

## Chapter 6

# Visions of an alternative world: Understanding the background to Boko Haram

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### Introduction

Northeastern Nigeria is a land of savannah with rocky escarpment along the Cameroon border. A rich dark agricultural soil, *firki*, supports farming communities from Lake Chad to the regional capital Maiduguri. Borno, the name of the modern state whose capital is Maiduguri, was an important state in precolonial times with a long tradition of Islamic scholarship and trading relations across the Sahel and the Sahara. The majority of the population are Muslim Kanuri speakers, but speakers of many other languages live along the escarpment of the borderlands and in the south of the region. The primary northern Nigerian lingua franca, Hausa, is spoken widely as a second or third language. However, the larger towns, like much of Nigeria, have speakers of many languages living side by side. Rainy season agriculture is the mainstay of communities across the region, with intense manual labour in the fields between planting in May/June and harvest in September/October. Abundant rains are the salvation of these communities, providing sufficient millet, rice and vegetables to store and sustain a family through the dry season between November and April, as well as produce to sell, and seed to retain for the next sowing season. Late rains or extensive drought can limit a harvest and push families and communities to the limits of sustainability. This fragility is mitigated by dry season petty trading, moving the able-bodied to towns and cities in search of paid labour, thereby reducing the number of mouths to feed at home, and, if the system works, producing a cash income for the purchase of essential commodities. In a good year the cycle repeats as people return to their farms at the sign of rain in May and have the seed to plant, the land to till, and the labour to apply to the land. Across the tree-lined savannah and through patches of denser bush, the Fulani follow tracks, driving their cattle between grazing grounds and water. They move over farmland in the dry season and through the bush during the wet season, causing potential friction between farmers and herders if cattle damage crops. Maiduguri has for many years acted as a hub for cattle transported by road to the meat markets of the cities of the south. Some of these cattle are driven in from as

far away as the other side of Lake Chad.

### **Economic decline**

The mid to late 1970s was a period of economic boom in Nigeria. New oil revenues were accruing to the federal government, the reliance on agricultural produce, such as cotton and groundnuts for export, was disappearing, and government jobs, funded by oil revenues, were growing in reward and in number. The splitting of three regions into 12 states after the end of the civil war and then the creation of 21, then 30, and most recently, in 1996, 36 states multiplied bureaucracies and the number of government jobs. The boom years, until the crash came in the mid-1980s, created both a commercial and ruling elite in which some people rose fast and far. A burgeoning urban middle class was able to buy imported goods ranging from fridges to luxury cars, while the Naira traded at two to a British pound. When structural adjustments in the mid-1980s burst the economic bubble, the naira went to 200 to the pound, and spare parts for fridges or cars suddenly became hugely expensive, if not unobtainable, encouraging many Nigerians to become familiar with the 'make-do' culture of constant repairs. The aspiring middle class found their standard of living falling rapidly, while the mega rich seemed to be able to sustain their international lifestyles. Young people, who had aspired to join the older generation in promotion and reward, found that there was nowhere to go, no jobs that met their aspirations, or often no jobs at all. The industrial areas in places such as Bompai and Sharada in the great city of Kano, saw factory after factory close its doors, and school and university graduates had little or no prospects in government employment, while teaching salaries often went unpaid. A popular perception was that the rich had gained their wealth through corruption on a grand scale.

The early 1990s were years characterised by dislocation and disarray in many sectors. With the grim humour that typified many Nigerians' attitudes, the national electrical power authority, NEPA (Nigerian Electric Power Authority), became popularly known as Never Ever Power Anywhere. Ordinary Nigerians everywhere suffered from a lack of medicines in the clinics and hospitals, collapsing schools with no books or teachers, a corrupt and ineffective police and legal system, problems with water supply, transportation and safety on the roads, and few job opportunities. Stories of corruption abounded and people yearned for a way out of the apparent national chaos.

