

**VIOLENT PERFORMANCES AND PERFORMATIVE VIOLENCE:  
AN ANALYSIS OF BOKO HARAM**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis examines how a performance lens can help conflict analysts better understand violent groups and the context that frames their actions. A consideration of both the types and the styles of a group's violence can reveal how actions are often determined by individual resentments, collective traumas, colonial legacies, international precedents, trends in mass media, and government actions all at the same time. This thesis is geared towards theory building. While the historical, cultural, and temporal context of Boko Haram is not identical to others, my process, questions, and findings illuminate other cases and offer insight into what analysts should examine in other groups. I discuss the context that has framed Boko Haram's origins, development, and mobilization in what I term anti-colonial political Islam and describe how this context produced a major tendency reflected in their forms of violence. Another major tendency reflected in Boko Haram's forms of violence is of gender-specific targeting, treatment, and trends of exploitation. I conclude that both major tendencies arise out of context in different ways. A performance lens provides the tools required for conflict analysts to uncover what tends to be hidden in plain sight.

## **DEDICATION**

*To my parents and my sister, who inspired every aspect of my thought,  
and to Juliette, who saw it through.*

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AQIM	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
CTJF	Civilian Joint Task Force
ELF	Earth Liberation Front
FARC	Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia
IDP	Internally Displaced Persons
IRA	Irish Republican Army
IS	Islamic State
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
ISIL	Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant
ISWAP	Islamic State West Africa Province
JASDJ	Jamā‘at Ahl al-Sunna li-Da‘wa wa-l-Jihād
JTF	Joint Task Force
MNJTF	Multi-National Joint Task Force
NA	Native Authority
NST	Nigeria Security Tracker
UN	United Nations
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution
US	United States
WPS	Women, Peace, and Security



## I. INTRODUCTION

In 2014, an Islamic extremist group received international attention for the abduction of almost three hundred girls from their school in Nigeria. Militants entered the students' dormitories in the middle of the night dressed in military fatigues and many women interviewed later remarked that they thought they were members of the Nigerian military.<sup>1</sup> The girls, mostly between the ages of 16 and 18, were loaded onto motorbikes and into other vehicles over the course of about four hours. Just over fifty people were able to escape while in transit, but the others were taken as hostages. The leader of the group widely known as Boko Haram at the time, Abubakar Shekau, claimed responsibility for the attack in a video a month later: "Now, you make noise about Chibok, Chibok. Only Allah knows the unbelieving women we have captured, the women Allah instructed us to enslave. Yes, Allah said we should enslave them."<sup>2</sup>

Outrage over the abduction and the ineffective response by the Nigerian government swept across the global stage. The hashtag #BringBackOurGirls trended on Twitter and spurred a movement, with protests in cities all over the world. It became commonplace to see celebrities and politicians holding signs that featured the hashtag, often written in marker on blank canvases to represent solidarity. Figures like Michelle Obama spearheaded what continues to be the #BringBackOurGirls campaign's rhetoric: "Our daughters should not have to choose between an education and staying alive."<sup>3</sup> Out of the 276 girls abducted, 57 escaped during the initial kidnapping, 107 have been released through negotiations with the Nigerian government, and 112 remain in captivity.<sup>4</sup> After the Chibok kidnapping, Boko Haram became somewhat defined by

their apparent fixation on women. Scholars and journalists began to analyze how their rhetoric and targeting profile were profoundly gendered in this way, how the treatment of victims and focus of violence differed according to gender.

Much of my undergraduate research and interest focused on criminal organizations in Latin America, which tend to exhibit alternative tendencies. Few of these examples have conducted mass kidnappings of this magnitude, nor systematic rape, nor exhibited tendencies that analysts have determined to be particularly female-focused. Many studies have suggested, rather, a predominance of male-focused rhetoric and targeting of violent groups in Latin America.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, recent studies have revealed the central roles that ‘masculine honor’ plays in relations between criminal organizations and local populations (e.g., the concept of Omertà in Italy).<sup>6</sup> Coming from this background, I was curious about Boko Haram’s rhetoric, choice of targets, and treatment of women within the movement. While there have been many instances of gender-specific violence in Latin America (e.g., femicide, disappearances, and sexual violence), there are no clear examples of a modern criminal organization or non-state actor specifically *known* for this kind of violence. Boko Haram’s profile is unique in this regard, even when compared to other groups of similar ideological backgrounds.

Boko Haram has been characterized as a radical Salafist Jihadist group. Other radical Salafist groups from, for example, the Salafist Call in Egypt to the modern Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant seem to exhibit similar rhetoric, ideological motivations, and political aspirations, yet distinct forms of violence. Because a group engaged in ‘terrorism’ is principally defined by its forms of violence, Boko Haram’s irregularity presents a phenomenon worthy of study. It is important to determine whether the group members see themselves as Salafists, or even Islamists, since many of the questions surrounding the group arise out of their divergence from

other groups from similar ideological backgrounds. Defined broadly, ‘Islamism’ is the belief that Islamic law and values should play a central role in public and political life. This term encompasses a broad spectrum of Muslims, from mainstream Muslims who believe in gradual political change, and often eschew revolution, to ultra-conservative Salafist “quietists” who embrace practices of earlier generations of Muslims called the *Salaf*, thought to represent a closer connection to the Prophet Muhammad, and tend to prefer to dissociate from the secular state structure.<sup>7</sup>

Salafism has a long history of development in Nigeria, particularly in the north. This history is reflected in “by far the most prominent Sunni group in Nigeria,” the *Jama‘at Izalat al-Bid‘a wa-Iqamat al-Sunna* (Izala Society for the Removal of Innovation and Reestablishment of the Sunna) also known as Yan Izala or just Izala.<sup>8</sup> Boko Haram’s first leader, Mohammad Yusuf, rose to prominence as part of the Izala movement. In the early years of the *Yusufiyya* movement that later transformed into Boko Haram, Yusuf and his followers embraced quietist Salafism and denied anything that could not be found in the Qur’an as an “innovation.”<sup>9</sup> The movement’s relationship with the secular state eventually soured and the group transitioned into a more active and radical Jihadist movement in 2009 based on their Salafist background. I will discuss the evolution of the group in more detail later in this thesis, however it is important to orient Boko Haram within the larger context of Salafist Jihadist ideology.

