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Boko Haram: The Development of a Militant Religious Movement in Nigeria

Roman Loimeier

Abstract: Since 2009, the radical Muslim movement in northern Nigeria known as Boko Haram has become widely known in Western media for both its militant actions and its ultra-fundamentalist programme. This analysis examines Boko Haram from a historical perspective, viewing the movement as a result of social, political and generational dynamics within the larger field of northern Nigerian radical Islam. The contribution also considers some of the theological dimensions of the dispute between Boko Haram and its Muslim opponents and presents the different stages of militant activity through which this movement has gone so far. The article shows that movements such as Boko Haram are deeply rooted in northern Nigeria's specific economic, religious and political development and are thus likely to crop up again if basic frame conditions such as social injustice, corruption and economic mismanagement do not change.

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Keywords: Nigeria, Boko Haram, religious movement, militant Islam

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Since 2009, a radical Muslim movement in northern Nigeria has become widely known in Western media for both its militant actions and its ultra-fundamentalist programme: Boko Haram, often translated as “Western education is forbidden” (sometimes even more misleadingly as “Western education is sin”).¹ Boko Haram activities have been reported not only in northern Nigeria, but also in neighbouring Chad, Cameroon, Niger and even Mali.² However, not all violence was and is linked to Boko Haram (cf. Mättig n.d.). It is equally misleading to view Boko Haram exclusively as a terror organization. Such a narrow-minded approach is not particularly useful in fathoming the true character of the movement and understanding why Boko Haram has managed to attract considerable popular support in northern Nigeria despite harsh police and army repression.

The Historical Context

This analysis³ looks at Boko Haram from a historical perspective, viewing the movement as a result of social, political and generational dynamics within the larger field of northern Nigerian radical Islam, as represented most prominently by the Yan Izala movement (Arabic: *jama'at izalat al-bid'a wa-iqamat al-sunna*, meaning “the community for the eradication of un-

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- 1 See Rémy 2012 and a series of articles on Boko Haram published in daily newspapers and journals. (For a good overview, including most recent incidents, see the *Wikipedia* entry on “Boko Haram”.) The Christian concept of sin – in particular, original sin – does not exist in Islam. While the Arabic term *haram* has a wide meaning, it could be translated most properly as forbidden, prohibited, interdicted, and thus carries a rather legalistic notion of things one should not do. In colloquial usage, the term *haram* also has the connotation of shame. The Arabic terms that come closest to the Christian concept of sin are *'asi*, implying somebody who is disobeying, refractory, rebellious, mutinous and *ithm*, offence, misdeed, crime, an *athim* being a wicked, evil, criminal person.
 - 2 Communication with Maikorema Zakari, 13 March 2012, as well as Rémy 2012. Boko Haram has established a base in Diffa, southeastern Niger, on the Nigerian border, in order to escape Nigerian army and police repression; yet, so far Boko Haram has not become active in Niger. Other Boko Haram bases in Niger were recorded in Maradi and Zinder. Since October 2010, Boko Haram also seems to have been linked, at least in logistical terms, with an Al-Qa'ida branch – namely, Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghrib (AQIM).
 - 3 For comments on this paper I would like to thank audiences at the Harvard Divinity School, the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris, and at the University of Frankfurt/Main, where I had the privilege of discussing earlier versions of this paper in March and May 2012.

Islamic innovations and the establishment of the Sunna”).⁴ It is also necessary to look at some of the theological dimensions of the disputes between Muslims in northern Nigeria. Taking such a perspective can help to clarify processes of radicalization and to show that in moments of crisis and rapid social change, theological arguments acquire paramount importance for the self-definition of a new religious movement.

Boko Haram is not the first Muslim movement in the region which has advocated jihad (in the sense of an armed struggle) as a strategy to implement its programme of reform: The movement of jihad as started by Usman dan Fodio (d. 1817) in the early nineteenth century led to the removal of the Habe rulers⁵ in Hausaland and to the establishment of the rule of religious scholars (Arabic: *‘ulama*), who consequently strove to legitimate their rule through theological argumentation. Since then, recourse to theological argumentation has become a precondition for political action among Muslims in northern Nigeria. A sound education in Islamic law and theology has consequently become a *sine qua non* for participation in public/political debates. The introduction of Western education, as symbolized by the books (Hausa: *boko*) of British colonial schools, has seriously challenged the hegemonic position of Islamic education and has consequently been seen as both a threat and a symbol of the increasing impact of an alien, colonial, Christian, materialist and corrupt process of Westernization.

Colonial rule, the establishment of British education, British law and the economic dynamics of the colonial and postcolonial period have indeed led to a deep crisis in northern Nigerian Muslim society that can be described by the umbrella term “modernization shock”. In contrast, Muslim reformers such as Ahmadu Bello, the premier of northern Nigeria in the 1950s and 1960s, Aminu Kano, the leader of the influential oppositional Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU) in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, and Abubakar Gumi, a Muslim religious scholar who inspired the foundation of the Yan Izala (Hausa: “sons of Izala”) movement, tried to develop programmes of reform that sought to Islamize modernity.⁶ These leaders attacked the “traditional rulers”, including the sultan of Sokoto, as

4 Due to the publisher’s rules regarding transliteration, it was not possible to use proper diacritics for Arabic terms. I have thus stuck to a simplified system of rendering Arabic terms as close as possible to their true form. A text version with the proper transliteration may be obtained directly from the author (roman.loimeier@sowi.uni-goettingen.de).

