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“SLICING OFF THE TUMOUR”: THE HISTORY OF GLOBAL JIHAD IN NIGERIA, AS NARRATED BY THE ISLAMIC STATE

Abstract

This paper provides a detailed summary and analysis of “Slicing Off the Tumour,” a text written by two sons of Muhammad Yusuf (d. 2009), founder of the Nigerian Jihadi movement known as “Boko Haram,” and recently (2018) published by the Islamic State. The paper argues that although obviously biased, this book provides important insights into the history of Jihad in Nigeria as seen through the lenses of Global Jihadi actors, which the analysts should not dismiss. In the conclusion, the author questions the heuristic usefulness of the term “Boko Haram” in the literature on local and global manifestations of Jihad in contemporary Nigeria. Finally, the author locates his position in the recent debate around the nature of the global links entertained by Nigerian Jihadi actors and around the role of these links in the development of the “Boko Haram phenomenon.”

Keywords: Boko Haram, Al-Qaeda, Islamic State, Global Jihad, Global War on Terror

Introduction

The links between Boko Haram and global Jihadi actors have been recently the object of a hot debate in the academic literature on the topic.² In a recent article, Alessio Iocchi and I have analysed a document (“Some Advice and Guidelines”) published by Al-Qaeda in 2017.³ This document—which has been also,

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 - 2 For the argument that these links were not decisive in the history of the Nigerian movement, see especially Higazi Adam, Kendhammer Brandon, Mohammed Kyari, Pérouse de Montclos Marc-Antoine, and Thurston Alex, A Response to Jacob Zenn on Boko Haram and al-Qa’ida, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 12, No. 2, 2018, pp. 203-213. For a response, see Zenn Jacob, A Primer on Boko Haram Sources and Three Heuristics on al-Qaida and Boko Haram in Response to Adam Higazi, Brandon Kendhammer, Kyari Mohammed, Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, and Alex Thurston, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 12, No. 3, 2018, pp. 74-91.
 - 3 Brigaglia Andrea and Iocchi Alessio, ‘Some Advice and Guidelines’: The History of Global Jihad in Nigeria, as Narrated by the

though only partly, used in Alexander Thurston's recent book on Boko Haram⁴—provides rich insights into the history of Jihad in Nigeria as seen through the eyes of a global Jihadi group. The main information provided in “Some Advice and Guidelines” can be summarised in the following points:

(1) The first contacts between a group of Nigerians and a Global Jihadi organisation date back to the mid-1990s, when some Nigerians started to train within the ranks of the Saharan branch of GSPC (Salafi Group for Preaching and Combat), which would later become Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

(2) While ideologically inspired by Al-Qaeda, and while including AQIM-linked members in his group, in the mid-2000s the first leader of “Boko Haram” Muhammad Yusuf operated independently from AQIM.

(3) Immediately after the Nigerian government's crackdown on Muhammad Yusuf and his network (July-August 2009), members of the Nigerian AQIM-linked cell travelled to the Sahara to reorganise themselves in co-ordination with their North African partners.

(4) AQIM provided intense military training and occasional financial help to their new Nigerian franchise during the years 2010-2011.

(5) AQIM, however, was not interested in opening a new front of Jihad against the Nigerian government: its strategy in Nigeria was focus its attacks on western targets and Christian missions.

(6) AQIM did not want to push the theology of *takfir* (excommunication of other Muslims) too far: its strategy was to adopt a soft propaganda aimed at gradually drawing the Nigerian Muslim community to the cause of Jihad, while carefully avoiding the targeting of (Muslim) civilians and the hasty excommunication of the Muslim masses, even if those were hesitant to collaborate with the Jihadi project.

(7) Abubakar Shekau was originally recognised by AQIM as the legitimate successor to Muhammad Yusuf and as the new leader of the Nigerian Jihadi community. However, due to his theological extremism and to his targeting of other Muslims (including elders and commanders of the Jihadi organisation who were reluctant to follow his leadership), he was rejected as soon as late 2011. AQIM's rejection of Shekau on theological grounds was argued in several treatises, penned both by Nigerian (Abū Muslim al-Ibrāhīmī) and international theologians (‘ Abdallāh al-Shinqīṭī and Abū al-Ḥasan al-Bulaydī) aligned with Al-Qaeda.

(8) Shekau's behaviour was seen by AQIM as the systematic *undoing* of the work of Al-Qaeda in the country: Shekau's operations were targeting Muslim

Islamic State, *Annual Review of Islam in Africa*, Vol. 14, 2017, pp. 27-35. For the full text of the book, see Al-Bulaydī Abū al-Hasan al-Rashīd, *Naṣā'ih wa-Tawjīhāt Shar'iyya li-Mujāhidī Nayjīriyā*, edited by Abū Nu'mān Qutayba al-Shinqīṭī, *Mu'assasat al-Andalus*, 2017 (<https://jihadology.net/2017/04/28/new-release-from-the-archives-of-al-qaidah-in-the-islamic-maghribs-shaykh-abu-al-%E1%B8%A5%asan-rashid-shariah-advice-and-guidance-for-the-mujahidin-of-Nigeria/>, accessed 1.8.2018)

4 Thurston Alexander, *Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and Princeton, 2018, especially pp. 160-179.

commoners instead of focusing on western or Christian objectives; he was alienating the older leadership of the group and even killing, one after the other, its most influential commanders and scholars; and he was unveiling the secrets of the organisation to the Nigerian security through his public messages, facilitating the arrest of some of the commanders and the prevention of some of the planned attacks.

(9) The creation of a new Jihadi group (*Ansaru*) independent of Shekau's and aligned to Al-Qaeda, was the outcome of the above process.

Earlier this year (2018), the Islamic State has issued a similar publication, entitled *Khadh' al-waram min al-khawārij al-Shikawīyya bi-bay'at ahl al-karam* (Slicing off the Tumour of Shekau's Kharijites, in Pledging Allegiance to the Honourable Ones).⁵ Similarly to "Some Advice and Guidelines," "Slicing off the Tumour" offers a wealth of interesting insights into the history of Jihad in contemporary Nigeria, as seen through the eyes of global Jihadi actors—in this case actually Nigerians, but recognised as legitimate interlocutors by the Islamic State. This text has been discussed in two recent posts by Alexander Thurston.⁶ In the following lines, I will summarise the text more in detail for the benefit of the English-language readers and, in the conclusive reflections, I will try to locate my position in the recent debate around whether the emergence of Boko Haram should be seen primarily as the result of structural problems inherent in the local Nigerian context, or of the agency of global Jihadi actors.

"Slicing off the Tumour" is a 120-page treatise. In the cover page, the book is credited to "two sons of the Shaykh Abī Yūsuf al-Barnāwī," that is, of Muhammad Yusuf. The book, however, is mostly written in the singular first person and is most certainly to be credited to Abū Muṣ'ab al-Barnāwī, the current official leader of the West Africa Province of the Islamic State (*al-Dawla al-Islāmiyya – Wilāyat Gharb Ifrīqiyyā*). Like "Some Advice and Guidelines," "Slicing off the Tumour" is framed as representing the point of view of an orthodox stream in Salafī-Jihadi thought⁷ and as rejecting the "extremism" (*ghuluww*) and the "deviation" (*inhirāf*) of the misled (*ḍāll*) community of "Kharijites" led by Shekau. Emerged in the seventh century and characterised by a rigorist theology, the Kharijites were

5 Ibn al-Shaykh Abī Yūsuf al-Barnāwī, *Khadh' al-waram min al-khawārij al-Shikawīyya bi-bay'at ahl al-karam*, al-Ḥaqqā'iq, Dawlat al-Khilāfa al-Islāmiyya, 2018.

6 Thurston Alexander, Boko Haram/Islamic State West Africa's New History of Itself, Part 1, <https://sahelblog.wordpress.com/2018/07/23/boko-haram-islamic-state-westafricas-new-history-of-itself-part-1/> (accessed 1.8.2018); Thurston Alexander, Boko Haram/ Islamic State West Africa's New History of Itself, Part 2, <https://sahelblog.wordpress.com/2018/07/23/bokoharam-islamic-state-west-africas-new-history-of-itselfpart-2/> (accessed 1.8.2018).