Boko Haram’s origins and self-identification in Salafist Islamism often lead to comparisons between them and other groups of similar ideological backgrounds. These comparisons tend to be grounded in the assumption that future actions can be predicted by ideological motivations alone. This assumption, however, does not account for the differences in violent actions between similar groups. It does not provide reasons or explanations for why some

groups of the same, or similar, ideological background target specific demographics or utilize different tools for attacks, for example. Consequently, much can be learned from how groups of similar backgrounds, ideologies, and motivations differ in their forms of violence. In this thesis, I argue that understanding the *styles* of a group's violence, determined by their context, is just as important as understanding the *types* and tendencies of violence they choose to employ. By focusing on performed and performative forms of violence, analysts can better account for divergences between seemingly uniform groups.

In this thesis, I bridge three seemingly unconnected literatures on terrorism, performance, and conflict analysis through their links to violence. Based on the literature of performance studies, I distinguish Boko Haram's forms of violence between the 'performed' and 'performative.' Types of violence refer to how actions are performed, determined by external pressures and precedents, and styles of violence refer to how actions are performative, representative of internal or individual resentments and historical context. In utilizing a theoretical framework informed by Mahmood Mamdani and Donald L. Horowitz, this performance lens helps elucidate how Boko Haram's tendencies are determined by both localized context and international trends. With reference to Diana Taylor's development of 'public spectacle,' I find that the group's forms of violence reveal two distinct, yet interrelated, tendencies that have been shaped by their historical and cultural context. One tendency is informed by what I term anti-colonial political Islam, and another is indicative of an implicit gender-specific dimension. Finally, through Cynthia Enloe's feminist curiosity, I illustrate how a performance lens can help disentangle the spectacular from the everyday and reveal the more widespread societal issues that are reflected in Boko Haram's gender-specific targeting.

It is important for conflict analysts to understand how a group's violent actions can be determined by individual resentments, collective traumas, colonial legacies, international precedents, trends in mass media, and government actions all at the same time. In an increasingly connected and globalized world, it would be naïve to consider violent actions as isolated and independent occurrences. It is equally misguided to predict a group's actions based solely on a general trend of similar groups from completely different geographic or historical contexts. There are many shifts, tendencies, precedents, and triggers of violence that are not easily explained by the group's assumed motivations. There are often deeper, more complex, historically precise, and culturally relevant explanations for a group's violent tendencies. Rather than starting from an assumption of a group's motivations, I start from the group's actions, informed by their context, and reveal their characteristics from there. This understanding, of how both context and contingencies interact to determine a group's types and styles of violence, can help bolster the field of conflict analysis and resolution.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### Introduction

Recent developments have forced many analysts, scholars, and onlookers to seek alternative explanations for the levels, types, and patterns of non-state group violence that have continued to ravage the world. Since most of my prior research has been focused on Latin American criminal organizations, I have noticed that their forms of violence have been the subject of much attention in the literature. Many scholars have discussed how forms of violence change depending on prompts by the government, competition from other groups, claims to legitimacy entailed in governance, and individual or group resentments.<sup>10</sup> Many corners of scholarship have also been focused on what a group's forms of violence say about a group's status, characteristics, or motivations.<sup>11</sup> This tradition is largely borne out of the fact that criminals, gangs, and drug trafficking organizations are presumed to be apolitical, therefore attention-seeking behavior presents unique phenomena.

My literature review reflects the general trend of my thesis in that I combine elements of multiple disciplines and make linkages between seemingly unconnected traditions to better understand what a group's acts of violence might reveal about the group. I first explore the term 'terrorism' and its development over time, bringing particular attention to how its use is determined by global politics and bolstered by collective interpretation. I explain that the real analytical import of the concept is found in its reference to violence rather than its capacity to classify distinct groups into somewhat arbitrary categories. I move to a discussion of

performance and performativity as they relate to violence and explore the limitations presented by an insular focus on the spectacular. Lastly, I orient my review of ‘terrorism’ and performative violence within the robust literature of conflict analysis. I argue that a performance lens can aid conflict analysis and address questions about violent tendencies that may otherwise remain unanswered.

### **Terrorism and Terror: Understanding Forms of Violence**

The term ‘terrorism’ has evaded standard definition for many years. There have been countless attempts to move beyond the pitfalls of simplistic definitions, but as Richard Rubenstein remarks, “to call an act of political violence terrorist is not merely to describe it but to judge it.”<sup>12</sup> This judgment is grounded on the perceived legitimacy of the groups or individuals who perform violent actions. The term ‘terrorism’ is essentially nondescriptive. As Michael Getler recognizes, the words ‘terrorism’ and ‘terrorist’ are useful, but they are merely labels. “Like all labels,” he writes, “they do not convey much hard information.”<sup>13</sup> This accounts for the arbitrariness of both the definitions and their use in public discourse. In other words, the definition of terrorism and the qualities it connotes change over time depending on the judgment of those in charge of dictating and utilizing the term.

Brigitte L. Nacos recounts three main attributes traditionally, albeit controversially, assigned to terrorism: (1) the motives are political, (2) the targets are civilians or noncombatants, and (3) the perpetrators are nonstate actors.<sup>14</sup> As Nacos discusses in the second chapter of *Terrorism and Counterterrorism* (2016), these attributes have not been formed in a vacuum but rather determined by public assent and political convenience.<sup>15</sup> In the wake of the French Revolution, for example, terrorism was defined as political violence “from above” as “mass

guillotining of the aristocracy and other real or perceived enemies of the state.”<sup>16</sup> In the nineteenth century, terrorism began to describe violence “from below” such as assassinations of those in power by those not in power.<sup>17</sup> By the twentieth century, the definition became associated with “antistate, antigovernment violence,” while in the twenty-first century, the term is increasingly ambiguous.<sup>18</sup>