5 *Habe* (a Fulfulde term) in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century jihadist terminology referred to the pre-jihadist (and allegedly pre-Islamic, heathen) rulers of Hausaland (Hausa: *sarakunan gargajiyya*, “old kings”).

6 For the development of the Yan Izala up to the early 1990s see Kane 2003, Loimeier 1997 and Umar 1988.

well as the leaders of the established Sufi orders – in particular, Qadiriyya and Tijaniyya – as being unable to tackle the challenges of modernity.

Although religious and political leaders such as Ahmadu Bello and Abubakar Gumi have been highly successful in their endeavours of reform and their efforts to create a modern, yet still Muslim, northern Nigeria, their policies of reform have been contested by representatives of the religious and political establishment, as well as by small but outspoken and radical groups that maintained that reform was either not radical enough in political terms or basically un-Islamic, equivalent to another form of Westernization. A paradigmatic example of such a radical anti-modern movement was Maitatsine, a group that surfaced in a number of violent clashes with the Nigerian army between 1980 and 1987. The Maitatsine movement was established by the Cameroonian Muslim scholar Muhammad Marwa, who had settled in Kano in the 1960s and had slowly built a group of followers among Muslim migrants in the Ayagi quarter of Birnin Kano (the “walled city of Kano”). Due to his radical rejection of all non-Qur’anic innovations such as watches, Western dress, bicycles and even ritual prayers,⁷ he became known as the “master of rejection”.⁸ In 1980, the disputes between the Maitatsine movement and state security as well as established scholars escalated, and Muhammad Marwa and his group were accused of being “heretics” by Kano’s scholarly establishment. On 19 December 1980, Muhammad Marwa tried to storm Kano’s major Friday mosque, close to the emir’s palace. This attack triggered massive retaliation by the Nigerian army, and in the course of several days of fighting approximately 6,000 people, including Muhammad Marwa himself, were killed. The movement continued to blossom, however, and again rose in rebellion in 1982 (Maiduguri and Kaduna), 1984 (Yola), 1985 (Gombe) and 1993 (Funtua) (Loimeier 1997: 218ff; Hiskett: 1987).

Due to its radical and militant character, along with its ultra-fundamentalist positions, the Maitatsine movement has recently been compared with the Boko Haram movement. This comparison extends to the social roots of both movements – namely, the *almajirai* (sing. *almajiri*):⁹ those young students of Qur’anic schools who still move, as in olden times, from teacher

7 Due to the fact that the Qur’an mentions only three ritual prayers (not five, as established by the Sunna), the Maitatsine group stuck to only three daily prayers (see Loimeier 1997).

8 In proper Hausa: *mai’yatsine*, “the master who picks out [something] one by one, who selects one by one [...and condemns]”. “Maitatsine” is linguistically false; the infix “ta” denotes female gender.

9 For a discussion of the *almajiri* phenomenon in northern Nigeria see Loimeier 1997 and Hiskett 1987. The term *almajiri* is derived from the Arabic term *al-muhajir*, meaning “the person who migrates”.

to teacher in order to acquire knowledge. Many *almajirai*, often of rural origin, were and are living in destitute circumstances and are therefore considered easy prey for radical groups. In the 1980s, Muslim religious scholars, the Nigerian press, and Western observers and academics such as Lubeck (1985) and Hiskett (1987) saw a connection between Maitatsine and the *almajirai*. Similar allegations have been made in the context of the rise of the Boko Haram movement (see Höchner 2012). However, while some *almajirai* may indeed have joined both Maitatsine and Boko Haram, the very social set-up of both movements still needs proper research. Indiscriminate allegations are misleading and ignore the ability of established (and respected) Qur'anic teachers to control their students.

The Development of the Yan Izala

Processes of change in northern Nigeria have led to violent conflicts, often expressed in religious terms. This also applies to northern Nigeria's largest reform movement, the Yan Izala, established in 1978 in the city of Jos by Ismaila Idris, a former army imam. Since then, the Yan Izala movement has become the most influential and powerful movement of reform and the most outspoken opponent of the established Sufi orders. Sufi orders were fought by violent means, such as the occupation of their mosques. Becoming a member of the Yan Izala also meant breaking with established society, including parents, and rejecting all manifestations of allegedly un-Islamic character (Arabic: *bid'a*), including social customs such as the bride price, extensive mourning (Arabic: *bika'*), and supererogatory prayers, often in the context of Sufi ritual. However, the Yan Izala not only fought against many features of northern Nigerian society, but also advocated for substantial reforms by establishing, for instance, modern Islamic schools even in rural areas and by calling for the political and religious mobilization of women. The Yan Izala movement thus represented an emancipatory programme of Islamic reform which offered Muslim women, youth and usually urban, Western-educated Muslims an alternative vision of Islam no longer mediated by established religious authorities.