7 Salafism is a Sunni theological strand that is mainly represented today by the Wahhābi School of Saudi Arabia. It is characterised by a desire to return to the practices of the early generations of Muslims (the Salaf) and by its rejection of Shiism, Sufism and classical Sunni theological thought, which are represented as accretions or deviations from the practices of the Salaf (see Lauzière Henri, *The Making of Salafism: Islamic Reform in the Twentieth Century*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2015). Global Jihadi movements like Al-Qaeda, Al-Shabaab and the Islamic State, stem from the Salafī movement but reject the political quietism enjoyed by the official scholars of Saudi Arabia. For a historical reconstruction of the development of Jihadi-Salafism as a relatively independent stream in Islamic thought, see Maher Shiraz, *Salafī-Jihadism: The History of an Idea*, Penguin Books, London, 2015.

the first religious group to stem off the mainstream Muslim community. Today, the label of “Kharijite” is loosely applied by Muslims to any group that allegedly manifests extremism or rejects “legitimate” authority. Thus, mainstream Sunnis often use this label for the Salafis as a whole; mainstream Salafis apply it to the Jihadi; and Jihadis like Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State apply it to Boko Haram’s leader Shekau.

“Slicing off the Tumour” is a book written in a nuanced Arabic, interspersed with metaphors, learned references and quotes from classical Arabic poetry, and it is organised in five chapters. The first provides a history of the Jihadi movement in Nigeria from its inception to today, with an interesting section dedicated to the biography of Yusuf (coincidentally, pp. 9-11) and a less interesting one on the biography of Shekau (pp. 35-36). The central and longest chapter (Two) is devoted to a detailed theological examination of the doctrines of the Kharijites from the point of view of Sunni theology, as well as to an examination of Shekau’s doctrines aimed at demonstrating that he falls into that category. Chapter Three summarises the “fruits” of Shekau’s doctrines in the Nigerian Jihadi landscape. Finally, Chapter Four, in providing theological justification for fighting the Kharijites as drawn from classical Islamic literature, serves to prove the necessity of a military engagement, by the Jihadi forces aligned with the Islamic State, against Shekau’s group. As the most important information, from the historical point of view, is provided in chapters One, Three and Four, the reconstruction below will be focused on them.

Muhammad Yusuf, the Mujaddid

Though framed in a hagiographical style, the first chapter provides some interesting information on the life of the father of the author(s), Muḥammad b. Yūsuf b. Muḥammad b. Aḥmad, al-Dāghirī (a *nisba* or toponym that refers to the origins of his mother in Girgir, Jakusko local government, Yobe State). The outline of his life provided in this text does not differ much from the one available in most published sources on Boko Haram but is somewhat richer in detail. Muhammad Yusuf, described as a *mujaddid* (reviver of Islam) in multiple instances in the text, was born in Jakusko and grew in a Sufi background. He moved to Maiduguri in search of Islamic knowledge, and there, he studied the Quran, *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), Arabic language and elementary hadith at the hands of the scholars of the local *zawāyā* (Sufi circles). He then enrolled in the al-Kanemi Institute, located in the neighbourhood of Borno Express (Maiduguri), where he received a more formal Islamic training (p. 9).

In search of a more activist form of Islamic engagement than the one offered by the traditional scholars of the Sufi orders, at some point Yusuf joined the “Muslim Brothers,” a group led by Ibrahim El-Zakzaky and known as the vanguard of the Islamist opposition to the military governments of Ibrahim Baba-

ngida (1985-1993) and Sani Abacha (1993-1998). As many other conservative Sunnis, however, Yusuf left the movement in 1994, when El-Zakzaky publicly announced his inclination towards Shiism.⁸ He then joined the Salafi movement of Izala.⁹ Yusuf—continue the authors—quickly rose to prominence in the ranks of Izala, until he “occupied a highly regarded position and enjoined good reputation with all of them” (p. 10). Then, in 2002 he broke off from the Izala-aligned Salafis, “without, however, fighting them or claiming complete independence from them, but showing kindness to them and inviting them to stop associating (*al-muwālāt*) and participating (*al-dukhūl*) into a democratic government, for the latter is more contagious than scabies” (p. 10).

The 9/11 attacks were, for the authors, a turning point in Yusuf’s life (p. 11), for they divided the world into two umbrella groups (*fusṭaṭān*) to which “no third can be” (*lā thālitha lahumā*):

(1) the umbrella of “faith without hypocrisy,” i.e. the Muslims who embraced Global Jihad by either “migrating to the land of Jihad or remaining in their lands trying to ignite the fire of Jihad there”; and

(2) the umbrella of “unbelief without hypocrisy,” i.e. the “Jews, the Crusaders” and all those, in the Muslim world, who opposed the Global Jihad of Al-Qaeda.

On 9/11, 2001, Yusuf was in Saudi Arabia observing the Pilgrimage rituals. As a consequence of the news of the attack, “what had been previously dormant in his soul, was awakened,” “his heart was brought back to life and an exemplary path was drafted for him,”¹⁰ so that he could finally see in Jihad, and in Jihad only, the right solution to the injustices suffered by Muslims the world over. Jihad was seen by Yusuf, in particular, as the right response to the incapacity of the various Nigerian governments to respond to the inter-religious crises of the Middle Belt (Kafanchan, Zangon Kataf, Kaduna, Tafawa Balewa, Plateau State) and the South (Shagamu), where Muslims had been victimised by Christian or ethnic militias, often with the complicity of the Nigerian military.” Because of their closeness to the Nigerian government—the authors continue to argue—the “Murjiites of

8 1994 is the year in which, in reaction to El-Zakzaky’s Shiism, a group of Sunni dissidents of the Muslim Brothers defected and established a new organisation, *Jamā’at Tajdīd al-Islām* (JTI), under the leadership of Abubakar Mujahid (see Isa Kabiru H, Adam Sani Y, A History of Shia and its Development in Nigeria: The Case-Study of Kano, *Journal for Islamic Studies*, Vol. 37, 2017, pp. 226-256, especially pp. 234-236. In some cases, membership in the JTI overlapped with membership in the Salafi organisation of Izala, but at their core, the first was always more political in orientation, and the second more theological. It is not clear whether Yusuf was ever affiliated with the JTI.

9 On the history of Izala, see Ben Amara Ramzi, *The Development of the Izala Movement in Nigeria: Its Split, Relationship to Sufis and Perception of Shari’a Implementation*, PhD Thesis, University of Bayreuth, Bayreuth, 2011, available online at: <https://epub.unibayreuth.de/101/1/BenAmaraDiss.pdf> (accessed 1.8.2018). On the broader history of the Salafi trend in Nigeria, see Thurston Alexander, *Salafism in Nigeria: Islam, Preaching and Politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2016.

10 The language used by the authors here suggestively reminds one of William James’ classical psychology of religion, where religious conversion is defined as a process whereby a subject’s “religious ideas, previously peripheral in his consciousness, now take a central place, and [...] religious aims form the habitual center of his energy (James William, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, Collier, New York, 1902, pp. 200-201). In this sense, one could argue that, if the account of the authors of “Slicing off the Tumour” is accurate, the events of 9/11 triggered Yusuf’s conversion to Jihadi-Salafism.

today, the scholars of the Sultans” (references to the Izala-aligned Salafis, drawn from the Saudi Islamist literature, where the terms are applied to the scholars who support the Kingdom), were unable to offer an adequate response to the predicament of the Nigerian Muslims.