Providing a bit of ambiguity is the introduction of the term ‘state terrorism.’ It rose in prominence at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century due to figures like Noam Chomsky, Edward Herman, George A. Lopez, and Michael Stohl.<sup>19</sup> The concept refers to the capacity of a legitimized state to conduct acts of terrorism against civilians and non-combatants. The concept has received criticism due to the narrow definition of terrorism. Some scholars have argued that a state cannot engage in terrorism because, by definition, terrorism is a form of violence conducted by non-state actors.<sup>20</sup> Others argue that scholars can understand acts of terrorism conducted by a state without losing the distinction between state and non-state actors; correspondingly, some argue there is much to learn from state actors that choose these methods over others given their greater power and legitimate authority.<sup>21</sup> The original prompt for the inclusion of ‘state terrorism’ into the literature is the abundance of examples of states terrorizing their populations: Guatemalan scorched-earth tactics after 1954, death squads in Argentina’s “dirty war,” explosives placed on airliners in Libya, assassinations of dissidents in South Africa, and many others. If these examples are not considered ‘terrorism,’ there may be something wrong with the definition.<sup>22</sup>

Bruce Hoffman recognizes that “terrorism ineluctably involves a quest for power: power to dominate and coerce, to intimidate and control, and ultimately to effect political change.”<sup>23</sup> He posits a five-step process to this quest for power: *Attention* (seeking media attention through acts of violence), *Acknowledgement* (forcing their causes onto the state’s or international



community's radar), *Recognition* (capitalizing on newfound interest and successfully justifying their cause), *Authority* (gaining power and effecting change in state, economic, demographic, or geographic structure), and *Governance* (consolidating direct control over state or people).<sup>24</sup>

There are many groups that fit into this linear process, depending on how Hoffman defines the details of his stages. For instance, the groups that are successful in seeking attention, legitimizing their actions, justifying their cause, gaining power, effecting change, and consolidating control are manifold, sweeping in scope, and can even include state officials.

The term 'terrorism' and its popular use, therefore, carries with it little analytical import. The best solution is to attempt to reconcile the semantic disparity between 'terror' and 'terrorism': the former as the use of brutal violence against non-combatants that often attracts media attention and the latter as a particular category of the former based on the group's political motivations and illicit status. Scholars engaged in research on 'terrorism' tend to spend most of their time catering their definitions to fit a diverse set of groups and actors that somewhat capriciously teeter between categories. Hence, my contention is that scholarship that focuses on the use of terror by criminal organizations in Latin America can help contribute insight into other groups engaged in similar actions, irrespective of group classification. Since there is often an assumption that criminal organizations do not have political motivations and are therefore not engaged in 'terrorism' per se, scholars of Latin American criminal organizations are forced to employ alternative frameworks to understand terror.

There have been some recent developments that have linked criminal organizations to the politically motivated groups traditionally considered 'terrorist.' For example, some scholars have discussed how the operational structures, capacity for violence, brutal nature of attacks, as well as the use of rhetoric is similar between the two types of groups.<sup>25</sup> Others have discussed how

they might be likely to work together because they each rely on illegal or illegitimate actions to sustain their group's momentum and continuity.<sup>26</sup> In specific examples like La Familia Michoacana in Mexico, it is clear how some criminal organizations seek legitimacy by presenting political and religious motivations. Joseph Michael Reynolds describes La Familia as a "faith-based right-wing populist socialist movement" that stage themselves as vigilante authorities in direct contrast to the state and other criminals.<sup>27</sup> Alternatively, James J. F. Forest describes how some groups like the FARC in Colombia or Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines have slowly transitioned into purely criminal activities and away from their "original commitment[s] to political violence."<sup>28</sup>

Attempts to transition criminal organizations into the 'terrorist' classification further reveal the issues with the definition of 'terrorism' found in the literature. Why do groups that seem to rely on inconspicuous profiteering, as opposed to political motivations, for their group's continuity engage in such brutal forms of violence that attract so much attention? If they do not have political motivations, then why do they use the same rhetoric as groups engaged in terrorism? How can we explain their choices of targets given their lack of ideological foundations? While a 'terrorist' group's uses of terror are normally explained by their "cause" (e.g., Irish independence and the IRA or environmental defense and the ELF), apolitical groups may exhibit a whole host of motivations that are considered more context dependent. I argue that many of the limitations of the literature on 'terrorism' can be avoided if scholars recognize that a group's violent actions are often determined or informed by factors other than their political or ideological motivations. The fact that a group adopts the same rhetoric or exhibits the same organizational structure does not mean that they will exhibit the same forms of violence.

Many scholars argue that a focus on group motivations in general can be misleading. Assumptions about a group's ideological or political motivations are frequently based on a limited understanding of the "cause" in question, the actors involved, and their reasons for choosing violence. In the case of 'religious terrorism,' it is often inaccurate to maintain that religious texts are the main, or only, motivating factors. Talal Asad writes that, contrary to Western histories, jihad is not a central notion in Islam.<sup>29</sup> Neither, he maintains, is there any mention of "holy war" in the classical texts, nor has there ever been a consensus about the virtue of religious warfare in Islam (in contrast to Christianity and Christendom).<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, there are many groups engaged in terrorism that utilize the rhetoric of religious warfare through their interpretations of Islam and its holy texts. Terrorism, from a Western perspective, is somewhat synonymous with Islamic extremism. While there has been an increase in the use of the terms 'Christian extremism' or 'right-wing extremism' to explain some of what is happening in the United States, these descriptions are still limited in explanatory value.<sup>31</sup>

Some major questions are left unanswered: are the actions of seemingly politically motivated groups determined entirely by their "cause," or do their actions precipitate, develop, and evolve over time depending on other context-dependent factors? Conversely, to understand a violent group, should analysts rely on what they assume to be the group's motives, or expand their scope to incorporate other factors that might determine the group's use of terror? Does a group's use of terror and their various forms of violence accurately reflect a group's motivations or characteristics? Can these forms of violence help elucidate group characteristics that are hidden behind media interpretations of sensational events? In the following sections I will address the literature I find to be the most relevant for an engagement with a group's forms of

violence. I argue that much can be learned from a focus on a group's violent tendencies rather than a group's perceived motivations.