The foundation of the Yan Izala movement had, as mentioned above, been prepared by Abubakar Gumi, who, since the early 1960s, had been leading a bitter struggle against the Sufi orders, which he identified as the major perpetrators of un-Islamic innovations. When Gumi's major political ally, Ahmadu Bello, was assassinated in 1966 and when his efforts to use the

jama'at nasr al-islam¹⁰ for his struggle against the Sufi orders also misfired, Gumi changed his strategy and started to go public:¹¹ In 1966, he started to broadcast his exegesis (Arabic: *tafsir*) of the Qur'an – which he had regularly held in Kaduna during Ramadan in the Sultan Bello Mosque – through Radio Kaduna in order to reach a larger audience all over northern Nigeria.¹² At this time he also began publishing contributions in the northern Nigerian daily newspaper *Gaskiya Ta Fi Kwabo*. In 1978, he translated into Hausa his programmatic text *al-'aqida al-sahiba bi-muwafaqat al-shari'a* (*The Right Faith According to the Prescriptions of the Shari'a*, first published in Arabic in 1972), a harsh polemic against Sufi concepts of the faith, under the title *Musulunci da abinda ke rushe shi* (*Islam and the Things which Lead to Its Destruction*), triggering a broad public debate on the deviations of the Sufi orders. The Sufi orders responded by publishing their own pamphlets defending themselves against Gumi's literary attacks. In the mid-1970s, Sufi scholars also started to broadcast their own radio *tafsir* programmes and thus again retaliated in kind. In order to overcome this stalemate, Gumi supported the foundation of a proper reformist organization, the Yan Izala, in order to fight the followers of the Sufi orders in each and every town and village of northern Nigeria.

An important pillar of the Yan Izala campaigns were its preachers, the *masu waaɓɓi* (Hausa: “masters of wa'ɓɓi”),¹³ who in 1978 started to challenge the ‘ulama’s hegemony of interpretation of Islam in the public sphere. These new preachers formed a key group of the movement, who translated the message and programme of the movement to large audiences. In their preaching activities, the *masu waaɓɓi* were caught in a constant dilemma, however: On the one side, they treated and even despised ordinary Muslims as “ignorant” (Arabic: *jahili*); on the other side, they wanted to (and had to) teach and convince the same people to join the Yan Izala movement (Hasane 2009: 104). The ignorant “popular masses” in fact constituted the mass of potential followers of the Yan Izala and, thus, had to be treated with respect. This logic and the will of the *masu waaɓɓi* to spread the cause (Arabic: *da'wa*) of the Yan Izala contributed to the commodification of religious preaching and religious activities in northern Nigeria (and, later, in Niger,

10 The jama'at nasr al-islam (The Society for the Success of Islam) had been established in order to coordinate Islamist Muslim activities regarding, for instance, the annual pilgrimage to Mecca, and was intended to provide Muslim movements in northern Nigeria with a common platform. For more information on the jama'at nasr al-islam see Loimeier 1997.

11 For this development see Loimeier 1997.

12 On the development of the radio *tafsir* in the 1960s and 1970s and the subsequent radio *tafsir* wars among northern Nigerian scholars see Brigaglia 2004.

13 The term *wa'ɓɓi* (warning, admonition) denotes a specific type of sermon characterized by an often polemical and aggressive content and tone.

Cameroon, Chad, etc.). The *masu waaʒi* in fact had to sell their message to the popular masses and thus applied, consciously or not, the laws of the market. For this reason, the sermons of the *masu waaʒi* never acquired the scholarly character of the sermons of the established religious scholars: The *masu waaʒi* did not care to expound on certain intricate details of Islamic law, for instance, but wanted instead to popularize their message of social liberation and religious rebellion against the established authorities.

Due to this logic, action was at the very core of Yan Izala preaching: The *masu waaʒi* communicated, in fact, through action. An implication of this dynamic was that the message of Islam (Arabic: *daʿwat al-Islam*) was discussed in new arenas, beyond the realm of mosques and schools, and consequently acquired an increasingly public and popular – even democratic – character, rejecting established rules of protocol and conventions of respect based on seniority as maintained by the established religious authorities. At the same time, the *masu waaʒi* were forced to remain open to voices from the public and to present themselves as amiable and accessible. As a result, they developed a personal touch and cultivated specializations in terms of the themes, style or presentation of their *waaʒi* sermons (Hassane 2009: 109). While some *masu waaʒi* specialized in themes like marriage, Islamic law or Islamic ritual, others became famous for their political polemics or their moralistic diatribes. As itinerant *masu waaʒi*, they travelled through the ever-expanding realm of the Yan Izala, contributing to the perception of the movement as being highly mobile (Hassane 2009: 110).

However, in the late 1980s, the Yan Izala suffered its first crisis due to the rise of Pentecostal Christianity: In 1987, Christian candidates managed to win a surprising number of local government seats even in Muslim-majority areas in northern Nigeria because the Muslim vote was split among Yan Izala, Tijaniyya and Qadiriyya candidates. Christian local government electoral victories raised the spectre of Christian domination over Muslim northern Nigeria and eventually forced the Yan Izala, Tijaniyya and Qadiriyya to shelve their disputes and form an alliance of (political) convenience. As a consequence, the Yan Izala movement had to stop its attacks against Sufi orders and become moderate. This strategic re-orientation led to a major, but silent, protest within the Yan Izala and stifled the development of the movement until 2000, when the introduction of “political shari’a”¹⁴ allowed it to again assume a more activist role in society.