Although the Jihadi positions of Yusuf had been clear, “in his sermons and preaches” (p. 12), since the year 1422 (2001-2002), it was not until the year 1424 (2003), when he openly preached “for monotheism and Jihad, and for a complete disavowal of the followers of democracy and of its demonic *‘ulamā’*,” that the latter (again, obviously a reference to Izala) *withdrew from him*. The reference to the year 2003, and to the fact that this is the time when the core Salafi leadership of Nigeria took a distance from Yusuf, is important to take note of. In a 2015 article,¹¹ I had argued that the decision of the Nigerian Salafi leadership to collaborate with the security in dismantling a first Jihadi camp in Kanamma (which most of the literature had previously referred to as a pacific “Salafi commune”), was the event that had precipitated the split between the Jihadi-Salafis and their non-Jihadi counterparts. In the same paper, I also argued that the split between Yusuf and the “mainstream Salafis” was a result of the fact that the latter, after some initial hesitation, had decided to take a stand against the Global Jihad of Al-Qaeda—and not of the progressive radicalisation of the former. Izala’s rejection of Jihad—I was convinced then, and I am even more convinced today—was the result of the pressure created by the new context of the global War on Terror, and in particular, of a Saudi attempt to force the various Salafi constituencies around the world, in which multiple trends overlapped, and over which the Saudi government exerted varying degrees of control, to position themselves in a clearer way. The authors of “Slicing off the Tumour” will have more to say on Kanamma in a subsequent section.

By that time, Yusuf—the text continues—was already “inciting against the *ṭawāghīṭ* (i.e. the political representatives of Nigeria’s constitutional dispensation) and calling away from the foreign schools and the democratic system, while spurring to Jihad and quickening the pace to ingathering the vanguard of the believers (*anṣār*) and putting the Monotheists back on their feet” (p. 13). According to this book, then, Yusuf was not a pacific preacher who would suddenly turn violent in 2009, but, as suggested by several recent contributions on Boko Haram,¹² by the early 2000s he had already deeply invested on the promotion of a form of Jihadi project ideologically inspired (but not necessarily externally directed) by Al-Qaeda.

The chapter continues by providing more information on the content of Yusuf’s call. The main aspect of his preaching was that democracy constitutes a

11 Brigaglia Andrea, *The Volatility of Salafi Political Theology, the War on Terror and the Genesis of Boko Haram*, *Diritto & Questioni Pubbliche*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 2015, pp. 175-201.

12 See especially Kassim Abdulbasit, Nwankpa Michael, *The Boko Haram Reader: From Nigerian Preachers to the Islamic State*, Hurst, London, 2018.

form of *shirk* (polytheism), for it implies allegiance to a legislating subject other than God; in this case, the parliament of a country (p. 14). Although on this point of doctrine, he was supported by a wealth of fatwas (religious edicts) emanating from the Quietist Salafi scholars of Saudi Arabia (from Bin Baz and al-Albānī to, more recently, Rabī' al-Madkhalī and Muqbi b. Hādī al-Wādī'ī),¹³ Yusuf, contrary to these Quietist scholars, was not calling Muslims to passively withdraw from their political environment and to refrain from running for, or voting in, the democratic elections of a *kufir* (un-Islamic) system like the Nigerian government: his call, in fact, "was not a call to preaching, although preaching was a part of it; it was not a call to education, although education was a prerequisite to it; and it was not a call to teaching, although teaching was one of its conditions." His was, continue the authors of "Slicing off the Tumour," quoting from one of Yusuf's lectures, "a call to Jihad, and anyone who considers it as a call to preaching or education or teaching, or a call without essence, has not understood this call: for this is a Jihadi call and a Jihadi movement; a community of fighters, and not a community of preachers only."¹⁴

After becoming independent from Izala, Yusuf, the authors continue, was able to establish a number of centers for his mission in a variety of northern Nigerian states, including Bauchi, Kano and Gombe. Borno State, however, remained, as is well known, his central base of operation, and most of the establishments where he was directly engaged in teaching were located in Maiduguri, the state capital: the Ibn Taymiyya Center (where he delivered his Friday sermons and where he taught Quranic exegesis, Hadith and Life of the Prophet on Saturdays and Sundays); the Ṭā'ifāt al-Manṣūra Mosque (where he taught weekly sessions of Quranic exegesis on Fridays); a centre in the Millionaires' Quarters (where he taught weekly sessions of Quranic exegesis on Fridays, in Kanuri), the Fezzan Mosque (where he occasionally delivered lectures); a centre in the neighbourhood of Lawan Bor (where he taught the *Riyāḍ al-Ṣāliḥīn* of al-Nawawī, in Kanuri); the Abū Hurayra Mosque (where he delivered special sessions on the "purification of the soul," *tazkiyat al-nafs*). Yusuf did not give a specific name to his organisation, but created a community of followers who were integrated in the broader Muslim environment, from which they were distinguished only by their stricter adherence to the outward aspects of the Sunna (full face-veil for women; fist-long beards and ankle-length trousers for men), by their modesty, and by their spirit of chivalrous brotherhood and solidarity (pp. 16-17).

After having devoted a paragraph to Yusuf's denunciations of Shiism ("the Rāfiḍī Imāmī Zoroastrians," p. 15), the book proceeds to detailing "the main

13 For an extensive collection of fatwas by Quietist Salafi scholars disallowing democracy and elections, see Al-Kashmeere S, *Sheikh Muqbil's Speech on Voting, Elections and Democracy*, undated (available at http://www.salafitalk.net/st/uploads/Muqbil_Elections.pdf, accessed 1.8.2018). For a brief analysis of the (unintended) impact of these fatwas on the Nigerian arena, see Brigaglia, *The Volatility of Salafi Political Theology*, pp. 186-192.

14 Pp. 14-15, quoting from an undated lecture by Muhammad Yusuf in explanation of the Ṣaḥīḥ of al-Bukhārī.

things the Community fought.” In line with Salafi methodology, the object of Yusuf’s denunciations were, first and foremost, *bid’ā* (heretical innovation) in all its forms, starting from Sufism and specifically, the Tijaniyya, which remains the most widely practiced Sufi order in Borno as in the rest of northern Nigeria. But even as important, if not more important, as a target were, for Yusuf, “the *shirk* (polytheism) of democracy and of the foreign colonial school system (*boko*),” as well as “working within the *kufr* (un-Islamic) system” (p. 18). It is because of Yusuf’s views on the prohibition of foreign schools, that the ‘*ulamā’ al-sū’* (the “scholars of evil,” another reference to the Izala-aligned Salafis) started to call the new, rival Salafi community with the derogatory nickname of “Boko Haram.” As harsh as his condemnation of the western school system was, however, Yusuf was not of the advice that the mere fact of attending schools constituted *ipso facto* unbelief (p. 19), and he never called for a *takfir* (excommunication) of the schoolchildren and their parents as such. His view was that certain points of biology and natural sciences (in particular, evolution and the hydrological cycle) went clearly against the Quranic verses. At the same time, he also had reservations about the spherical form of the Earth and about its rotation around the Sun, which, however, are “points around which there is difference of opinion (*ijtihad*) among scholars” (p. 20).¹⁵

The following pages (21-23) detail the actions taken by the Izala-aligned Salafi scholars of Nigeria, whose “sources of income depend on the apostate rulers (al-salāṭīn al-murtaddīn),” to antagonise Yusuf and his community: from accusations of “following the Kharijite methodology,” to various efforts to defend the legitimacy of the Nigerian establishment by “blustering about the necessity of obeying them and of taking permission for declaring Jihad only from them” (p. 21). Here, the authors make a direct reference to Isa Ali Pantami, a Salafi scholar whose public critical engagements (in Hausa) with Yusuf are still available on the internet¹⁶ and have also been closely examined in the academic literature.¹⁷ The Izala scholars started to spy on Yusuf and to engage in “useless public debates,” during which they carefully avoided touching on the central points of doctrine, deceiving instead their public with “speeches and futilities that would burden heavy volumes by mentioning, and that it would be painstaking to even enumerate” (p. 22).

The opposition of the Izala-aligned Salafis gradually turned—continues the text without, however, providing a specific date—into repression. It is thanks to the collaboration of the “scholars of evil” with the Nigerian State, in fact, that

15 Here, the authors seem to be attempting to exonerate their father from the belief that the Earth is flat (famously held by prominent Salafi scholar Bin Baz) and to align him with the position of the theologian of the Islamic State, Abū Mālik al-Tamimi, who accepts that the Earth is spherical (see “Slicing Off the Tumour,” p. 20, fn 1).