### **Performance and Performativity in Violence**

While the literature on 'performance' and 'performativity' seems to be, at most, peripherally related to violence, the evolution of the field has revealed a particularly compelling connection. The literature on 'performance' and 'performativity' is largely derived from J.L. Austin's conception of performative speech-acts, later developed by Judith Butler and others.<sup>32</sup> Austin describes such phrases as those that, "the issuing of the utterance is performing the action."<sup>33</sup> Albeit outdated, examples of performative speech-acts include: 'I do,' while in the process of marriage, 'I give my watch to my brother' as inscribed in a will, 'I name this ship,' while smashing a bottle against the stern, and others.<sup>34</sup> Simply, it is the capacity for an action to accompany speech, and conversely, for speech to act. Judith Butler takes up the idea of speech-acts and transitions to a focus on agency with gender performativity.<sup>35</sup> Angela Marino describes Judith Butler's development of the concept as a way to show the reality of what had been originally considered merely biological, genetic, and inherent processes. Namely, identity formation is a "dynamic and discursive act... [that] implies a reiterative action, one that produces effect and outcomes as much as it makes room for agency to intervene."<sup>36</sup>

Moving away from the limitation imposed by Austin of merely linguistic analysis, Butler and others began to use the term 'performativity' to describe "processes or things that act and do rather than fixed objects," as context-dependent relational forces, and ultimately as a way to theorize agency.<sup>37</sup> In an attempt to define the field, Diana Taylor and Marcos Steuernagel compiled contributions from thirty scholars across seven different countries in Latin America in

2013.<sup>38</sup> The trilingual publication offers great insight into the difficulty of achieving a unified definition of a concept so comprehensive and broadly encompassing as ‘performance.’ Taylor’s own attempts to define concepts with respect to the preceding generation of philosophers and rhetorical theorists run at odds with others within the field. She discusses the problems with ‘performance’ and the connotations latent in its false cognate ‘performativity’ when translated into Spanish and Portuguese, precisely due to the “extraordinarily broad range of behaviors it covers.”<sup>39</sup> However, if incorporated into the social sciences as a new methodological lens, the idea of performance and its incredibly broad scope of attention promises great analytical import.

Angela Marino describes how this novel analytic disposition has been incorporated into Latin American studies as a performance “turn:” both a broadening of the objects of study and an acknowledgement that the objects of study are “better approached as relational and interdependent acts.”<sup>40</sup> In other words, the concept’s introduction into Latin American studies has diversified the range of what is accepted as evidence and facilitated a sense of connectedness between previously isolated phenomenon (e.g., paintings and art pieces can be compared more readily to ‘official’ texts). Correspondingly, the founder of modern Performance Studies, Richard Schechner writes that the discipline “starts where most limited-domain disciplines end.”<sup>41</sup> He describes the practice as the study of any item or artifact of art or culture not in themselves, but as “players in ongoing relationships,” as “performances.”<sup>42</sup>

Performance studies scholars regard events as practices and behaviors rather than as isolated phenomena devoid of context. Scholars gather ongoing trends and tendencies rather than focus on isolated and individual occurrences. As an engagement with cultural artifacts, Schechner asserts that the study must acknowledge two facts about today’s global context: first, that there are no isolated groups because cultures are always interacting and, second, that the

differences between cultures are so profound that no theory of performance is universal.<sup>43</sup> With its origin and early development in the arts, Performance studies is introduced into the social sciences by Schechner and others as a way to understand the interconnectedness of the global, local, and individual actors that play off each other and define themselves in relation. According to Schechner's 1973 account, Performance studies is best equipped to investigate the following considerations of the social sciences: gatherings of any kind, sports, rituals, play, political and public behaviors, semiotic expression, elements of psychotherapy that focus on person-to-person interactions, ethnography, and constitutive theories of behavior, among others.<sup>44</sup> In this way, it is better to understand 'performance' as a lens through which one might analyze these routine, yet incredibly meaningful, phenomena.

Building on this, Carleen Basler, Thomas L. Dumm, and Austin Sarat write in *Performances of Violence* (2011) that "violence is not something that can be isolated from its context... Violence is *performed*."<sup>45</sup> The essays compiled in the book incorporate theories of performance and focus on a three-tier relationship of violent actions: performances of violence, the subjectivity or subjecthood of their performers, and how the performances are represented.<sup>46</sup> The scholars featured in this publication represent various fields such as anthropology, history, sociology, political theory, and law. Through this interdisciplinary representation, the goal of the publication is to begin to uncover the "subterranean cross currents of the cultural lives of violence" reminiscent of Schechner's considerations.<sup>47</sup> They remark in their introduction that, "[while] not all acts of violence are acts of killing, there is a touch of the killer in all violent acts."<sup>48</sup> This is essentially the use of transitioning the focus toward 'performances' of violence, rather than the mere actions in themselves. Marino describes the performance "turn" alternatively as a shifting of focus from that which *is* to that which *does*.<sup>49</sup> Insofar as an act is

performed, one may study its performance and uncover essential characteristics of its performer. This is how performance studies can inform inquiries into a group's forms of violence.

Andrew Lantz's study on performative violence in the context of Mexican drug trafficking organizations is seminal in this regard.<sup>50</sup> Much of the literature on violence in Mexico tends to focus on the spectacular and almost passively indiscriminate violence that has denoted criminal organization involvement for years.<sup>51</sup> Lantz focuses on the peculiarly performative nature of violence in Mexico that seems to have risen in frequency after Calderón entered the presidency in 2006.<sup>52</sup> Lantz remarks that while "narco-related executions used to be kept out of the limelight, with cartels depositing bodies in *narcofosos* (mass graves) ... the announcement of death now invades public space."<sup>53</sup> In corpse-messaging in Mexico, in which dead bodies are staged with messages, the violence goes beyond a general warning; the violent act is claimed by the performer and their messages are clearly stated, embodied by their victim. It constitutes an appropriation of the victim's agency wherein "essentially, the message is the body, and the body is the message."<sup>54</sup>

For Lantz, the spectacular refers to the grotesque manner in which bodies are staged and more likely to receive media attention, while the performative refers to the capacity of the victim's body to carry a message to the intended, and unintended, audiences. He incorporates an understanding of 'performative' that is derived from the original definition developed by Austin, Butler, and others: "the capacity of semiotic expression (in this case, corpse messaging) to produce extra-semiotic results (the exercise of sovereignty and social control)."<sup>55</sup> Alternatively, he writes that his use of 'performance' refers to "the ways in which cartels mindfully stage the display of their victims and the accompanying messages, thus giving their brutal deeds an effective degree of 'spectacularity.'"<sup>56</sup> Spectacular actions can be, and often are, performative.

Mirroring the statement made above by Sarat et al., there is a “touch of the killer in all violent acts,” there is a touch of the *performative* in every *performance*.<sup>57</sup> I ask, how can analysts utilize this distinction between violence as merely performed or performative to better understand violent groups?