14 The introduction of shari’a penal laws in 12 northern Nigerian states since 1999 has been called “political shari’a” by many Nigerians due to the fact that this recent round of shari’a legislation had an obvious political agenda – namely, to legitimize the political agenda of northern Nigerian politicians and to de-legitimize the demo-

The Yan Izala in Crisis

At the same time, the Yan Izala started to experience regional divisions, since many outspoken representatives of the movement, while accepting the overall spiritual leadership of Abubakar Gumi, rejected the rather authoritarian style of Ismaila Idris. Initial rebellions occurred in Sokoto, where Abubakar Jibrin and Shaykh Abubakar Tureta joined another politically radical, activist Muslim organization, led by Ibrahim al-Zakzaki,¹⁵ and took control of Farfaru, the most important Yan Izala mosque in Sokoto. Even a major Yan Izala leader in Sokoto, Sidi Attahiru Ibrahim, turned away from the Yan Izala and set up his own organization, the ahl al-sunna (People of the Sunna), although it failed to gain more than local importance (Loimeier 1997: 241). As a result of these splits, the Yan Izala suffered a serious loss of influence in Sokoto.

Another hotbed of rebellion against the central leadership of the movement was Kano, where an influential businessman, A.K. Daiyyabu, had managed to marginalize, since 1986, the existing leadership of the movement under Shaykh Sulaiman (Kane 2003: 112ff). Daiyyabu particularly criticized the loyalist attitudes of the Yan Izala movement with regard to the Nigerian government under General Babangida: Both Abubakar Gumi and the Yan Izala leadership were highly supportive of the Babangida government, despite its agenda of economic liberalization and its conservative foreign policies. Daiyyabu's authoritarian style, however, triggered his own deposition in 1990 by the central committee in Jos. However, Daiyyabu's demise did not put an end to the internal disputes. The 1990s saw a growing number of rebellions against the Jos leadership, which was accused of financial mismanagement and embezzlement of funds and of colluding with Nigeria's corrupt political elites. A number of regional sections of the Yan Izala under the leadership of either Alhaji Musa Mai Gandu (1930–2011), the chairman of the national Committee of Patrons, or Rabi'u Daura, the chairman of the Council of 'ulama' of the Yan Izala for Kaduna State, advocated either neutrality or a critical position with regard to the Nigerian state without openly attacking Nigerian politicians. They criticized Ismaila Idris, however, and questioned the sources of his income. In June 1991, Musa Mai Gandu suspended the national steering committee of the Yan Izala in Jos, accusing it of embezzlement of funds. In direct reaction to this, Ismaila Idris and the

cratic Obasanjo federal government (voted into power in 1999). For a larger discussion of political shari'a see Last 2000, Peters 2003 and Weimann 2010.

15 For more on Ibrahim al-Zakzaki, a well-known Muslim activist and a leading representative of the Muslim Students' Society at Ahmadu Bello University Zaria in the late 1970s and early 1980s, see Loimeier 1997 and 2007.

Yan Izala national steering committee removed Musa Mai Gandu and his supporters from all official functions. As a result, the Musa Mai Gandu Kaduna group and the Ismaila Idris Jos faction of the Yan Izala started a bitter dispute that has continued to divide the Yan Izala movement despite repeated efforts at reconciliation. Even after Ismaila Idris' death in 2000, his successor Muhammad Sani Yahya Jingir (b. 1950) continued to fight the Musa Mai Gandu Kaduna group, although both factions advocated the introduction of political shari'a in 12 northern Nigerian states in 2000. The dispute within the Yan Izala has acquired a rather bitter note due to both factions' stubborn adherence to theological arguments – in particular, the mutual accusation of unbelief – in order to discredit the other side.¹⁶

In addition to disputes over leadership, authority and regional autonomy, since the 1990s the development of the Yan Izala has been characterized by the emergence of a generation of young and middle-aged Izala leaders. With that, generational conflicts within the Yan Izala as well as disputes over the question of proper Islamic education have arisen: The struggle for modern Islamic education had been one of the major programmatic features of the Yan Izala's development and had led not only to the establishment of numerous Yan Izala schools in northern Nigeria but also to the emergence of a second generation of Yan Izala followers who had gone through this new system of education, only to discover that modern Islamic education "Yan Izala-style" did not necessarily provide jobs. In particular, the stress on sound training in Arabic in Yan Izala schools as well as Yan Izala-sponsored university education in Saudi Arabia did not provide enough career options in Nigeria. Even positions within the Yan Izala movement were still occupied by first-generation Yan Izala members who were not keen to retire. Second-generation Yan Izala activists thus found their career paths blocked and were increasingly prepared to dispute existing claims to leadership. Many second-generation Yan Izala activists either established their own Izala schools to engineer careers as teachers, or split from the Yan Izala movement to carve out a position for their own endeavours of religious reform by establishing, for instance, their own mosques, schools and Islamic NGOs (see Umar 2012).

16 For more on the development of the Yan Izala since 1991 see Ben Amara 2011: 108ff. Today, each Yan Izala faction has its own constitution. In the constitution of the Kaduna group (1995), Abubakar Gumi is named as founder of the movement, while the constitution of the Jos group (2004) refers to Ismaila Idris in that context. In December 2011, the two Yan Izala factions eventually managed to reunite in the context of a summit in Abuja (Brigaglia 2012: 7).