### **Islam in northern Nigeria**

From before the 16th century in what is now northern Nigeria, walled towns and cities, such as Kano, Zaria, Rano, Daura and Katsina, were home to

Hausa aristocracies. There was a variety of craft and trade guilds supported by surplus production from agricultural communities, sometimes of slaves, in the surrounding farmlands. Islamic clerics were often resident in these towns and cities, providing religious and scribal services to the local ruler and to the urban community. Non-Islamic religious belief systems, particularly the *bori* spirit-possession cult, were practised in both rural and urban environments alongside Islam. In 1804, a jihad against un-Islamic practices in the Hausa city states led to the overthrow of the pre-existing Hausa rulers who were replaced by emirs of Fulani descent, led from a new capital at Sokoto and owing allegiance to the leader of the jihad, Shaikh Usman dan Fodio. The military overthrow was complemented by an ideological war to reform Islam as it was practised at the time, and to spread the Sunni Islamic faith through preaching and teaching throughout the land. The writings of the leaders of the jihad debated both the practice of the faith and the correct administration of the state, the practice of sharia law, and the promulgation of the branches of Islamic knowledge from theology and the traditions of the Prophet to Arabic grammar and the writing of religious verse. They translated and wrote in Arabic, Hausa and the language of the Fulani, Fulfulde. Among the issues they debated were the lawfulness of enslavement, the definition of a Muslim, and the prohibition against the enslavement of fellow Muslims.

Within the practice of Islam, there were a number of movements, including Sufi brotherhoods, which had their own ways of prayer, their own leaders, and their own forms of religious literature. The two major brotherhoods that spread and grew in adherents through the 19th and early 20th centuries were the Tijaniyya and the Qadiriyya. These were brotherhoods with members right across West Africa and beyond. Within the traditions of these movements, the importance of the founders, the role of saints revered by the membership, and a body of mystical knowledge were of central significance. By the 1960s and 1970s, with the rise of modern media and the introduction of printing presses, the Tijani or the Qadiri way of prayer was transformed from a set of beliefs and practices that were focused on the individual person and their own way of faith to a mass movement, where adherents would pray together in public, meet in brotherhood buildings, and distribute pamphlets and poetry as part of their proselytising. The Qadiriyya quickly matched this new style, led by the Tijaniyya in Kano, across the north generally. At the same time, there were many people who viewed themselves as pious Muslims but who did not belong to either brotherhood. With the greater public presence of the brotherhoods in the 1970s, there was a growth of anti-Sufi sentiment, arising from an abhorrence for the veneration of Sufi saints and mystical practices. A strong line of thought at the time of the jihad of 1804 (and ever since) has been the condemnation of

introducing *bidi'a* (innovation) into the beliefs and practices of Islam. Adaptation, syncretism and addition have all been seen as movements away from the essential truths contained in the Qur'an and in the traditions of the Prophet. A return to the fundamentals is a rallying cry repeated often down the centuries. In the late 1970s, in northern Nigeria, an anti-Sufi movement called *izalat al-bidi'a* (removal of innovation), under the leadership of the cleric Abubakar Gumi, began to preach against adherence to the ways of the Sufi brotherhoods. The movement quickly spread, particularly among graduates, government employees and others outside the networks of the brotherhoods.

### Traditions of rejection

The issue of what are the appropriate actions for a good Muslim faced with external or, indeed, internal threats has been the subject of debate over the years. A hundred years apart, around 1800 and 1900, there were discussions about options in the face of perceived threats. In 1800, the followers and extended family of Usman dan Fodio were faced with opposition from the rulers of a series of Hausa states, and their options were accommodation, fight or flight. In opting to fight, and declaring a jihad, the leaders of the jihad set out their justifications in terms of the maladministration and un-Islamic practices of previous regimes. A hundred years later, similar debates about options occurred when the descendants of the jihadists were faced with the arrival of the British in the first decade of the 20th century. The British defeated the military resistance they encountered, and the Sultan of Sokoto, Attahiru, a descendant of Usman dan Fodiyo, fled east and was killed at the battle of Burmi, while his followers dispersed. The options to fight, to flee, or to accommodate were illustrated in one of the first Hausa novels, *Gandoki*, published in 1934. The novel's eponymous warrior-hero, in the service of Sultan Attahiru, resists the British in battle. He escapes capture in defeat and flees eastward. His defeats in the real world are followed by a series of victories and conversions of infidels in a fantasy world, only for him to return to northern Nigeria at the end of the story and reach an accommodation with the presence of the British and their new technologies.