### **Conflict Analysis and Culture’s Shaping of Violence**

A recent doctoral graduate of the Carter School and professor of mine in Malta described conflict analysis as the study of ‘systems of violence.’ This is a broad, general, and simplistic definition of the field, but it has framed the way I read, investigate, and analyze conflict. With respect to the interdisciplinary nature of the field, and the subsequent criticism due to this feature, conflict analysis and resolution is an attempt to combine and synthesize the developments of relevant fields to better understand the multiple facets to violence and how they interact. Various disciplines offer insights into systems of violence from different vantage points: political science, anthropology, criminology, and sociology, for instance, have different insights on political, cultural, direct, indirect, and structural violence. Conflict analysis can be seen in this way as the practice of utilizing diverse disciplines to enhance our understanding of the various forms of violence and how they overlap. The relationship between violent performances and performative violence provides another point of reference by which analysts may identify violent actors, their tendencies toward specific types of violence, and ultimately how their styles of violence reflect their positions within their broader context. I argue that understanding the relationship between a group’s types and styles of violence can help analysts better account for their conflict dynamics.



The suggestion of investigating forms of violence to gather insights into actors, groups, and systems of violence can be found in the work of founding scholars in the field of conflict analysis and resolution. Johan Galtung, for example, speaks about the need of a more accurate definition of ‘violence’ and its subsequent utilization in peace research.<sup>58</sup> Galtung describes violence more comprehensively as “the cause of difference between the potential and actual.”<sup>59</sup> Anticipating later developments, this definition moves past the limited conception of direct, personal, or physical violence and includes indirect or structural manifestations of violence. Peace, then, should be understood in relation to the multiple manifestations or systems of violence, personal and structural, that constitute its negation and that might actively work against it. Violent tendencies emerge in ‘peaceful’ contexts as much as those in conflict and can thus be used to analyze conflict dynamics.

Tedd R. Gurr develops this idea of violent manifestations within his framework of relative deprivation.<sup>60</sup> The relative discrepancy between one’s expectations and one’s perceived capacity to fulfill those expectations can yield a powerful sense of frustration. This frustration, if felt collectively and without curtailment, can lead to aggression, violence, and collective action. Understanding this frustration-aggression mechanism, Gurr writes, can aid conflict analysis because one may reveal the objects of frustration through acts of aggression.<sup>61</sup> John Burton introduces basic human needs against this background to focus attention more intentionally on the fundamental individual needs that are “as basic to harmonious social relationship as food and shelter are to the individual.”<sup>62</sup> In a move away from the inability of Realism to account for the “internal wars” of the twentieth century, Burton proposes a novel focus on the non-negotiable human needs that, if left unsatisfied or unpreserved, may lead to violent outbursts. For Burton,

recognizing these basic human needs and their culturally informed “satisfiers,” is crucial for conflict resolution.

Some scholars have criticized these theoretical frameworks as essentialist and de-contextualized based on their attempts to establish an “objective basis for socially and politically salient needs in human biology or in unalterable “human nature.””<sup>63</sup> Basic human needs and value expectations, if universalized, do not take into consideration the profound and important differences between cultures and communities. Burton, Gurr, and Galtung made tremendous strides in shifting the focus to the individual and respect for the marginalized victims of indirect and structural violence, but one must engage with cultural context to understand the conditions under which needs and values form and to attempt to satisfy them. This is not to say that culture causes conflict nor that there are such ineradicable and irreconcilable differences between specific cultures that render them likely to frequently or necessarily “clash.”<sup>64</sup> But, conflict resolution practitioners must be aware of the dangers of interventions and theories that underestimate the importance of culture and the way it shapes conflict.

It is difficult to define culture and the many facets of its development; while it implies a particular connectedness of a group through language, nationality, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, gender, or ability and disability, among others, it is neither fixed nor stagnant. It is a profoundly dynamic and discursive phenomenon. Kevin Avruch, the most ardent critic of the human needs approach, describes culture as a “perception-shaping lens or (still metaphorically) a grammar for the production and structuring of meaningful action.”<sup>65</sup> He differentiates ‘disputes,’ best addressed by Realists, from ‘conflicts’ that are based on perception and belief, both of which are shaped by culture.<sup>66</sup> Culture shapes the way humans engage in conflict and what trends and tendencies manifest, but culture does not cause conflict necessarily. One scholar

affirms this understanding of the way culture permeates conflict in that culture shapes the perception of conflict because conflict is a profoundly human experience.<sup>67</sup> John Paul Lederach understands conflict as a “socially constructed cultural event,” in which, “people are active participants in creating situations and interactions they experience as conflict.”<sup>68</sup>

Later scholars such as Frances Stewart speak about culture as a perception-shaping lens that can also be activated or catalyzed by external pressures. Stewart writes that cultural differences lead to conflict only when there are also major political and economic causes.<sup>69</sup> Conflict dynamics tend to be manifestations of cultural grievances not because they are caused by them, but because cultural differences color a group’s perception. Culture can be shaped by a number of internal developments and external pressures, not to mention the effects of globalization or imperial reach. Mahmood Mamdani and Donald L. Horowitz, for example, each speak about ways in which the abstract ethnic, racial, or tribal identifiers, among others, were legally demarcated through the colonial structure and indirect rule.<sup>70</sup> They speak about how these perception-shaping legacies persist long after a state achieves independence and contemporary conflicts are often determined by the way in which identities have been *made* politically salient. Mamdani has also discussed how different systems of conquest (e.g., colonial, imperial, religious, cultural) can manifest alternative tendencies in contemporary conflict. How, for example, Islam is made political through one form of conquest and nationalism is fostered by another.<sup>71</sup>

To be aware of a culture’s influence on conflict dynamics is not to essentialize a group’s actions or generalize groups of similar backgrounds, two tendencies within what Mamdani calls “Culture Talk.” He writes that “Culture Talk assumes that every culture has a tangible essence that defines it, and it then explains politics as a consequence of that essence.”<sup>72</sup> As this is a study

of a radical extremist group who attempt to legitimize their actions by appealing to Islam, Mamdani's next remark is especially salient:

Culture Talk after 9/11, for example, qualified and explained the practice of "terrorism" as "Islamic." "Islamic terrorism" is thus offered as both description and explanation of the events of 9/11. It is no longer the market (capitalism), nor the state (democracy), but culture (modernity) that is said to be the dividing line between those in favor of a peaceful, civic existence and those inclined to terror."<sup>73</sup>

It is inaccurate to understand culture, or a religion so widely practiced as Islam, in this way. Just as I mentioned previously, 'terrorism' and 'terror' are not bound by single ideological or religious motivations. There are any number of reasons a group becomes mobilized, chooses specific targets, or embraces particular symbolism. Manifestations of conflict, violence, and peace are often determined by the interplay of a multitude of contextual factors. A group's forms of violence give glimpses into not just the group's cultural practices, ideological motivations, or political aspirations, but also the individual resentments, group triggers, and organizational preconditions that might determine actions.