Among the prominent second-generation Yan Izala dissidents was Aminu d-Din Abubakar (b. 1947) in Kano.¹⁷ Aminu d-Din Abubakar had met Abubakar Gumi in Kaduna in 1979 and had become an ardent supporter of the Yan Izala movement. In 1985, he changed affiliation and turned against Abubakar Gumi and the Yan Izala group in Kano. He set up his own organization, Daawa, which was less radically anti-Sufi than the Yan Izala movement, and managed to find some grass-roots support in Kano, where Sufi orders enjoyed vast popular support. When political shari'a was introduced in Kano State in 2000, Aminu d-Din Abubakar became chairman of the Kano State Hisba Committee, which supervised the implementation of shari'a law in Kano (Peters 2003: 49). The debate over the implementation of shari'a law in 12 northern Nigerian states starting in the year 2000 created major opportunities for Yan Izala activism: Numerous second-generation Yan Izala followers became militant supporters of shari'a legal reforms and formed a majority of the Yan Hisba¹⁸ militia members (Brigaglia 2004: 243). Yan Hisba activities for many young Yan Izala members meant a welcome return to militant activism, which had been ended for strategic reasons in the late 1980s.

One of the most outspoken Yan Hisba groups in Kano was a group called ahl al-sunna, which consisted of activist Muslims who had been socialized as Yan Izala activists in the 1980s. After the split of the organization in 1991 and Abubakar Gumi's death in 1992, they formed the Kano ahl al-sunna group, although this group was not identical with the aforementioned Sokoto-based ahl al-sunna group. All ahl al-sunna groups, however, adopted basic Yan Izala ideas such as the struggle against un-Islamic innovations; yet, they also stressed the need for Muslim unity and the necessity to participate actively in politics (Kane 2003; Brigaglia 2004). The link between the ahl al-sunna and politics was most obvious in Zamfara State: The governor, Ahmad Sani Yerima, was closely linked with the Yan Izala movement and was the first northern Nigerian state governor to introduce political shari'a, in 1999. In Kano State, this link was less obvious: Yan Izala members had been marginalized in the 1980s and were insultingly referred to as *yan sbege* (Hausa: "bastards"). Yan Izala positions in Kano were consequently adopted by both Aminu d-Din Abubakar's Daawa group as well as the new ahl al-sunna group, which were able to garner popular support due to their split from the main Izala group.¹⁹ The most outspoken representatives of the ahl al-sunna

17 For his biography see Loimeier 1997: 247-250, 288 and Kane 2003: 75ff.

18 The Hausa term *yan hisba* refers to the Arabo-Islamic institution of the "market overseer", the *mubtasib*, and the practice of *hisba* ("guarding, checking or controlling public order").

19 In addition, the Kano Yan Izala/ahl al-sunna groups were less radical than other Yan Izala groups on a number of dogmatic issues: They accepted eating the meat of an

in Kano since the late 1990s – namely, Yakubu Musa, Dr. Ibrahim Datti Ahmad and Ja'far Mahmud Adam – in fact all became Yan Hisba leaders in the 2000s. Dr. Ibrahim Datti Ahmad (b. 1962) was a medical doctor and imam of the Bayero University Kano (BUK) Friday mosque. In addition, he chaired the Supreme Council for Shari'a in Nigeria (established in 2000) (Brigaglia 2004: 153, 360). Both Dr. Ibrahim Datti Ahmad and Ja'far Mahmud Adam were also highly active in Kano State policies and opposed Kano State Governor Rabi'u Kwankwaso (in office 1999–2003), who was accused of being far too timid with respect to the implementation of shari'a penal laws. At the same time, they supported Ibrahim Shekarau, a more radical politician from the All Nigerian People's Party (ANPP) in the 2003 state government elections.²⁰ Ja'far Mahmud Adam (b. 1961 or 1962), from Daura, had gone through both Qur'anic school (*madrasa*) and *boko* education in Kano and Hadejia and was an ardent Yan Izala follower in the 1970s and 1980s (initially the Kaduna, later the Kano faction). In 1988, he won the Nigerian Qur'an recitation competition and subsequently (1989) went to Saudi Arabia in order to continue his education at the Islamic University of Medina. He returned to Nigeria in 1993, only to leave again for Sudan, where he continued his studies at the International Islamic University in Khartoum. Finally, in 1996, he returned to northern Nigeria and became imam of the Dorayi Friday mosque in Kano and a leading ahl al-sunna representative. In addition, he became a leading representative of the British al-Muntada al-Islami (Islamic Assembly) organization, a Saudi-financed NGO that had started to develop a network of modern schools in a series of African countries that combined Islamic and Western education, but became a major target in the US-led "war on terror" after 2001. In Kano, the activities of al-Muntada al-Islami were opposed not only by the leading representatives of the Sufi orders but also by a small, but growing, group of ultra-fundamentalist Muslims who rejected "book" education even in a Saudi guise.

animal slaughtered by a follower of a Sufi order, regarded followers of Sufi orders not as "unbelievers" (Arabic: *kaafirun*), but as mere "innovators" (Arabic: *mubtadi'un*), and consequently allowed prayers behind an imam affiliated with a Sufi order under certain circumstances, such as the absence of a Yan Izala imam (see Brigaglia 2012: 8).