16 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ESOFrCdm9Q> (accessed 1.8.2018), and, for the following parts, the links suggested by Youtube.

17 Anonymous, The Popular Discourses of Salafi Radicalism and Salafi Counter-radicalism in Nigeria: A Case Study of Boko Haram, *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Vol. 42, No. 2, 2010, pp. 118-144.

Yusuf was briefly arrested on two occasions: once, on the accusation of being associated with al-Qaeda; and on another occasion, accused of links with the "Talibans of Kanamma, [an organisation] headed by a man by the name of Muhammad Ali and which was later responsible for the killing of Ja'far Mahmud Adam, the idol (tāghūt) of the Murjiites" (p. 23). This, even though the Kanamma community had earlier "made *takfir* (excommunication) of the Shaykh [Muhammad Yusuf] and attempted his assassination."

Let us pause for a minute, for in the engagements and confrontations between these three men (Muhammad Yusuf, Ja'far Mahmud Adam and Muhammad Ali) lies an important key to understand the early development of global and local Jihad in northern Nigeria. Yusuf has often been believed to be responsible for the 2007 assassination of Ja'far M. Adam,¹⁸ but the authors of "Slicing off the Tumour" exonerate him, shifting the blame to Ali and disassociating Yusuf from the latter. Today, we also know that Ali is considered by those, of the Nigerian Jihadis, who maintained an organic link to Al-Qaeda, as the man who acted (or rather, tried to act) as a liaison between Osama Bin Laden and the Nigerian arena in the late 1990s and early 2000s, only to be later betrayed by a mysterious "Shaykh Abu al-Bara' al-Dourawi" (a religious scholar who, like Adam, originated from Daura).¹⁹ If the myth that the Kanamma camp was "a pacific commune" has been dispelled by the *Al-Risala* article cited at note 17 and mentioning Ali and al-Dourawi, the hypothesis that the 2003 confrontation with the Nigerian security was not the incidental outcome of a dispute over fishing rights, but an undercover anti-terror operation, should now start to be seriously taken into consideration. And although the embryonic Jihadi community led by Ali had not been able to establish a training camp at Kanamma as I had previously hypothesised, this was obviously their intention, which was averted thanks to the collaboration of the top leadership of the Salafi community with the security. The text of "Slicing off the Tumour," where Ali is presented as more extreme than Yusuf even if the latter had already clearly "made his Jihadi call," should be seen as an additional evidence pointing to the fact that the Kanamma group was never established as a pacific commune but as a group linked (loosely or organically, it can be disputed) to Al-Qaeda. The Al-Qaeda linked Nigerian source cited in *Al-Risala* also believes that Adam was responsible for the assassination of Ali in early 2004,²⁰ which could make sense in the light of Adam's collaboration with the authorities. The possibility that the remnants of Ali's "Talebans," three years later, killed Adam in retaliation for the assassination of their leader, would therefore be realistic. The full picture of these events remains unclear (especially with

18 Brigaglia Andrea, A Contribution to the History of the Wahhābī *Da'wa* in West Africa: The Career and the Murder of Shaykh Ja'far Mahmud Adam (Daura, ca. 1961/1962, Kano, 2007), *Islamic Africa*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2012, p. 22; Thurston, *Boko Haram*, p. 99.

19 Message from Nigeria, *Al Risalah Magazine*, 4, 2017 (available at: <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2017/01/alrisacc84lah-magazine-4.pdf>, accessed 1.8.2018), p. 19.

20 Ibid.

reference to the relationship between Ali and Yusuf, which the Al-Qaeda source claims to have been organic, while the authors of “Slicing off the Tumour” claim to have been conflictual), but the fact that two documents recently released by Nigerian actors linked to global Jihadi groups make both reference to the intrigue of Kanamma, are further indications that the latter had a central role in creating the foundations for the “Boko Haram phenomenon.”

The text then moves to providing rich and interesting details of the steps taken by Yusuf, while facing a multiplicity of enemies, to build the structure of his organisation. Yusuf’s was a long-term strategy aimed at building, coordinating and motivating a vast Jihadi community from *inside, and as a part of its surrounding, mainstream Muslim environment*—not at rushing to strike its enemies or at isolating itself as the men of Muhammad Ali had foolishly done in Kanamma. The visibility of Yusuf and his community was the talisman that made its Jihadi project invisible and therefore, much more dangerous than that of its Kanamma predecessors. The structure built by Yusuf comprised a *Majlis al-shūrā*, a core executive composed of nine religious scholars; a number of regional committees; a supervision committee; a *ḥisba* (public morality) committee; a finance committee (from the information included under this heading, we can conclude that Yusuf was not relying on foreign funders); a security (concerned—it is important to note—especially with *preventing* the members of the organisation from committing any act that would attract the suspicion of the Nigerian security); a committee of beneficence; a media committee (concerned with the publication of the group’s audio and video recordings); and a military committee which “in the public, limited itself to ensuring the security of the Shaykhs and the protection of the centres, while secretly, it trained in the use of arms and explosives” (p. 25).

The Confrontation: 2009

Notwithstanding the efforts made by Yusuf to keep the military training of its members secret, this must not have passed unobserved to the Nigerian security, which was obviously keeping Yusuf under close surveillance after his January 2005 negotiated return from Saudi Arabia. Gradually, in coordination with the “barking dogs” (p. 26; again a reference to the Izala-aligned Salafi scholars) and in particular, Ja’far Mahmud Adam (referred, once again, as the *ṭāghūt*, here intended as “idol,” of the non-Jihadi Salafis) and one Bashir Kashirra, the security decided to take a definitive measure towards the physical elimination of the group. Prevented from praying in the Izala mosques of Kano and of other cities, the members of Yusuf’s group were exposed to the unleashing of “Operation Flush Out” (p. 27), launched by the Borno State Government with the purported aim of crushing armed robbery, but perceived (probably rightly) by the authors of “Slicing off the Tumour” as a new cover-up (after the Kanamma “fishing rights” story) for an anti-terror operation, this time directed at the group

that Yusuf had painstakingly re-organised. The repression escalated during the year 2009, culminating in the famous incident of the shooting of four members of the group, on the 10th of June, while they were returning from a funeral. This resulted, as is well known in the literature, in the issuing of Muhammad Yusuf's "Open Letter" to the Nigerian government (p. 28), and in his decision, under the pressure of the circumstances, to call his followers to military action even while knowing that he would face certain martyrdom.

Pp. 29-34 contain a lot of information—presented, obviously, in a hagiographic style—on the military confrontations that occurred between the end of July and the beginning of August 2009. This account confirms the outline of the unfolding of the events provided in the many published reports and books but adds some interesting details. Yusuf had appointed one man, Abu 'Amir al-Barnawi, as the general in-chief of an army of *mujāhidīn* which was—if we believe this account—remarkably big. Under Abu 'Amir, in fact, were three commanders, each in charge of 1,000 men (p. 29). This militia, however, was poorly armed. Although Yusuf called his followers to sell all their possessions and buy as many weapons as possible, the "Kalashnikovs, revolvers and ammunitions" previously gathered by the group were intercepted by the Nigerian security.²¹ As a result, when on 2 Sha'bān 1430 (24 July 2009), Yusuf arranged his forces for the defence of the *Markaz Ibn Taymiyya* in Maiduguri, he could only rely on one Kalashnikov per unit of twenty-thirty men (p. 30), while the rest had to rely on "swords, bows and arrows."

While the *Markaz* was surrounded by the Nigerian police waiting to take action, the *mujāhidīn* grouped in Maiduguri were receiving news of the attacks by the police forces to the group's headquarters in Bauchi State, and of the response of Yusuf's men, who were able to raid a police station in Dutsen Tanshi. As they were poorly armed, however, the "brothers in Bauchi" had been eventually overcome and arrested. On the morning of Saturday 3 Sha'bān, on the contrary (and while the *Markaz* in Maiduguri was still surrounded by the Borno State police), Yusuf's forces in Yobe State had been able to score two victories in the battles of Damaturu and Potiskum, raiding a huge quantity of weapons from several police stations. However, as they had not been previously trained to the use of firearms, the "brothers in Yobe" had eventually dispersed, leaving the arsenal in the hands of the security, which had subsequently raided the two headquarters.