## **Conclusion**

Systems, forms, and outbursts of violence are determined by a multitude of diverse and interconnected processes. Hence, it is often misguided to analyze a group's forms of violence through a focus on ideological or political motivations alone. Who would have known, for instance, that kneecapping would become such a common practice in Northern Ireland? Can anything explain the shift from the "monkey wrenching" tactics of the Earth First! movement (e.g., spiking trees to disrupt commercial saw blades) to the Earth Liberation Front's reliance on arson?<sup>74</sup> How can we explain the rise of beheadings in Latin America and the Middle East given their clear ideological distinction?<sup>75</sup> There are many trends, shifts, and tendencies of violent

actions that are not easily, or accurately, explained by the group's assumed motivations. I argue that there are more precise explanations for a group's violent tendencies found in analysis of their forms of violence. I combine elements of the robust literatures on terrorism, terror, performance studies, performative violence, and conflict analysis to understand Boko Haram's foundations, characteristics, and evolution reflected in their violence.

### III. METHODOLOGY

#### Research Question and Design

This thesis bridges existing literature about terror, violence, performance, and how considerations of each may aid conflict analysis. Much of the research on armed non-state actors tends to focus on motive and group characteristics to explain violent actions. Recent analyses of Latin American criminal organizations, on the other hand, have used the performative qualities of violent acts to understand a group's motives and characteristics; this is done from a performance point of view, detailed in my literature review. These analyses rest on the assumption that a criminal organization does not have ideological underpinnings and so attention-seeking behavior (e.g., terror) is antithetical to the group's operational structure. Thus, performative acts of violence offer an avenue whereby analysts might gain insight into a group's motives and essential characteristics. In other words, instead of postulating a group's intentions to explain their choices of violence, these analyses rely on the choices of violence to explain the group's motives and characteristics. My research question arises out of this novel lens:

*How can conflict analysts better understand Boko Haram based on the types and styles of violence they employ?*

Various sub questions have emerged out of this central question. Namely, a temporal and context-dependent dimension, *how and why did their choices and styles change over time?* This is not just in reference to the violent acts Boko Haram frequently employs but also changes in the style of the performances. A brief glance at the group's movement indicates that they have been

largely confined to West Africa and have targeted primarily locals and West Africans. *Based on their anti-west rhetoric, why do they target other Nigerians and the Nigerian state as opposed to foreigners? Conversely, why have they remained in West Africa instead of branching out to Europe or the U.S. like other groups?* Particularly with reference to groups such as ISIL or Al-Qaeda that are often classified into similar categories, one might assume that they would attempt to extend their activities outside of the continent or diversify their targets past the Nigerian state and other West Africans. Furthermore, prompted by the media attention surrounding the group and the gender-specific nature of violent actions, I ask *why do they exhibit unique gendered dynamics in comparison to other groups engaged in similar types of violence?* I address these questions through a performance lens.

I utilize a qualitative research method through a case study of the Nigerian insurgent group *Jamā'at Ahl al-Sunna li-Da'wa wa-l-Jihād* (The Sunni Group for Preaching and Fighting, JASDJ), who are popularly known as Boko Haram. Most research has used the name Boko Haram to refer to the group even though they have denied it as an imposition. In this thesis, I will use the name Boko Haram in the same fashion. The group developed from its origins in Mohammad Yusuf's teachings, to prominence under Abubakar Shekau's leadership, and to their fragmented status in the present day. Other names, such as the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) and Ansaru, will serve to differentiate their splinter factions each led by former members.

Boko Haram exists in the present day but is marred by division and fragmentation. No matter their present status, their brutality, rhetoric, and forms of violence are worth analysis. They waged a brutal war against the Nigerian state, achieved years of territorial sovereignty, and terrorized local populations. In select years, they were known as one of the deadliest 'terrorist'

groups in the world. This thesis gathers insights into the group's characteristics through their violent performances and performative acts of violence. Through a deep exploration of this case, I am concomitantly engaged in theory building. While the case of Boko Haram is not identical to others, my process, questions, and findings illuminate other cases and offer insight into what analysts should examine in other groups.

### **Collection of Data**

When analyzing a group's forms of violence, there is an important distinction to be made which is connected to the way in which violence is *performed* or *performative*. I incorporate this distinction in a focus on the *types* or the *styles* of violence, but the analytical value of one is often determined by its relation to the other. The 'performance' of violence refers to the way in which violence is staged, while the 'performative' nature of violence refers to the way in which actions carry messages from the actor that are interpreted by the audience, witness, or responsible spectator. Messages frequently overlap with the spectacle and there can be multiple messages hidden in the staging that require different vantage points. What is of interest for the purposes of this thesis is not necessarily the acts of violence by themselves, but how performances interact with their performative components. How, for instance, does Boko Haram's rhetoric contrast with their acts of violence? My unit of analysis is Boko Haram's forms of violence, but I differentiate between types and styles of violence. The distinction at times becomes muddled because types and styles are often interrelated, so I will illustrate with examples for clarity.

The same type of violence might be utilized by two different groups (e.g., beheading). The targets might be the same (e.g., soldier), the rhetoric might be the same (e.g., anti-West), their weapon of choice might be similar (e.g., blade), and the response from media might be



similar (e.g., viral videos shared on social media). Upon closer examination, however, there are distinct styles within specific types of violence depending on the group. Instead of a soldier from a foreign nation who is seen to be occupying the actor's land, the target might be a local soldier who is from the same area but from another religious background, another sex, a representative of another gender identity, another ethnic group, or another race. The staging of anti-Western rhetoric might carry messages as well that are more localized and indicative of individual resentments, for example an economic dimension (e.g., global capitalism or local aid workers) that does not reflect the target's background. The weapon might be reflective of a shared trauma provided by historical events (e.g., guillotine in France or machete in central Africa). The interpretation of the media might be based on assumptions about the group that the actors embrace or deny depending on their background.

