

Long before Boko Haram, Dissenters were Driven to the Brink in Northern Nigeria

As Boko Haram continues its deadly campaign in Nigeria, Shobana Shankar explores parallels between Boko Haram and other marginalised groups in the history of the northern part of the country.

No simple explanation for Boko Haram—its opposition to western education, gruesome acts, and territorial aims within Nigeria and in neighbouring Chad and Cameroon—is entirely convincing. **After a recent attack in Jos, the Anglican Archbishop Benjamin Kwashi berated journalists for blaming poverty and skirting the issue of radical jihadism.** But what is Boko Haram’s jihad—implementing *shari’a*, destroying the Nigerian state, or rallying against the West? Poverty as an explanation for the group’s drive is no more edifying. Both Boko Haram’s fighters and its victims are poor. **Poverty did not draw followers to Muhammad Yusuf, the group’s founder, because his views were so extreme.** His murder by the Nigerian security forces changed that.



White missionaries meeting a medicine man with his ‘trained hyena’ in Pategi, c. 1902. Although we have evidence of repression, we also have evidence of long-surviving heterodoxy and alternative forms of belief and practice in Nigeria. Boko Haram represents a grave threat to Nigeria’s history, surely one of its greatest riches. Credit: SIM Archives

Too often, explanations for crises in Africa are ahistorical and narrow. With “Islamist extremism,” many, especially Westerners, are quick to scapegoat poor young men and overcredit international terrorist networks. Curiously, we rarely hear the more common stuff in media coverage of African crises—**ethnic strife, warlords, arms trafficking**. Obviously, neither Islam nor poverty can be removed entirely from Boko Haram’s story, but both have complicated histories in Northern Nigeria. Surprisingly, we can look to the region’s Christians to better understand the meaning of marginalisation.

Two tales of conversion from Islam to Christianity bear striking similarities to Boko Haram’s story. Both, before ending with conversion, begin with dissent and exile from the fold of Islam. In **the first**,

a cleric in the court of the Kano emir went to Mecca in the 1860s and returned, preaching a new message about the importance of Isa (Jesus) over Muhammad in the Qur'an. The emir accused Ibrahim of apostasy and ordered his death by impalement in the market. His followers, called Isawa, fled to the bush and allied with "pagans" warring with the Muslim state, until the 1910s, when Christian missionaries negotiated their resettlement onto farms. **The story, despite clear missionary influence, is believable.** Many Nigerian Muslims have returned from hajj or study abroad as new people. **Muhammad Ali, a jihadist in the nascent phase of Boko Haram, reportedly got inspired to fight the Nigerian government after returning from Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan.**

In the second case, in 1905, a young man named Inusa from the French colony of Niger lost his entire family in a Muslim uprising led by a blind cleric who claimed he was the Mahdi (redeemer), coming to lead the faithful in the End. The movement was brutally suppressed by French, British, and African troops. Inusa fled across the border into Nigeria. After studying with Christian missionaries, he became a wandering book-seller and preacher among "pagan" communities, beyond the prying eyes of white missionaries and colonial officials.

The parallels to Boko Haram are clear. Following the return of a faithful reformer, the state reacts with a heavy hand. Scattered followers regroup in borderlands, where no state (Muslim or British) had control. Ethnic divisions are important, marking the dividing line between Muslim and non-Muslim but also between "civilised" and "barbaric" Muslims. Inusa, Zarma by ethnicity, stopped in a mosque in Sokoto to sell religious tracts in 1916. He described the imam as friendly at first but angry after learning about Inusa's origins: "There is a natural dislike between the Fulani and Zarma. They would not even give us a drink of water or a place to lay our head. They always remember the trouble our people caused them." The cleric invoked the disloyalty of Inusa's people, also Muslims, to the cause of the Fulani jihad in 1807. This disagreement was about ethnic territorialism.

"Inferior" Muslims were pushed to the frontier, where they were made uncivilised. Dissent meant exclusion from proper mosques, Qur'anic schools, and respected occupations such as trade and teaching.¹ The Isawa raided farms; Inusa and others hunted and sold animals. Families did not arrange marriages of outcasts. Missionaries and institutional authorities in charge of orphaned girls made matches.

These stories are not moral tales, suggesting explanations or solutions for Boko Haram (As an aside, Christians in power, including missionaries and British colonial officials, were no less repressive.). They are histories showing the many ways that individuals are excluded from civil society. Material wealth alone does not define status. Ethnic, familial, occupational, and religious credentials matter. Poverty does not simply drive people to find religion; it can be a marker of piety, a choice to reject values of mainstream society.

To better understand grievances that Boko Haram may have is not to pardon them. History reveals the complex social and physical landscape the group exploits. It also shows that such groups are not apart from the state, be it Islamic or secular, but intimately connected to it, wreaking havoc from just beyond its borders.

¹Murray Last, "From Dissent to Dissidence: The Genesis and Development of Reformist Islamic Groups in Northern Nigeria," Working Paper no.5, Nigeria Research Network, Queen Elizabeth House, University of Oxford, 2013.

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