On the evening of Saturday, the Nigerian police had finally received orders to attack the *Markaz* in Maiduguri, and a fierce battle had taken place, during which the 3,000-men strong militia of Yusuf had been able to repel the attack. During the following three days, Yusuf's men were able to retaliate by raiding

21 Most likely a reference to the "Boko Haram training camp in Biu" discovered by the Nigerian security in mid-July 2009 ("INTERVIEW—Nigerian Sect Planned Bomb Attack During Ramadan," *Reuters*, 4 August 2009; <https://af.reuters.com/article/nigeriaNews/idAFL438570820090804>, accessed 1.8.2018).

several police stations, confiscating numerous weapons and killing many policemen. Finally, however, on Wednesday 7 Sha'bān 1430 (29 July, 2009), the special units deployed by the Nigerian military under the order of President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua, had arrived in Maiduguri and unleashed a new, more powerful attack on the *Markaz*. The authors provide some details of the heroic resistance of the members of the group, naming some of the leaders who were "martyred" on the occasion, like Abu 'Amir al-Barnawi, Dr Abu Adam Adamawa (probably a University lecturer), Abdallah Maiduguri and Muhammad Kashari. Before being finally arrested on Thursday, 30 July 2009, Yusuf, knowing he was facing death, ordered his remaining forces to flee and to wait for an opportunity to reorganise themselves. The section ends with the quote of some Arabic verses from an elegy dedicated to Yusuf, composed by "Shaykh Abū 'Abdallāh Usāma" (p. 33).

Abubakar Shekau, the "Tumour"

The following section of Chapter One narrates the successive developments of the Nigerian Jihadi community after the death of Yusuf, providing some scanty biographical details on Abu Bakr Shekau, and a much more interesting account of the splits that occurred within the movement after his succession to the leadership.

Abū Bakr b. Muḥammad Shekau came from a harsh rural environment, which left "a bad mark on his soul, giving him the negative behavioural traits of the Bedouins, such as rudeness, avarice and quarrelsomeness" (p. 35). Shekau had left his original environment as a child and travelled to Maiduguri in search of Islamic knowledge. After studying for some time in the "High Islam Institute," an institution run by Tijani Sufis, he left it before completing his studies when he made his first encounters with the Salafi scholars, from whom he received a "superficial knowledge" of the Salafi canon. When Yusuf started his preaching, Shekau enthusiastically followed him, becoming one of his closest disciples. And when Yusuf started to put Shekau in charge of some teaching, people—continue the authors of "Slicing off the Tumour"—were attracted by the simple, yet passionate and motivating style of his lectures, which they attended not only as a learning exercise, but also as a form of "amusement and entertaining" (p. 36). At the same time, however, Shekau was also known and respected for his virtues of piety and asceticism: he used to wear simple, unembroidered clothes; he used to eat a porridge of coarsely ground millet as a meal; and he used to ride a simple motorcycle, refusing the offer of some members of the group to buy him a car. It was because of these praiseworthy traits, that Yusuf had "elevated him above all other preachers, had drawn him close, and had started to appoint him as his deputy whenever he would travel" (p. 36).

In re-organising the scattered community of Yusuf's Jihadists after the 2009 crackdown, Shekau had also given the organisation, for the first time, the name

of *Jamā'at Ahl al-Sunna li-l-Da'wa wa-l-Jihād* (Community of the People of the Sunna for Preaching and Jihad). Shekau's original input on the Nigerian Jihadi community was, overall, a positive one from the point of view of the group: it was thanks to him, in fact, that the dispersed and demoralised followers of Yusuf were able to regroup, and it was thanks to his video-messages that they were spurred once again into action. It is also under his leadership that a delegation travelled to the Algerian Sahara to meet the leaders of AQIM (Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb), with whom they "arranged ways of communicating, entertaining a strong connection for some time in the form of reciprocal visits of delegations and letter exchanges" (p. 37). Thanks to the logistic support of the Saharan partners, "tens of raids and martyrdom operations were carried out, targeting the churches of the militant Christians, who so many a time had given to the Muslims the taste of distress and bitterness."

The narration of the predicament into which the Nigerian Jihadis sank during the following years because of Shekau's extremism, largely overlaps with the one provided by AQIM in "Some Advice and Guidelines." However, as "Slicing off the Tumour" provides additional insights, it is worth summarising this section in some detail. The excessive extremism of Shekau, as well as his "autocratic and selfish" leadership style, were soon noticed, both at the national and global levels of the Jihadi leadership. This had prompted AQIM to release a letter of advice, at the result of which the Nigerian Jihadi community split into three groups: one in defence of Shekau; one still committed to Jihad but opposed to him; and a third which, disenchanted, fell into the "opposing extremism" of renouncing Jihad and joining "the Murjiites" (p. 38), i.e. the non-Jihadi Salafis. Shekau's reaction to the growing opposition of the "defectors" was brutal: not only, in fact, he attacked those who opposed him, but he killed even the few who, in the interest of the organisation, attempted to remain neutral and to mediate between the two groups. Among the representatives of the "middle way" between Shekau's "extremism" and his "moderate-Jihadi" opposition, were the two commanders Abu Sa'ad Bama and Muhammad Salafi, who chose to remain under him but tried to use their influence to moderate his views. For some time, the above-named were among the very few in the organisation who were personally in touch with Shekau, for the latter had started conducting a strictly secretive life. Before being "martyred" (the text does not explicitly say whether they were killed by Shekau, but it implies it), the two were accused by Shekau of treason for having used their influence with the leader to cut off the ties between him and his army of *mujāhidīn*, thus undermining his authority.

When Shekau started confiscating the weapons of the commanders who refused to submit to his authority, the Jihadis who were opposed to his leadership finally broke off from him and, with the blessing of AQIM, established an independent organisation, named *Anṣār al-Muslimīn fī Bilād al-Sūdān* (The Vanguard of the Muslims in the Lands of the Blacks). Ansaru (as the organisation be-

came known) was originally led by Abu Muhammad Bauchi and included “some of the leading poets of the community, like Shaykh Abū Usāma al-Anṣārī and Muḥammad Awwal Gombe.” Members of Ansaru too, however, were soon engulfed in an internal debate around whether or not the Muslim masses who are unaware of the fact that collaborating with the Nigerian government constitutes unbelief, should be excused (*al-‘udhr bi-l-jahl*) and should therefore be spared by the Jihadists’ attacks. This debate led to a further fragmentation of the leadership of Ansaru and to its ultimate decline (p. 39). On the whole, the authors of “Slicing off the Tumour” continue, the members of Ansaru were more learned than Shekau, but the latter had control of the *mujāhidīn*’s army, a fact that ensured his success. Shekau’s men were thus able to kill Abu Usama al-Ansari,²² who had inherited the leadership of Ansaru after the arrest of Abu Muhammad Bauchi. The rest of the Ansaru leadership, which was “influenced by the thought of al-Qaeda” (p. 39), was decimated by the arrests made by the Nigerian police, while the lay members of the group, from that time on, restricted their operations to the robbing of banks and to the kidnapping of foreigners for ransom.

As Shekau’s camp was now “deserted from scholars and seekers of knowledge,” it provided fertile grounds for the emergence of all sorts of extremism by its lay members. These included the practice of highway robberies directed at the Muslim commoners, whose loot was considered as legitimate booty of war based on Shekau’s blanket excommunication of the Muslim masses. Gradually, some of the lay followers of Shekau were able to occupy an entire neighbourhood in the east of Maiduguri, close to the train station, which they used as a basis to engage in systematic raids on the residents of Maiduguri, thus further contributing to the alienation of the Muslim masses from the Jihadis. Exasperated by the actions of Shekau’s men, the Muslim residents of Borno decided to actively collaborate with the Nigerian government in the fight against the Jihadis through the establishment of the Civilian Joint Task Force (*yan kato da gora*).