A study of types of violence lends itself to quantitative approaches to data collection, modeling, and testing, however styles of violence are more complicated and thus require more in depth and comprehensive study. Considerations of styles of violence are informed by the cultural, political, and social context within which an act is performed, how the actor might be responding to local and international contexts, and how their violent actions might be determined by the interplay of ideological underpinnings, symbolic expressions, and latent resentments. Styles of violence are determined by historical developments, cultural practices, long-held traditions, and group preferences among others. Types of violence are often prompted by precedent but take on new styles depending on their performers. There are endless possibilities of different styles of violence a distinct performer might exhibit in the same type of action.

To understand the styles of violence that Boko Haram members tend to exhibit, I split their types of violent actions into five different categories: kidnappings, systematic rape, suicide

bombings, other bombings and targeted attacks, and beheadings. The Nigeria Security Tracker (NST), provided by the Council of Foreign Relations, directed my early research by providing access to every major event connected to Boko Haram covered by media between 2011 and 2022. This dataset helped to provide an overall view of the trends and tendencies of Boko Haram, as well as the types of violence they used most and during which periods. This is an important aspect of my study because it highlights the rises and falls of different types of violence that have often been determined by external pressures, precedents, and global trends. These timeframes give good indicators of where to look for distinct styles that Boko Haram exhibits.

Data collection for this type of case study comes in various forms. As a study of performances of violence and performative violence, I focused mainly on collecting data on violent actions to place them in context. I made use of articles and interviews from local newspapers that feature testimonies from victims, perpetrators, spectators, and onlookers. I utilized country-wide and regional reports with interviews conducted by various non-governmental human rights and development organizations, descriptive statistics concerning the vertical and horizontal inequalities, ethnographies, sociological works, and various academic papers. I also made extensive use of the group's statements and rhetoric through the writings, speeches, videos, and passing remarks of members and leaders of Boko Haram. I analyzed first-person historical accounts, government documents from national and international archives, as well as seminal religious texts that provide insights into the doctrinal fragmentation of Islam in northern Nigeria.

## **Limitations**

Data collection and availability has its limitations in research on terrorism, violent non-state actors, and illegitimate groups in general. Other major limitations that I faced throughout the process of data collection were time and resources. Because my program has an accelerated timeframe of one year, my colleagues and I were given but a few weeks to conduct data collection and analysis before we needed to begin writing. Admittedly, one of my few regrets from my process of data collection is that I did not have the time allotted, nor the resources, to conduct interviews in Nigeria. Hence, I focused rather on theory building and incorporating non-traditional links into the field of conflict analysis and resolution given the limitations of desk-based research. Moreover, given the brutal nature of violence, the availability of videos presented difficulties. Videos have been removed from major platforms due to their gruesome nature but the staging in videos was a crucial element of my study. Another limitation I did not anticipate was the barrier of language. I relied heavily on translated materials from the group because they at times spoke in Arabic, Hausa, Kanuri, and seldom in English. Notwithstanding these limitations, I was able to gather the data required to establish the analytical import of a focus on the forms of violence through a performance lens.

### **Analysis and Significance**

In all three of my analytical chapters, my findings from data collection are coupled with analysis. My analysis of the data is grounded in three seemingly unrelated theoretical frameworks that work together to address and illuminate the phenomenon which is Boko Haram's forms of violence. In my first analytical chapter, I combine theories from Mahmood Mamdani and Donald L. Horowitz to describe Boko Haram's development and mobilization through anti-colonial political Islam. For the chapter on their forms of violence, I employ Diana

Taylor's framework of 'public spectacle,' later developed by Charmaine Pereira, to better understand the relationship between Boko Haram's types and styles of violence. In my last chapter, I analyze a tendency that arises out of Boko Haram's forms of violence, gender-specific targeting, treatment, and exploitation. Cynthia Enloe's framework of feminist curiosity gives insight into what we miss by looking at the performances and ignoring what is underneath.

Because a consideration of performative violence is in many ways a method in itself, the particular case of Boko Haram is not meant to be necessarily generalizable. There are tendencies that can be transitioned to different contexts, however other groups engaged in the same actions or from the same ideological background would exhibit different styles based on their contexts. My point is that analyses of rhetoric, media attention, overall attacks, overall victims, or timeframes of group movement by themselves would each paint distinct and contrasting pictures. Moreover, a focus on motives or group characteristics instead of actions often yields conflicting results because the styles of violence can be distinct even when the types of violence are the same. This is where a focus on how performative violence relates to the performances of violence can be instructive.

Through engagement with this case, their acts of violence, and the testimony of victims, I have encountered a great deal of material that can be troubling and outright disturbing to many readers. Much of the research has been mediated through secondary accounts and raw statistics, but the reality of Boko Haram's violence and its impact on millions of people is made painfully clear through interviews, statements, and testimonies by the group's victims. It is important to acknowledge the harrowing experiences that are too often sanitized by academic language and formality. I sit in a position of unwarranted advantage in comparison to many whose lives are touched day-to-day by systems of violence such as Boko Haram. I find I have a responsibility to

aid analysis so that future interventions might avoid past trends of exacerbation. It is important to acknowledge all aspects of violence, however I would like to alert readers that what follows is at times difficult to read because of the incredible brutality that has come to define Boko Haram.

#### IV. ANTI-COLONIAL POLITICAL ISLAM IN “*BOKO HARAM*”

##### **Introduction**

In this chapter I discuss the implications of an insular focus on group motivations, without a careful consideration of actions and their performative qualities. Mahmood Mamdani and Donald L. Horowitz have both helped me frame and understand the trends and tendencies of Boko Haram’s violence against the backdrop of the group’s formation and development. The group must be understood in relation to its context. Namely, Boko Haram’s performative acts of violence indicate a twin process of group development and fragmentation through political Islam as well as a rejection of, and subsequent mobilization through, Nigeria’s colonial legacy. Mamdani describes the process by which a cultural, religious, ethnic, racial, or other identity becomes political, while Horowitz describes the mechanisms of group conflict based on these identities. I combine their theories to provide the theoretical framework that undergirds this chapter. I argue that Boko Haram’s bridging of Nigeria’s colonial legacy to Islam is explained through Mamdani’s work on political identity formation, while the group’s mobilization is explained through Horowitz’s work on groups in conflict.