However, in the face of British colonisers there were other options. For example, rather than fight or flight, resistance could take the form of quietist non-engagement. Non-cooperation was typical of attitudes among many northerners to aspects of colonial government, on issues of taxation, for example, and the demand that northerners send their children to the new, Western-style schools that were being established in the north, schools which parents feared were synonymous with Christianisation.

Fight, flee, resist actively, resist passively, withdraw, engage – these were all

options in dealing with what was seen as any illegitimate power, and by the middle of the 19th century, the geography of northern Nigeria allowed for a variety of such possibilities. Space and order were generally divided into three major categories. Cities and towns were the sites of aristocratic power, craft guilds, traders and markets, administration and sources of religious authority. The second, dependent category of space, was the agricultural hinterland to these towns and cities – hamlets, settled farms, slave settlements, paths, economic trees, land ownership and places to process produce. The third category was the unregulated bush – the domain of hunters, outlaws, dangerous animals and spirits – ventured into along dangerous paths only by outlaws, woodcutters and honey collectors. This land was beyond the control of authorities, but potentially available for clearing and occupation if someone was brave or foolhardy enough. Hausa stories and early novels trace characters into and between these spaces.

### Two types of schooling

The north of Nigeria has long operated with two systems of schooling, with efforts at various times to combine the two. Islamic education starts from the age of five or six years with the learning of verses of the Qur'an and writing them in Arabic script. A child will go on to study a range of religious texts under the tutelage of a scholar (*malam*) into early adulthood. The child may leave home to live as part of the scholar's small community of religious students (*almajirai*) who, in addition to studying, may farm, pursue a craft and collect alms from neighbours for the *malam's* community. This traditional model has been supplemented since the middle of the 20th century by more formalised schooling, where Islamic education has sat alongside history, geography, maths and other subjects in an integrated school curriculum in a formal school setting. Institutions of higher Islamic learning were established, such as the School for Arabic Studies, and the universities have had departments of Islamic Studies from which graduates have gone on to train at other institutions such as Al-Azhar University in Egypt and, in more recent years, the Islamic University of Medina.

Western secular education began in the north of Nigeria in the early colonial period with the establishment of a small number of primary schools and one secondary school, Katsina College, where teaching was in English and a range of subjects, including science, maths, English, history and geography, were taught. British colonial officials pressed the emirs to send their sons to school as a means of training a modernised ruling class. The early years of resistance in the lead up to independence began to crumble as the acknowledged political leader of the north, Ahmadu Bello, saw the need to train young northerners

to compete with the larger number of southerners who had benefited from years of mission schooling and gained Western educational qualifications. The imbalance between the north and the south in terms of numbers and level of qualification in Western education was to remain a factor for many years after independence. A move to introduce universal primary education in 1976 and a further move to strengthen adult education produced a new generation of northerners who could read and write in English and in Roman script Hausa. However, the question became 'an education for what?' as the effects of the economic downturn hit from the mid-1980s onwards. In the boom years, some people went through primary, secondary and university education straight into positions of power and wealth, whether ill-gotten or not. When the crash came, it damaged the quality of all levels of education, and qualifications seemed to no longer lead anywhere. Modern state schooling was the key to advancement in the Nigerian state, yet the resistance of the colonial years was followed by a disillusionment that had started long before the economic collapse of the 1980s. A Hausa woman poet, Alhajiya 'Yar Shehu, wrote a poem called *Wakar Gargadi* (A Poem of Warning) in 1973, which illustrated the dilemma of the undereducated alienated from the lives of their parents. An extract is presented below:

*Ka ce da ni an kai ka har ga uban gari,  
Wai ka ki ba da su Tanko har da Magajiya.  
Aka tilasa ka ka ba da su aka kai gari,  
Wai don sui yo ilmu ka huta dawainiya.  
Aikinka noma ka ga su ba su san shi ba,  
Su sai zama bisa kan kujera ka jiya.  
Ka kai su sun gama du Piramare sun fita,  
Kuma an hana su shiga Koleji gaba daya.  
Har ma da Certificate Piramare sun gama,  
Kuma an rubuta sun yi passing kun jiya.  
Sai anka ce musu wai akwai interview,  
Interview nan ne akai musu murdiya.  
Sai anka ja su aka hau su da tambaya,  
Ko sun ci ma ai dole ne sai an biya.  
To kun ga Kosau babu wanda ya san da shi,  
Kuma bai da kurdi wanda zai yai murdiya.  
Gona guda daya ga shi 'ya'ya sha biyar,  
Kuma ban da noman ba sana'a ko daya.  
To kun ga Tanko Magajiya duk sun rasa,  
Don babu wanda ya san ubansu a duniya.*

*Daga nan su Mallam Tanko sai a shige gari,  
 An bar uwa da uba da bacin zuciya.  
 Daga nan a fada kantuna har campuna,  
 Har ofisoshi babu aiki ko daya.  
 Imin su Tanko bai wuce na Piramare,  
 Su 'yan Coleji suke bukata kun jiya.  
 To kun gan shi bai zauna gun babansa ba,  
 Kuma nan a birni babu aiki ko daya.  
 Irinsu ba su kidayuwa a Nijeriya,  
 Sun yiwo Piramare ba sana'a ko daya.  
 To kun ga guntun ilmi ba shi da fa'ida,  
 Kuma shi ya ke da yawa a nan Nijeriya.*

*You told me that you were taken before the authorities  
 For not handing over your children Tanko and Magajiya.  
 You were forced to give them up and they were taken to town  
 Seemingly so that they could be educated and you receive some relief.  
 Your work is farming but they now know nothing of it  
 They only know how to sit on chairs.  
 You sent them off and they graduated from primary  
 But they were prevented from going to College.  
 They even emerged with primary certificates  
 In which it indicates that they passed the exams.  
 They were told there would be an interview  
 And that was when they came under pressure to pay.  
 They were beset and beleaguered with questions  
 And even if they could answer them they were required to pay up.  
 Nobody has ever heard of Kosau  
 And he has no money with which to bribe.  
 He has just one farm and fifteen children  
 And apart from farming he has no other trade.  
 So you see Tanko and Magajiya lose out  
 Because no one knows their father in this big wide world.  
 And then those like Tanko make their way to town  
 Leaving mother and father desolate at home.  
 They go round to shops and companies  
 And offices where there is no work at all.  
 The education of the likes of Tanko goes no further than primary  
 But they need College graduates.  
 So neither does he stay with his father*

*Nor can he find work in the city.  
 There are innumerable people like him in Nigeria  
 Primary graduates with no trade.  
 So you see a little knowledge is not a good thing  
 And there is much little knowledge here in Nigeria.*

Islamic schooling assisted with insertion into the economic activities of traders and merchants within, for example, the Sufi brotherhoods, but did little to provide direct access to employment within the Nigerian state or its agencies or, indeed, national commercial companies. However, the combination of early childhood Islamic education and universal primary education from 1976 onwards produced a new literate generation who were looking for a way forward for Nigeria in the years leading up to the return of civilian rule in 1999. Many looked at the mess they thought Nigeria was in and desperately wanted, with civilian rule, a dispensation that could bring some order, some discipline and some effectiveness to Nigerian economic and daily life.