The opposition of the Muslim residents of Maiduguri forced the Jihadis, after three years of Jihad and after the death or the arrest of all the commanders who had been directly appointed by Yusuf, to move out of town and to look for refuge in the forest of Sambisa (p. 41). This was the occasion for Shekau to “openly transform the methods of the organisation, changing the rules it had been established upon, in broad daylight, into his vulgar Kharijite doctrines.” As the author of the introduction of “Some Advice and Guidelines,” the authors of “Slicing off the Tumour,” too, accuse Shekau of systematically killing the scholars of the group, and name Shaykh ‘Abd al-Malik Kaduna and Shaykh Abū al-‘Abbās Binkuwa as examples. This went on, the authors continue, until the June 2014 announcement of the Islamic State’s world Caliphate by Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī in Mosul, Iraq.

22 Abu Usama al-Ansari should be the *nom de guerre* of Khalid al-Barnawi. However, Khalid al-Barnawi was arrested, not killed, in 2016.

Chapter 2, the longest in the book, interrupts the historical account with a long (pp. 50-95) and repetitive theological treatise aimed at demonstrating that Shekau should be considered as a Kharijite and that it is legitimate, if not obligatory, to fight him. Starting from the year 1435 (begun in November 2013), "Shekau had turned the mouth of his gun towards the Muslims, killing them and taking their children as captives. From that year on, Shekau would ambush the gathering places where he knew he would find the monotheists—like the stations, the mosques of the Sunnis and of other groups, the Eid prayer grounds—and send a suicide attacker to blow himself off in the gathering" (p. 51), while at the same time keeping the "crusaders" safe from any harm. After that time, in fact, the Nigerian Christians, who over the previous years had been the main targets of the operations carried out by the AQIM-aligned Jihadis, were able to "celebrate their festivities in their churches, in safety and tranquillity," protected by the security measures of the government, while the Muslims remained exposed to the violence of Shekau's group (p. 52).

Shekau thought of himself as a religious scholar and Jihadi leader of global repute, boasting to have inspired the Islamic State to the revival of slavery and the enslavement of the Yazidis with his famous mass kidnapping in Chibok (p. 57). However, he kept committing banal linguistic mistakes in his lectures (p. 56) and giving improvised fatwas where he confused the ruling of jurisprudence on as ordinary a matter as divorce (p. 60). The combination of conceit and superficial knowledge of the canon was, for the authors of "Slicing off the Tumour," the root of Shekau's most central doctrinal mistakes in the application of the rules of *takfir* (excommunication):

(1) Failing to consider ignorance as an excuse (*'adam al-'udhr bil-jahl*), and therefore, teaching that any Muslim holding a Nigerian ID is an unbeliever, for his lack of disassociation (*barā'a*) from a *kufr* system.

(2) Adopting an extreme version of the *takfir musalsal* (serial *takfir*), based on the principle (particularly dear to the Salafi school, but not necessarily unique to it in the history of Sunni thought) that "whoever does not hold an unbeliever to be an unbeliever, or doubts about his status as an unbeliever, is an unbeliever himself." As an example, the author quotes a tragicomic statement by Shekau according to which, "whoever commits an act of unbelief is an unbeliever and he is not excused even for an instant. [...] And if you are of the opinion that I am being too strict in this, you are an unbeliever too. And whoever doubts of your status as an unbeliever, is an unbeliever himself, and who, and who and who etc... all unbelievers!" (p. 91).

The theological section of the book does not need a detailed analysis. Suffice it to say that in framing Shekau as a Kharijite, the authors of "Slicing off the Tumour" rely on the canon of the Islamic State, that is the classical corpus of Salafi theology interpreted through the commentaries of Abū Mālik al-Tamīmī.

The Dawla Issue

Much more interesting are, on the contrary, the third and fourth chapters of the book, which provide once again, useful and new (though not necessarily unbiased) historical information. First, the authors recapitulate (pp. 97-103) the “fruits” of Shekau’s extremist doctrine: destroying life in the Nigerian northeast; killing Sunnis; assassinating the scholarly leadership of the Jihadi community; distorting the original teachings of Muhammad Yusuf. In doing so, they give (using the word *irhābī*, “terrorist,” to describe Shekau’s actions...) an account of a massacre occurred in Madagali (Adamawa State), which as far as I am aware, had not been documented in such a proportion by the Nigerian news. After having captured the town (August 2014), Shekau’s men, in anticipation of a forthcoming effort of the military to seize it from them, asked the inhabitants to choose between joining the Jihadists in the mountains or staying. After only 250 youth volunteered to join Shekau, the latter ordered the killing of all the rest, and more than 400 were executed (p. 103).

Then, the authors provide an extremely interesting account of the events that immediately preceded and followed Shekau’s famous pledge of allegiance (*bay’a*) to the Caliphate of al-Baghdādī (March 2015). According to the authors, in fact, the June 2014 declaration of the Caliphate by the Islamic State had been welcomed by the commanders of Shekau’s group who had been patiently tolerating his leadership, for they had seen in the emergence of a new worldwide Jihadi leadership an occasion to moderate the extremism of the Nigerian Jihadi autocrat (p. 104). Shekau, on the contrary, not only had done all he could to resist or postpone the pledge, but he had even killed many of those who were advising him to do so. Only after some time, as the pressure had become too strong, he had reluctantly ceded to it and publicly announced his allegiance. Immediately thereafter, however, he had started once again to murder those who had pressurised him in that sense—while keeping their murders secret to the lay members or justifying their executions based on counterfeited accusations of high treason. The motive of all these murders was, for the authors, directly linked to “the issue of the Dawla.” The names of these commanders and the circumstances of their assassinations are provided by the authors through pp. 105-108. The first was Muṣṭafā Chad (killed in November/December 2014), a Chadian who was in charge of a contingent of 5,000 men and to the military operations of whom the authors credit up to 80% of the conquests previously made by Shekau’s group during its 2014 territorial expansion (p. 105). The murder of Muṣṭafā Chad was kept secret for almost a year. The second was ‘Alī Abū Anīsa Gombe (killed in April/May 2015), who had originally been appointed to replace Muṣṭafā Chad as the head of the contingent of men previously led by the latter (p. 106). The third was Abū Ḥanīfā (killed in September/October 2015), who was one of those who had started to invite the members of the group to raise the issue

of Shekau's leadership to the Caliphate. The fourth was Malam 'Umar (killed in October/November 2015), an associate of Abū Ḥanīfa who, after escaping a first attempt of assassination, had personally gone to Shekau in repentance but who had been, nonetheless, killed by the latter (p. 107).

The authors of the book—who, according to their own account, had spent three years of their lives (ca. 2013-2016) under Shekau's leadership—kept looking at all these developments in distress but in silence, motivated by their commitment to the Sunni principle of absolute obedience to the legitimate ruler (*ūlū al-amr*): as Shekau had been recognised as an Emir by the Caliph—they reasoned—they would have committed a grave sin by rejecting his authority. Shekau spared their lives (perhaps in deference to the memory of their father) but put them under a severe surveillance and removed them from their position of trustees of the official communication between Shekau and the Caliphate, warning them from entertaining any type of contact with the Islamic State. Later, when the two expressed their desire of participating in global Jihad by traveling to Libya, he prevented them from doing so (p. 107), as he had previously prevented the Al-Qaeda-linked members of his organisation from traveling to Somalia and Algeria.²³ After deliberation with another commander (Abū Fāṭima), the two finally decided to secretly contact the Caliphate to raise their concerns, similarly to what other Nigerian "defectors" from Shekau had done, in 2012, with AQIM. And for a second time, the leadership of a global Jihadi organisation had "dumped" Shekau, appointing instead one of the two sons of Yusuf (Abū Muṣ'ab al-Barnāwī) as the new Emir of the Islamic State – West Africa Province.

Finally liberated from the religious obligation to follow Shekau, the defectors attempted to reorganise and re-motivate the Jihadi forces in the Nigerian territory. In doing so, the "Army of the Caliphate" occasionally came to clash militarily with Shekau's group, as detailed through pp. 108-109. The fire exchanges between the two rival Jihadi militias took place on 27 July 2016 (in an unspecified location); a few days later, on the shores of Lake Chad; in August 2016, in Yobe State; on 10 September 2016 (in an unspecified location); on 2 October 2016, in Kirinuwa (Borno State), on the shores of the Lake Chad.