- 20 When Ibrahim Shekarau was eventually elected governor of Kano State in 2003 and started to implement a more rigid interpretation of shari'a penal laws, Ja'far Mahmud Adam was appointed to a leading position in the Kano State "Hisba Board" that screened the implementation of shari'a penal laws. Yet, over time, Ja'far Mahmud Adam seems to have become increasingly critical of the ways in which shari'a penal laws were implemented and eventually refused to support Ibrahim Shekarau when the latter stood for re-election in the 2007 Kano State government elections (Brigaglia 2012: 16).

Ja'far Mahmud Adam was assassinated in his Friday mosque on 13 March 2007 during *fajr* (morning) prayers.²¹

The Emergence of Boko Haram

Since 2000, the amazing variety and increasing fragmentation of the religio-political spectrum has become even more complicated due to the formation of a number of ultra-radical groups. One activist group has become particularly notorious in recent years – an organization established by Muhammad Yusuf (1970–2009) in the early 1990s called *ahl al-sunna wa-l-jama'a wa-l-hijra*. In the Nigerian media, this group became known by a series of nicknames such as Yusufiyya, Taliban and finally Boko Haram.²² Muhammad Yusuf had been one of Ja'far Mahmud Adam's students in Kano, but had split from him in 2003.²³

Between 2004 and 2007 (the year of Ja'far Mahmud Adam's death), bitter theological disputes characterized the confrontation between Ja'far Mahmud Adam and Muhammad Yusuf. These disputes, often presented in the guise of

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- 21 See Weimann 2010, O'Brien 2007 and Umar 2012. For an extensive biography of Ja'far Mahmud Adam see Brigaglia 2012. Brigaglia also discusses the different hypotheses regarding Ja'far Mahmud Adam's assassination in detail and convincingly supports the argument that this murder was committed by Boko Haram followers (see Brigaglia 2012: 18–23).
- 22 For more on Muhammad Yusuf and the Boko Haram movement see Ben Amara 2011: 55f. as well as Umar 2012.
- 23 Brigaglia 2012: 22; Adesoji (2010) claims that Muhammad Yusuf was close to one Abubakar Mujahid, founder of yet another radical movement in northern Nigeria, the *jama'a tajdid al-islam* (Community for the Reform of Islam). According to Adesoji, Muhammad Yusuf chaired the *jama'a tajdid al-islam* in Bornu for some time. Adesoji's data are unfortunately based almost exclusively on the evaluation of Nigerian daily newspapers and journals, often published in southern Nigeria. Some of these papers are extremely biased regarding developments in northern Nigeria. The *jama'a tajdid al-islam* had in fact split off, in 1994, from Ibrahim al-Zakzaki's *ikhwan* ("Brothers") movement, when Ibrahim al-Zakzaki openly declared his allegiance to Shi'ism. In 1995, the *jama'a tajdid al-islam* dissidents established their own organization in Kano under the leadership of Abubakar Mahmud (not "Mujahid"). This group subsequently declared itself to be close to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood – meaning, it was rooted soundly in Sunni Islam. Since 2000, the *jama'a tajdid al-islam* has been one of the most outspoken supporters of political shari'a (in contrast to Ibrahim al-Zakzaki, who opposed political shari'a) (see Loimeier 2007; Ben Amara 2011: 52ff). Southern Nigerian ignorance with respect to developments in the north is also manifest in a polemic paper by L.O.O. Lawal (Ondo State University) (see bibliography), in which the author claims that one of my students, Ramzi Ben Amara, who recently completed his Ph.D. at the University of Bayreuth, was the founder of the Yan Izala movement (in 1978) (Lawal n.d.: 15).

public sermons, spread rapidly by way of pamphlets and cassettes or CDs. In his sermons and pamphlets, Ja'far Mahmud Adam criticized Muhammad Yusuf's theological positions as "ignorant" and "stupid", and as dangerous for the political ambitions of Muslims in Nigeria.²⁴ Ja'far Mahmud Adam advocated the importance of Western and secular education for Muslims – for instance, in a taped sermon entitled *Boko da aikin gwamnati ba haramun ba ne* (Hausa: "Western education and work for the government are not forbidden") (Brigaglia 2012: 22): Only the conscious adoption of Western and secular *boko* education would eventually enable Muslims to effectively fight the Western enemy. Ja'far Mahmud Adam also defended the long-term strategy of slowly Islamizing these institutions. The militant struggle against the Nigerian state was seen as counterproductive (Umar 2012: 132f.).

By contrast, Muhammad Yusuf rejected the modern Islamic schools of the Yan Izala and related groups as well as Nigeria's secular system of education and summarized this specific position as *boko haram* (Hausa: "Western education is forbidden"). He also turned against the Nigerian state and criticized the arbitrariness of Nigerian institutions – in particular, the police and security forces. He refused to recognize the sultan of Sokoto as the nominal head of all Nigerian Muslims and called him "Sarkin Sokoto" (Hausa: "King of Sokoto"). Central to Muhammad Yusuf's argumentation was a text written by a Saudi Arabian Wahhabi-oriented scholar, Abubakar b. 'Abdallah Abu Zayd²⁵ (d. 2008), titled *al-madaris al-'alamiyya al-ajnabiyya al-isti'mariyya: ta'rikhaha wa-makhatiraha* (*The Secular, Foreign and Colonialist Schools: Their History and Dangers*). This text specifically served as the theological basis for his rejection of a natural science-based (Western and secular) view of the world (Umar 2012: 123).