### **Sharia as the way forward**

For many northern Muslims faced with the conditions in Nigeria at the turn of the millennium, the extension of sharia beyond the field of civil law, where it had long since operated, into criminal law and the regulation of public life, was not only enjoined by their religion but constituted the only system that seemed to have the potential to restore order and discipline to society – a system that would apply to Muslims only, or to others by choice. My former neighbour in Gandun Albasu, a suburb of Kano, where I lived in the 1970s, told me in 2000 that an *alkali's* court operating under sharia would get you justice in one day for a theft, but nothing would come from a magistrate's court but delays, demands for bribes, extortionate legal fees and failure. So, when the governor of Zamfara State in 2000 declared that sharia law would be extended into many areas of public life, most people welcomed this as the only way to bring order and justice to the chaos of Nigeria. It would be as impossible for a northern public figure to publicly oppose the extension of sharia as it would be for a US politician to oppose motherhood and apple pie.

Central to the implementation of sharia is an agency, the *hisbah*, responsible for enforcing rules regarding public behaviour, particularly in relation to the mixing of the sexes in public places. Even more central to the implementation of sharia is the recognition of authority of those who pronounce on the interpretation of rules. In the years following the 2000 initiative in Zamfara State, other northern governors also set up *hisbah* organisations and recognised clerics' authority to speak on issues of rules and good practice. The authority



of religious leadership has generally been based on scholarly reputation in the teaching of theological, legal and other texts – a reputation combining personal qualities of piety and wisdom with a charismatic ability to perform as a preacher and teacher. Such reputations are perceived as having nothing to do with what creates a position of power in the Nigerian state at large – money and influence. However, there were not only different religious leaders among the Tijaniyya and the Qadiriyya, there was also a leadership of anti-Sufi *izala*, which split into a variety of groups with a number of leadership contenders. For some years, there had also been a small but growing number of Nigerian Shia adherents under the leadership of Ibrahim Zakzaky in Zaria, who were opposed to all branches of Sunni Islam across Nigeria. Their numbers have grown in recent years and in 2015–2016 they clashed with the Nigerian military on a number of occasions.

For ordinary people, the post-2000 implementation of sharia law saw limited improvement in their daily lives, and among the proponents of sharia, more and more strident voices rejected the Nigerian state and all that it represented to them – theft, corruption, impoverishment and oppression. Disappointment with the implementation of sharia led to increasingly bitter denunciations by one scholar of another for endorsing backsliding and selling out to the authorities. Rejectionist positions not only opposed all agencies of the modern Nigerian state, they also fiercely criticised the factions from which they had split.

Twenty-five years earlier, in the early 1980s, another popular rejectionist movement, the Maitatsine rebellion, was put down by the army, air force and police in Kano and then in other cities. In this instance, a preacher called Muhammadu Marwa gathered followers from among the poor and the dispossessed and preached a wholesale rejection of all aspects of Nigerian modernity. Marwa and his followers went as far as to refuse to wear buttons and watches or ride bikes, and attacked those passersby who did. Marwa apparently claimed to be a prophet, denouncing majority views among Kano clerics, criticising the Qur'an and calling for the destruction of pagans. Marwa and many of his followers, known as '*Yan Tatsine* (those who curse) were killed by the police and army, while some fled to other northern cities where further outbreaks of violence were suppressed.

### Schism and radicalism

A range of preachers took increasingly radical positions in reaction to what was seen by some as the failed implementation of sharia after 2000. Some had emerged within the *izala* movement and had broken away from the leadership of that movement. Others, who trained in Salafist thought at the