The Shekau Tumour: A Tentative Aetiology

Read alongside "Some Advice and Guidelines," the text of "Slicing off the Tumour" imposes a first, important conclusion: Abu Bakr Shekau, the secretive, tyrannical, histrionic, bloodthirsty and seemingly all-powerful Jihadi warrior from Yobe State, has consciously and resolutely tried to *cut off* any link between the Nigerian and the global fronts of Jihad twice: in 2012 with Al-Qaeda, and in 2016 with the Islamic State. These moves were dictated, according to the au-

23 See Brigaglia and Iocchi, "Some Advice and Guidelines," p. 34.

thors of the two books, by a combination of Shekau's extreme theology of *takfir*, of his exaggerated ambitions and of his paranoid personality. The leverage provided by his iron-fist control over the army of *mujāhidīn* he came to lead after the demise of Yusuf, as well as over their weapons and their movements, has been critical to his success. If he did not receive any external support, one cannot but stand in awe in front of Shekau's achievements as a leader who has been able to withstand a war not only against the armies of Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad and Niger supported by the United States, France and Russia, but also against Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.

The second reflection is that today, in the presence of three organisations operating in Nigeria in the name of Jihad (one, temporarily declined and almost inactive, linked to Al-Qaeda; one, undergoing a phase of reorganisation, linked to the Islamic State; and one, operating in isolation from, and in opposition to Global Jihad, led by Shekau), the term "Boko Haram" has become obsolete, unless we use it as referring to a *phenomenon* (Jihadist insurgencies in twenty-first century Nigeria) and not to a "movement" or a "sect."

In the past (especially under the Goodluck Jonathan administration), the Nigerian government had complained about the reluctance of the US to share intelligence on "Boko Haram."²⁴ If we intend by the latter term the militias led by Shekau, Nigeria should not expect any substantial cooperation, at least in the short term: as it appears that Shekau is actively engaged in an effort to turn a Nigerian Jihadi network of potentially global reach into a local insurgency, in fact, there is no reason why eliminating him should constitute a priority of the US foreign policy—and the US are not necessarily to be blamed if this will be their choice. If the war of the US is a war on Global Jihad, in fact, Shekau's insurgency is not *their* problem, but it might become an indirect leverage against the more dangerous (from their point of view) threats of Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Nigeria can, on the contrary, expect a more proactive collaboration from the US in the fight against globally linked factions like Ansaru and Abū Mu 'ab al-Barnāwī's group, as well as in the support to the State's infrastructures and in the enhancement of good governance, which continue to be critical, and very welcome, types of support. However, the independence of the Nigerian state and more broadly, of the African states, in developing their own strategies of the "War on Terror" and in determining the priorities of their policies, will be critical to preserve. For there is no doubt that—as important as the local context of Borno is to understand *the appeal* of the message of Muhammad Yusuf first, and Abu Bakr Shekau later, to a local public, and their capacity to mobilise and coordinate their militias—Nigeria has been a front of Global Jihad and of the Global War on Terror for quite some time, probably since the early 2000s and

24 "Chibok Schoolgirls: U.S. will not share military intelligence with Nigeria—Officials," *Premium Times*, 14 May 2014 (<https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/160751-chibok-schoolgirls-u-s-will-share-militaryintelligence-nigeria-officials.html>, accessed 1.8.2018).

the Kanamma intrigue.

So, who is to blame for the onset of this "tumour"—the agency of global actors or the structure of local Nigerian (and, Bornuan) society? The immune system of Nigeria was obviously weak due to the systemic and structural problems that are perfectly summarised in the analysis provided in the first chapter of Alex Thurston's recent book:²⁵ endemic corruption; regionally unequal development; massive urbanisation; and unaddressed local religious crises—to which I would add a dysfunctional, ethnic-based Federalism which provides the rationale for low-scale ethnic cleansing of "non-indigene minorities" (especially in the Middle Belt) and inhibits the capacity of the Federal Government (of any political colour) to take repressive action in states controlled by the opposition (of any political colour). But the carcinogenic radiations to which this body was exposed, generating the disease, were global in nature from the very onset, and on this point, I stand closer to the views expressed by Jacob Zenn in his debate with Adam Higazi, Brandon Kendhammer, Kyari Mohammed, Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos and Alex Thurston.

First, came the two combined radiations of Al-Qaeda's Global Jihad rhetoric and of George W. Bush's War on Terror rhetoric with their (empirically fallacious, but emotionally appealing) "either with us or against us" discourses. These discourses created a vortex of reactions that instinctively pushed many in the Muslim world to sympathise with Osama Bin Laden's project, even if they were unaware of its deeper implications. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, this sympathy in Nigeria might have occasionally been shared across the traditional Izala/Sufi divide. But it was the Izala leadership who systematically tried to capitalise on these emotions, using them to reinforce its agitation for the full implementation of Sharia in the country, as they allowed to reframe the latter not only as a part of a local conflict between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria, but also of a global hegemonic context where Muslims, after having been victimised, were starting to rise up. In the early 2000s (most likely in November 2002), a mainstream preacher of Izala like Abubakar Gero (who is, alongside Kabiru Gombe, one of the two most popular—though not certainly most learned—preachers of the group) was addressing the audience of his yearly public Quranic exegesis, between bursts of *Allahu Akbar!*, with the following words:

Do you think that there is no Mullah Omar active today? They are just busy preparing, and we can guarantee that they are on their way coming. Do you think that Osama Bin Laden is not active, just because he is keeping quiet? They are just busy getting ready for action. As for us, we are only waiting on them to send us their registration forms, and we will register! We are all ready to join them, even if this means to lift our entire country up! We are only waiting on this very little thing. They say they are investigating whether there are terrorists,

25 Thurston, *Boko Haram*, Chapter One, "The Lifeworld of Muhammad Yusuf", pp. 34-82.

whether there are Al-Qaeda people; they say they suspect there might be some of them in Nigeria: well, here they are, it's us! Are you looking for Al-Qaeda's people, and you think you do not know who they are? Here we are! Are you looking for the people of Al-Qaeda? For the men of Osama Bin Laden? For the members of the organisation of Mullah Omar? Here we are!²⁶

The connection between a popular "mainstream Salafi" preacher like Gero and the Global Jihad of Al-Qaeda was perhaps, a purely emotional one. It was based on his very shallow, mythical and binary understanding of the complex politics of the Middle East from which Al-Qaeda had emerged—which was not too dissimilar from the perception that an average Evangelical preacher, in America, would have had of Bush's war with "the Moslems." While the voicing of emotions plays a fundamental role in religion and politics alike, however, emotions are also often forced to sink back in the silence of the heart and to make room to realpolitik. Which is what happened when the third wave of global radiations came to hit Nigeria, in the form of the Saudi version of the War on Terror. The latter forced Izala (just as other Salafi communities worldwide) to take a clear stand against Global Jihad and to sever its ties with the Kanamma community first, and with Muhammad Yusuf later. Yusuf did not have (here lies my main disagreement with Thurston's analysis) to gradually "smuggle jihadist thought into a Salafi community that had originally been oriented toward non-jihadist Salafism,"²⁷ for Jihadist rhetoric was well represented in the Izala of the early 2000s. Rather, he was pushed away from the Nigerian Salafi community when a multiplicity of trends and rhetorical registers that had overlapped before, were not allowed to co-exist anymore.

