, may be highly selective but part of its vision and mission is the unfettered unfurling of an Islamised world organised through the law of Allah, the injunctions of the Qu'ran and the *Sunni* (practice) of the Prophet Mohammed. Undoubtedly, this would make it seem hermetic in its structure and constitution but it is also able to provide everything a true believer requires to navigate the temptations and obstacles of the unIslamised world while it struggles to impose its own version of the world. Boko Haram's world would obviously also include brothers and *shaykhs* in Chechnya, Kashmir, the Arabian Peninsula, Algeria and Azerbaijan.

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Micheal Nwankpa, one of the editors of the volume writes, that "a military approach to Boko Haram (armed combat) would not be suitable; rather, a criminal justice and law enforcement approach in addition to limited political concessions would represent the right counter-response" (p.285). It is difficult to fathom how this constitutes the most appropriate remedy for an organisation that construes the Nigerian nation as one led by unbelievers, an idolatrous constitution and an infidel army. Nwankpa himself admits that Boko Haram has spurned numerous entreaties for dialogue with the Nigerian government.

Due to its uncompromising stance, it is hard to see it aligning itself with the traditional leadership structures of northern Nigeria together with modern political elites in the region. Boko Haram repudiates the northern political elites because of their affiliation to a secularist state and hence at this juncture, it is quite impossible to see any alliance, or more appropriately, agreement being forged.

Shekau increasingly became a murderous, remorseless and heartless figure extolling kidnapping and hostage-taking, child soldiers and female sexual enslavement in the name of his psychopathic faith. He is crude, anti-intellectual and the opposite of the more suave and eloquent Yusuf. The multiple employment of twelve-year-old girls as suicide bombers, the awful event of the Chibok school girls' kidnapping that outraged the world, the merciless and odious decapitation of adversaries and perceived non-believers, the instigations of widespread social chaos, violence and death across different national boundaries, the utter lack of civility in the conduct of war and the absolute disregard for human life already offers up an extremely vivid picture of hell on earth. But if this is the price to be paid to breach paradise, then nothing can assuage the memory or protracted agonies wrought by this relentlessly bleak and violent dystopia.

Nwankpa mentions a number of counterterrorist measures to check the advances of Boko Haram,

which has been described as the West African Islamic state. The sect has evolved into a transnational succubus with various resources and networks available to it in enforcing its reign of death. So perhaps when it is in recession in north-eastern Nigeria, for instance, it could suddenly assume resurgence in say, Cameroon or Chad or Niger, which are all countries where it has adherents and has also managed to wreak a trail of death and destruction in its wake.

Nonetheless, Nwankpa explains why Boko Haram has not captured global consciousness in the way ISIS or al Qaeda have done. Boko Haram largely pursues a local(ist) agenda without having done significant and direct harm to global political and economic interests. In this sense, it is seen as pursuing the jihadist path trodden by Usman dan Fodio, who established the first great West African Islamic kingdom in 1804.

Boko Haram, at the zenith of its political and territorial powers between 2014 and 2015, never managed to create a viable Islamic state on the captured territories of north-eastern Nigeria. In addition, in political terms, rather than attract new adherents amongst die-hard Muslims, it has only succeeded in repelling them because apart from what appears to be its unalloyed nihilism and insufferable taste for violence and vengeance, it had very little else to offer.

In spite of these significant shortcomings, it is apparent that neither the Nigerian nor the Cameroonian government has the capacity to extinguish the murderous rage fuelling Boko Haram to ever more shocking depths of terror.

In view of such a dire prognosis, two approaches immediately come to mind: newer ways of living and coping with international terror would have to be found; and secondly, government authorities need to devise more integrated as well as multi-pronged approaches in deciding what forms of terror are likely to have global impact on a scale of priorities, and on that basis, initiate plans of action.

In an age when the whole of humanity trembles under constant threat, and basic humanism is sorely tested, post-traumatic stress disorder a widespread reality. Every effort ought to be made without recourse to the textbook terrorism of professional terrorists (and that's the hard part) to re-establish and retain what makes us simply and truly human.

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