In December 2003, the dispute turned into open conflict. At the same time, violent clashes between followers of Muhammad Yusuf and Nigerian

24 For a detailed presentation of this argumentation and of the dispute between Muhammad Yusuf and Ja'far Mahmud Adam see Umar 2012. Umar was, in fact, the first scholar to properly study the cassettes and CDs produced by both sides in northern Nigeria until 2009. Of particular interest is a public recording from 2 June 2006 of a dispute between Muhammad Yusuf and a follower of Ja'far Mahmud Adam, Mallam Isa Aliyu Ibrahim Fantami (or Pantami), entitled *Muqabala akan mastayin karatun boko da aikin gwamnati a Nigeria tsakakin Mallam Isa Aliyu Ibrahim Fantami da Mallam Muhammad Yusuf Maiduguri* (Debate on the Status of Western Education and Working for the Nigerian Government between Mallam Isa Aliyu Ibrahim Fantami and Mallam Muhammad Yusuf Maiduguri; see Umar 2012: 144).

25 This scholar was president of the international Islamic Fiqh Council and a permanent member of the Saudi Arabian Permanent Committee for Islamic Research and Fatawa. He was also close to the Indo-Pakistani ahl al-hadith movement. For more on the ahl al-hadith movement and the Saudi Wahhabi background see Schulze 1990.

security forces occurred in Kanamma, Yobe State, Muhammad Yusuf's home region. In January 2004, a group of approximately 200 followers of Muhammad Yusuf attacked police stations on a massive scale. As a consequence, the Nigerian media started to call the followers of Muhammad Yusuf "Nigerian Taliban", a label that was quickly adopted by Western media. After further attacks against police stations in Bornu State in September 2004, the Nigerian army killed 27 "Taliban", while others managed to flee into neighbouring Cameroon.²⁶ Muhammad Yusuf escaped to Sudan and subsequently to Saudi Arabia, where he met with the deputy governor of Bornu State, Adamu Dibal, who eventually organized his return to Nigeria.²⁷ His opponents in Nigeria, such as Ja'far Mahmud Adam, were quick to point out Muhammad Yusuf's "hypocrisy" in using "modern means" such as a passport, visa and airplanes (as provided by "corrupt" Nigerian authorities, no less) despite his supposed espousal of anti-modern and ultra-fundamentalist ideas. This statement was rather polemical, though: Muhammad Yusuf and the Boko Haram movement had never taken such a position on modern technology, and had in fact claimed that modern technology (by contrast to Western education), meaning mobile phones, television, motor-bikes and even modern medicine (as well as AK-47 machine guns), was completely acceptable in Islamic terms. In this respect, the Boko Haram movement has clearly taken a different position than that of the Maitatsine movement of the 1980s (Last 2009: 10).

In June and July 2009, the conflict escalated again and erupted into violent clashes between Boko Haram followers and Nigerian security forces in five northern Nigerian states. In the course of these clashes, at least 900, possibly even more than 1,100 people, were killed in Maiduguri alone. Among them was Muhammad Yusuf, who was killed in a police station after having been taken prisoner (Umar 2012: 128).²⁸ The July 2009 clashes were triggered by a series of Nigerian police raids of Boko Haram camps and against members of the movement in Dutsen Tanshi/Bauchi as well as Biu on 26 July 2009. Several Boko Haram followers were killed. Boko Haram fighters had by then developed new (and rather modern) violent tactics,

26 Brigaglia 2004: 240-241; *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 25/26 September 2004; *ix3w* (Informationszentrum 3.Welt), August/September 2004; Paden 2005: 170, 187-188.

27 *The Guardian*, Dar es Salaam, 5 August 2009.

28 Another prominent victim of the 2009 clashes was one of the most important patrons of the movement, Alhaji Buji Foi, a former Bornu State commissioner for religious affairs, who had sold his properties in order to support Muhammad Yusuf. The role of Alhaji Buji Foi and that of the Bornu deputy state governor, Adamu Dibal, points to the existence of high-ranking sympathizers of the Boko Haram movement. Most of these politicians have been voted into office in the context of the political shari'a campaigns since 2000.

including drive-by shootings and hit-and-run attacks against police stations and other targets. At the same time, the authorities had imposed a ban on night driving for motorbikes. Wearing a helmet had also been made obligatory, and police roadblocks had been introduced to enforce these regulations. In June 2009, 17 motorbike drivers were shot (though none died as a result) because they did not wear helmets (Last 2009: 7). Due to the fact that police roadblocks are often used to force drivers to pay oversized fees for minor infractions, attacks against police stations earned Boko Haram considerable sympathies in the northern Nigerian population.