Islamic University of Medina in Saudi Arabia, learnt of new authorities and new sources of interpretation and began establishing their authority within mosques and educational institutions across the north. A return to a vision of a pre-modern society, justly governed in an egalitarian Islamic polity, was an attractive idea to the disenfranchised and the dispossessed, and this is what some preachers, most notably a man called Mohammed Yusuf, set out for their followers. A complex pattern of splitting and alliances between radical groups and preachers led to animosity and denunciation between groups, and in 2002–2003, a group of people moved away from the big cities and established themselves near the border with Niger in a place called Kanama, as far away from state control as they could get. Nevertheless, this retreat into supposed liminal areas, like the ungoverned bush of traditional stories, led to clashes with local people and subsequent attacks on nearby police and government offices. Police action defeated the group, who scattered and regrouped in Maiduguri under the leadership of Mohammed Yusuf. Local journalists started using the phrase Boko Haram (Western education is forbidden) for the movement led by Mohammed Yusuf at the time. In 2007, the BBC's Hausa Service conducted a radio interview with him following clashes between his followers and the police. In that interview, he called his group the *Jama'atu Ahlis-Sunnah Lidda'awati wal Jihad* (People who propagate the Prophet's teachings and the struggle). He went on to explain that conflict with the authorities began after a doctrinal rift in interpretation between himself and the imam of the mosque in Monguno. This led to the foundation of a separate mosque in Monguno and his followers were reported to the police and some of them unfairly arrested. Attempts were made to free those arrested from the police station, which quickly escalated into attack and counter-attack between his followers and Nigerian security forces. In the interview, he was asked whether he was opposed to education and he replied that he was fully in favour of education, but not an education that promoted falsehoods such as evolution and much of modern science. In his answers to questions he cited a range of authoritative religious texts, including the 14th-century Damascus scholar Ibn Taymiyyah. During the same year as Yusuf's BBC interview, an erstwhile teacher/colleague of his, Jaafar Adam, who had criticised him in a mosque in Kano, was assassinated in his own mosque, apparently by some of Yusuf's followers. Further clashes in towns near Maiduguri between 2007 and 2009 were followed by an event that proved to be the spark that ignited the flames between Boko Haram and the state.

### June–July 2009

In June 2009, some of Yusuf's followers clashed with a police unit in an altercation about the wearing of motorbike helmets. The police opened fire,

killing a number of people. Tensions quickly mounted and the next month the military put down a major Boko Haram uprising in which more than 800 people were killed and many arrested. Yusuf was captured, interrogated and summarily executed. Subsequent police action saw many people rounded up and jailed. Reports of mistreatment at the hands of the authorities began to emerge. A year later, a new leader, Abubakar Shekau, appeared on a videotape denouncing all those who opposed Boko Haram and threatening to destroy all those who supported the state. A campaign of assassination ensued, targeting Islamic clerics who criticised Boko Haram, village and district heads who cooperated with the security forces, and policemen and local representatives of state organisations. Churches, police stations, military outposts, customs offices, newspaper offices, bars, government buildings in Abuja, Kano, Bauchi, Potiskum, Gombe and Kaduna were the target of frequent bombings. Boko Haram began to arrive in armed columns in towns and villages, killing inhabitants, taking supplies, robbing banks and, in the case of police stations or army barracks, stripping them of their armaments, vehicles and munitions, to be used against security forces and civilians. A splinter group, called Ansaru, was implicated in the kidnapping and execution of foreigners. Complaints of reprisals against civilians by the Military Joint Task Force were reinforced by external reports of widespread human rights abuses by security forces and civilian militias. In April 2014, Boko Haram took more than 200 girls from their school in Chibok and Abubakar Shekau claimed he would marry them off to his fighters.

#### **By the end of 2014**

By the end of 2014, Shekau declared Gwoza to be the capital of his new caliphate in West Africa. A regional summit proposed military cooperation between Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon and Chad to tackle the now rampant threat of Boko Haram to the region. At this low point, Nigerian soldiers complained of being ill equipped and ill led, and soldiers mutinied against their superior officers. There started to be suicide bombs attached to children. However, by 2015, the army began to slowly take back towns that had been under the control of Boko Haram, including Gwoza in March of that year. Military collaboration with neighbouring states began to have an effect and Boko Haram largely withdrew into outlying areas such as the Sambisa Forest, south of Maiduguri. It appeared by mid-2016 that large-scale Boko Haram raids had become few and far between and, in most of the north, attacks by the group were primarily suicide bombings in crowded marketplaces using young children. However, by late 2016, the insurgency had led to the displacement of an estimated 2.5 million people in northeast Nigeria and the possibility of a major humanitarian crisis. While good rains came in May/June 2016, people's

homes had been destroyed, their seed corn stolen, their livestock gone and their essential cycle of subsistence broken.