In the process, three things happened. The first was that the Izala scholars, unable to justify to their public the sudden turn in the content of their preaches, had no choice but to remain silent for various years on Al-Qaeda and Jihad, and to focus most of their public engagements with Yusuf on a secondary aspect of their conflict with him, that is the ban on government education. This led to the popularisation of the nickname "Boko Haram" through the "speeches and futilities" contained in years of "useless debates," which further muddled the waters. During the years of Yusuf's ascent to fame, Global Jihad was, to use a Hausa idiomatic expression, *kadangaren bakin tulun Izala*, "the lizard sitting on the mouth of Izala's water-pot":²⁸ Izala could not directly hit it (for by openly speaking negatively about Global Jihad, they would have "broken the water-pot," that is, they

26 Gero Abubakar, *Tafsir Surat al-Rum*, undated (but most likely from 2002) audio recording in Hausa. I am grateful to Shaykh S. (Damaturu, Nigeria), for making a copy of the recording available to me.

27 Thurston, *Boko Haram*, p. 109.

28 I am thankful to my wife, Fauziyya Fiji, for suggesting this metaphor, as well as for many other insights that helped me in interpreting the universe of the Izala youth base in the early 2000s, to which she feels personally close. In particular, I owe her my deep (though not uncritical) respect for the figure of Shaykh Ja'far Mahmoud Adam, and my attempt to understand the tragic predicament in which he found himself in the mid-2000s, reflected in my several articles on the topic. The responsibility for any mistake in the interpretation of the relative data, however, remains solely mine.

would have compromised the credibility of their own organisation); but by not doing so, they allowed the "lizard" to keep drinking from the water and gradually spoil it.

The second, was that because of their sudden about-turn, the "counter-radical discourses" of the Izala-aligned scholars, based on the defence of *boko* (modern education), appealed only to a section of its elder, urban middle-class public, who had invested so much in modern education and white-collar jobs, that it obviously had everything to lose from Yusuf's programme. Such counter-radical discourses were, on the contrary, utterly ineffective with a vast section of Izala's broader base (the economically disenfranchised, but also the most idealistic of the middle-class youth activists, who were often the sons or the students of Izala's "counter-radical" elite). Some, in fact, from within this section of Izala's base, understandably saw the about-turn of the leadership hypocritical, and decided to side with Yusuf, whose preaching continued to bear the marks of Izala's perceived "betrayal" of Jihad.

The third, and perhaps the most tragic consequence of the Saudi War on Terror played on Nigerian grounds, was that in its essence, the Saudi "anti-terror" policy was targeted not only at Al-Qaeda's Jihad, but also at mainstream political Islam. Thus, in exporting it, the Saudis also exported their ultra-monarchic political theology, in the form of the political fatwas released by the most Quietist strand of Salafi thought in the Peninsula. These fatwas, by clearly disallowing elections, constitutionalism and democracy on religious reasons, unintentionally removed the ground beneath the feet of Nigeria's "mainstream Salafis," for whom participation in the country's constitutional democracy was a key part of their strategy. Under the neat distinctions operated by the Islamised version of Bush's "either with us or against us" paradigm promoted by the Saudi state after 9-11, in fact, there was no place for the political activism of the most gifted and independent scholars of the Salafi school in Nigeria, like Ja'far M. Adam and Muhammad Awwal al-Albani. The domesticated "government *ulamā'*" of post-2003 Izala had to navigate the contradiction of calling the Muslim masses to obedience to the leaders of a constitutional government that the Salafi canon, by virtual consensus, enjoined to withdraw from; but once navigating this contradiction, they could survive and in fact, they could play a critical role in the government's "de-radicalisation programmes." Conversely, the Jihadi discourse of Yusuf, was suddenly ostracised, quickening the pace of its evolution into a full-fledged insurgency; yet, re-interpreted as a form of "Kharijism," it still fitted the new paradigm of a "bad Islam" in opposition to the "good Islam" of the Saudi state. As for Adam, he initially followed the new guidelines, by abruptly cutting off his links with the NGO that had funded him for years, Al-Muntada al-Islami (originally founded by Muḥammad Surūr, who was not necessarily a Jihadi, but certainly a long-time Islamist opponent of the Saudi State) and by proactively and decisively cooperating with the Nigerian security, providing intelligence

and advice to counter Yusuf's group. But although genuinely embracing an openly critical *da'wa* against Yusuf's Jihadi project, Adam also tried to remain as independent as possible from the Nigerian government, and was also clearly sceptical of the "a-political Quietism" enjoined by the Saudi establishment. When he was killed by "the Kharijites" in 2007, he was de facto isolated (while at the same time outwardly iconised) in the global Salafi landscape. A similar destiny fell upon al-Albani, who would also be murdered seven years later. With popular and partially independent voices like those of Adam and Albani silenced, most of the Salafi public of northern Nigeria had to choose between embracing a form of ultra-Quietism that is so close to the Saudi establishment to appear as an indirect endorsement of the American Empire or sympathising with the Jihadis.

An underlying point of the recent debate around the global or local origin of "Boko Haram," is that those who minimise the global roots of the phenomenon accuse the opposite camp of being instrumental to the most belligerent forms of American anti-terror engagement in Muslim-majority countries.²⁹ On this point, it is my belief that Africa-based researchers should look at this aspect of the debate from the distance of external observers, without being drawn into what remains essentially an American conundrum. For we³⁰ do not position ourselves as privileged interlocutors of the American government, nor do we aim at influencing its foreign policy. Our critique of the devastating effects of the radiations of the US War on Terror, therefore, should not prevent us from a parallel critique of the political theologies (in this case those of the Nigerian Salafi leadership) which magnetically attracted another set of radiations, those of global Jihadi-Salafism, unintendedly allowing them to target the Nigerian Muslim public without difficulty. And it is precisely because we are concerned about the effects of the tumour of *takfiri* theologies in undermining the body of the Global South and its capacity to produce a stronger and healthier Muslim (as well as trans-religious) *critique of the Global North*, that we believe that Africa-based researchers should not refrain from documenting the global dimension of the "Boko Haram phenomenon." In the context of internal US public discourses, the documentation of this dimension, and of the diffuse pro-al-Qaeda rhetoric of mainstream Nigerian Muslim scholars in the early 2000s, might be functional to nurturing the Islamophobic myths of the political Right and of its powerful lobbies. This is a problem inherent in American popular culture. But in our African Muslim context, the minimising attitude of Higazi *et al* does not serve the interests of an

29 See Higazi *et al*, *A Response to Jacob Zenn*, pp. 203-204. Another underlying point of the debate is that Higazi *et al* argue that over-emphasising the agency of global Jihadi actors in the genesis of Boko Haram, feeds the out-dated model of a "Sufi-oriented African Islam" vs a "Salafi-oriented Arab Islam." The same argument, however, could be turned against Higazi *et al*, for their failure to appreciate the depth of the participation of Nigerian actors into quintessentially global Jihadi networks, might also be seen as reinforcing the idea of an "African Islam" essentially isolated from or impermeable to global influences.

30 The research on which this paper relies is supported by the Centre for Contemporary Islam (CCI), University of Cape Town, South Africa.

oppressed community. It only exonerates from their (more often indirect than direct) responsibilities, our religious elites who have been busy muddling the waters around the "Jihadist tumour" that they contributed to create, and that they later (genuinely, but ineffectively) tried to "slice off" from Nigeria.

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Андреа Бригагљи

„СЕЦКАЊЕ ТУМОРА“: ИСТОРИЈА ГЛОБАЛНОГ ЦИХАДА У НИГЕРИЈИ, ИЗ УГЛА ИСЛАМСКЕ ДРЖАВЕ

Сажетак

Овај рад нуди детаљан приказ и анализу текста „Сецкање тумора“, који су написали синови Мухамеда Јусуфа, оснивача нигеријског џихадистичког покрета Боко Харам, и који је недавно објављен од стране Исламске државе (2018). Аргумент овог текста се заснива на чињеници да ова књига, иако очигледно пристрасна, нуди важне увиде у историју џихада у Нигерији из угла самих актера која не сме бити занемарена. У закључку, аутор доводи у питање хеуристику корисности појма Боко Харам у литератури о локалним и глобалним манифестацијама џихада у савременој Нигерији. На крају, аутор смешта своју расправу у савремену дебату о природи глобалних веза које одржавају нигеријски џихадисти и како ове везе утичу на развој феномена Боко Харама.

Кључне речи: Боко Харам, Ал Каида, Исламска држава, глобални џихад, рат против терора

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