In September 2010, a prison was attacked and 150 Boko Haram followers were liberated from detention. In 2011 and 2012, the conflict acquired new dimensions when Boko Haram not only targeted police stations and prisons, but also started to attack churches. Attacks against Christians were a new element and point to a change in strategy that followed a double rationale: Christian churches – in particular, Pentecostal churches – were seen by even moderate Muslims as a major threat to Muslim claims of hegemony. Attacks against Christians also responded to an argument developed by Sufi leaders in their struggle against the Yan Izala movement in the 1980s: They had accused Yan Izala followers of attacking fellow Muslims (Sufi orders) and creating *fitna* (civil strife) among Muslims instead of targeting the “real enemy”, Christians. Attacks against Christians thus acquired an integrative function in political contexts characterized by disputes among Muslims. In addition, Boko Haram started to attack targets beyond its home base, Bornu and Yobe, and expanded its activities to Kano, Bauchi, Jos and Gongola States, and even to the Federal Capital Territory. This shows that the escalation of violence has reached a new height in recent years.

After the death of Muhammad Yusuf in 2009, a 20-man council (Arabic: *shura*) assumed leadership²⁹ and continued a course of escalation. The group also adopted a new name: *jama'at ahl al-sunna li-l-da'wa wa-l-jihad 'ala minhaj al-salaf*. This change of name again reflects internal dynamics: The former name, *ahl al-sunna wa-l-jama'a wa-l-hijra*, may be translated liberally as “the people of the Sunna [of the prophet] and the community [of Muslims] as well as [those who accept the obligation] to emigrate [from the land of unbelievers, i.e. the Nigerian state]”. By choosing this name, Boko Haram clearly claimed to be the supreme authority on the concept of Sunna as well as the question of who could be regarded as a member of the community of Muslims. The additional reference to the term “*hijra*”, by analogy, declared the Nigerian state a heathen state that had to be left by way of emigration, as

29 Muhammad Yusuf's position as supreme leader was taken by Mallam Abubakar Shekau, who has cultivated the internet, in particular, YouTube, to convey messages to larger audiences.

the prophet had done in 622, when he migrated from heathen Mecca to Medina. The name *ahl al-sunna wa-l-jama'a wa-l-hijra* thus proclaimed an agenda of both inclusion and exclusion (of fellow Muslims). The new name of the group, *jama'at ahl al-sunna li-l-da'wa wa-l-jihad 'ala minhaj al-salaf*, signalled a corresponding shift in the programme of the group and a distinct radicalization: Now Boko Haram claimed to represent “the community of the people of the Sunna who fight for the cause [of Islam] by means of jihad according to the method of the Salaf”.³⁰ Again, Boko Haram claims to be the supreme authority on the definitions of both “Sunna” and “Islam”, excluding all those who did not meet their own (rather narrow) definitions of the terms; in addition, the group’s position has gone from advocating emigration to advocating jihad, jihad being defined as an armed struggle against the enemies of Islam.

Conclusion

The development of the Boko Haram movement shows yet again that Muslims in Nigeria do not form a homogeneous block but are divided into numerous larger and smaller movements and groups that mirror social, political and religious orientations and divisions. While some of these movements fight against the Nigerian state, others are deeply involved in governmental dynamics and politics of positioning. These differences in orientation and the dynamics of positioning continue to foster competition among Nigerian Muslim movements and produce bitter conflict among Muslims over questions of leadership and of which interpretation of “Islam” can and should be accepted as a model for Muslims in Nigeria. In the long run, the Nigerian security forces will probably defeat the Boko Haram movement. Despite having been able to garner some sympathies for its actions against the highly unpopular and corrupt Nigerian police force, the movement has numerous enemies and critics among Nigeria’s Muslims, including other radical groups. Yet, as long as the basic social and economic context does not decisively change – specifically, Nigeria’s on-going inability to achieve sustained economic growth as well as some degree of social justice – militant movements such as Boko Haram will rise again.

30 The reference to the *salaf*, the companions of the Prophet Muhammad, is a clear indication that Boko Haram propagated a rather narrow interpretation of the term “jihad” – namely, the kind of armed struggle against (Meccan and Arab) unbelievers as fought by the followers of the prophet. During his life time, the prophet had advocated a much broader understanding of the term jihad and had accepted armed struggle against his enemies only after the Hijra from Mecca to Medina in 622.

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Boko Haram: Die Entwicklung einer militanten religiösen Bewegung in Nigeria

Zusammenfassung: Seit 2009 wurde die unter dem Namen Boko Haram bekannte radikale muslimische Bewegung in Nordnigeria in westlichen Medien für ihre militanten Aktionen und ihr ultrafundamentalistisches Programm bekannt. Der vorliegende Beitrag untersucht die Bewegung aus historischer Perspektive und sieht die Entstehung von Boko Haram als Ergebnis sozialer, politischer und generationsbezogener Dynamiken innerhalb des radikalen Islam im Norden Nigerias. Der Autor verweist zudem auf theologische Dimensionen der Auseinandersetzung zwischen der Bewegung und ihren muslimischen Gegnern und stellt die verschiedenen Phasen militanter Aktionen Boko Harams dar, die bislang erkennbar sind. Der Beitrag belegt, dass Bewegungen wie Boko Haram tief in den spezifischen ökonomischen,

religiösen und politischen Bedingungen im Norden Nigerias verwurzelt sind und daher immer wieder entstehen können, sollten sich wesentliche Rahmenbedingungen – wie soziale Ungerechtigkeit, Korruption und ökonomisches Missmanagement – nicht ändern.

Schlagwörter: Nigeria, Boko Haram, Religiöse Bewegung, Militanter Islam