Some members of Boko Haram were, and are, committed to the cause, some were press-ganged into joining, and others or their families had suffered at the hands of the police and military. Others were paid mercenaries, or simply saw no alternative to achieving what was unavailable to them – a wife, wealth and power. Many will disperse and disappear into the urban populations of the north. Some may even manage to go home, if they still have one. Will that happen and will that be the end of it? It would appear that Boko Haram has split into at least two factions and armed groups still mount attacks in Cameroon, in Niger and on villages in the far northeast of Nigeria. While diminished, the insurgency is not yet over.

### **Solutions proposed**

Commentators have commonly proposed a range of long-term solutions to the insurgency, including:

- Improve the economy of the north to provide jobs, prospects and reduce poverty;
- Strengthen moderate Islamic organisations and the propagation of moderate Islamic messages;
- Improve transparency and governance;
- Reduce levels of state corruption;
- Improve the quality and availability of Western education in northern Nigerian schools;
- Improve the quality of the state's intelligence services and counter-insurgency training of the military.

However, even if all these proposed measures were, indeed, put into effect, would that necessarily be the end of it?

### **Accommodating rejection – co-existence or violence**

By the end of 2014, the idea of withdrawal of a community from a corrupt world into a separate society following its own true path was no longer viable, if it ever had been. For the leadership of Boko Haram, war was seen as the only way to establish an alternative world built on what they saw as Islamic principles. But the creation of a viable state, with a functioning local economy, was never achievable while at war with the Nigerian state.

As I write in early 2017, the insurgency is not over. The question remains as to whether a modern nation state can accommodate an ideology and a group of committed individuals who wish to have nothing to do with the daily manifestations of that state. Nigeria is a big country with over 400

languages, a federation of 36 states, and a multiplicity of lifestyles based on ethnicity and religion. Could it accommodate a group that wanted to live apart by its own rules and in its own way? To what extent does it already do so in accommodating local communities and a variety of religious and social practices? Is it the demand that others conform to self-created norms that inevitably leads to conflict and an escalation of violence? These questions come back to the limits of tolerance at all levels of the state. Is the idea of withdrawal into ungoverned space any longer possible in a world of modern communications and surveillance? A small peaceful group may be able to manage it, but Boko Haram's message was never a pacifist one – it was struggle (jihad) that would bring about the alternative vision. Boko Haram and the 'yan tatsine' before them, were perceived as a threat when large numbers of people moved to join them. Is violent suppression the only solution for groups that reject the state, or is there a politics of accommodation that could come into play when, inevitably, the sentiments that drove the jihad of 1804, or the warped sentiments that inspired the Maitatsine uprising of 1980, or the radical sentiments of the Boko Haram movement, re-emerge in years to come?

Clearly, alternative visions constantly jostle for attention, and people *in extremis* will tend to resort to extreme visions and extreme measures. Casting around for possible points of comparison, the history of the United States offers the contrasting trajectories of groups who desired to follow their own path. There were clashes between Mormons and local communities before the followers of Brigham Young migrated to Utah in the middle of the 19th century. Violence was transformed into co-existence with and within the federal US state. The Amish of Pennsylvania live peaceably to this day in their separate communities. In a prosperous, well-educated, economically viable northern Nigeria, could the state accommodate an Amish-like group seeking to live a communal and religious life away from the trappings of modernity – not the conversion of the state, but accommodation within the state? Or, is it more likely that antagonism will lead to a crescendo of violence – not the peaceful life of the Amish, but the conflagration in Waco, Texas, where a religious group calling themselves the Branch Davidians fought a 10-day bloody battle with the US federal authorities.

Is that the way it will happen again? Simply transforming economic conditions may alleviate the material situation of people *in extremis*, but one lesson of Boko Haram is perhaps that a solution to the human condition requires an additional dimension in terms of parallel alternative visions.

**Further reading**

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