I could have chosen many of Mahmood Mamdani’s major works to elaborate on identity and group formation in Boko Haram, but most important for this thesis is the bridging of a colonial legacy, group formation, and post-colonial development to Islam. Mamdani does this especially in his book *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim* (2004), but I use insights from his theory developed in previous books, *Citizen and Subject* (1996) and *When Victims Become Killers*

(2001).<sup>76</sup> Donald L. Horowitz's book, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (1985), might seem a bit out of place in this thesis because of an assumption that Boko Haram is not an ethnic group.<sup>77</sup> However, I find it to be relevant to Boko Haram due to its capacity to explain the group's mobilization as well as Horowitz's broad and inclusive definition of ethnicity: "[ethnic] groups are defined by ascriptive differences, whether the indicium of group identity is color, appearance, language, religion, some other indicator of common origin, or some combination thereof."<sup>78</sup> I use different aspects of their theories throughout the chapter. However, for clarity, I briefly describe both their theories at the start of the chapter and how they work in tandem to explain Boko Haram's trends and tendencies of violence.

Following my theoretical framework section, I explore some of the common assumptions and misconceptions of Boko Haram. I discuss first how the trends of group formation, mobilization, and violence are normally analyzed from the point of view of motive and how this leads to flawed conclusions. I argue that, to understand a violent group like Boko Haram, analysts must understand how their context has framed their violent actions. Different groups have different backgrounds and origins that manifest in forms of violence. I discuss how Islam was made into a political identity throughout Nigeria's history, particularly in the northwest. The leaders based their teachings and rhetoric in Islam, but the group's actions were not wholly based in religion. Rather, I argue that political Islam offered an avenue by which leaders and group members could legitimize their anti-colonial claims against the Nigerian state and the westernizing influence of the south. I conclude with a discussion of how performance and performative violence can help conflict analysts better understand the group given this background.

## Theoretical Framework

Mahmood Mamdani, like Horowitz, denies the convenient simplicity of theories of conflict (normally focused on Africa) based solely on elite manipulation or economic resentments.<sup>79</sup> Mamdani writes that Africa's predicament is too often, and erroneously, explained away by underdevelopment theorists who see colonialism as a primarily economic system and its legacies as primarily economic based.<sup>80</sup> The opposite tendency, to pin conflict on culture (e.g., clash of civilizations, nationalism, or tribalism), is equally misguided. There is a general tendency in academia to move between these two dimensions and say the "real" identities that matter are cultural rather than market-based, and vice versa, without a real consideration of how each, or others, have been *made* political. Mamdani writes, "At its outset, the Western colonial project was no less than to wipe clean the civilizational slate so as to introduce Western norms through Western law; modernization would have to be Westernization."<sup>81</sup> Political Islam is one such example of identity made political through this process. In *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*, Mamdani describes the way in which Islam, often opposed to modernity from a Western perspective, is made political through a similar process as other identities. Political Islam has been formed through an objection to the colonial modernizing project: "if being modern meant, above all, free rein for human creativity and originality, how could a colonial society modernize by imitation?"<sup>82</sup>

Moving past economic, elite, and even cultural considerations of conflict drivers, Horowitz describes ethnic conflict through the psychological processes of group comparison and the "struggle for relative group worth."<sup>83</sup> Group comparisons often take the form of a juxtaposition between "backward" and "advanced" groups.<sup>84</sup> Horowitz writes that, "Colonial policy inadvertently helped sharpen group juxtapositions and clarify the field in which



comparisons were made.”<sup>85</sup> Backward groups (not an endorsement of this pejorative-sounding concept, says Horowitz, but a reporting of the labels often employed) often express fears of extinction even when the fears are implausible. This leads to anxiety and can produce “extreme reactions to modest threats.”<sup>86</sup> Group comparison also creates a fixation on social recognition of self-esteem and relative group worth.<sup>87</sup> A sense of relative group worth must be met with an external recognition of worthiness conferred by political affirmation and inclusion, or even exclusive domination.<sup>88</sup> In other words, groups not only attempt to increase their relative group worth but also attempt to politically legitimize it.<sup>89</sup> This often takes the form of claims to exclusive domination through legitimate pre-eminence or “indigenusness.” It can also be connected to symbolic battles over language, tradition, custom, and religion.

Legitimacy grants domination and pre-eminence a moral basis and can be even more violent when tied to the sacred. Boko Haram’s claims to legitimacy are merged with political Islam, which explains their forms of violence. Boko Haram’s mobilization through an opposition to Nigeria’s colonial legacy was given legitimacy by the group’s Islamic identity. I argue that the group should be understood within this context and that Mamdani and Horowitz’s combined theoretical framework provides the contextual background to understand the group’s formation and mobilization. Attention to the group’s forms of violence and the relationship between performances and performative violence, given this context, can address some of the common misconceptions about the group. Many assumptions about the group are mostly based on the types of violence they are known to commit, but their styles of violence have been determined by their cultural and contextual background.

### **Going Against Assumptions**

There are many assumptions about the targets of Boko Haram based on their rhetoric, symbols, links to the Islamic State, and other factors. When onlookers witness Boko Haram's violence, they often see patterns based on what are perceived to be their motives and tie their perceptions neatly into a narrative of causation. This is all too common because attention and international outrage tend to require clear answers and simple solutions. The Chibok kidnapping, for instance, required leaders to give a reason for why the event took place to appease international outrage. Whether the reason given was Islamic fanaticism, cultural misogyny, economic resentment, anti-colonialism, or a combination of all of them, the international audience demanded answers. Much of the work that has been done in Latin America on criminal performative violence show that postulating answers based on what analysts perceive to be group motives can often be misguided. It does not make sense that, for example, two criminal organizations in the same country with the same motives could have two completely different targeting profiles for beheadings: one targeting local civilians and one targeting members of other organizations as well as their own.<sup>90</sup>

If precautions are taken based on what analysts determine to be group motives without considerations of the trends and tendencies of targeting, catalytic events, prompts by the state, or the rhetorical indicators that comprise their forms of performative violence, they will prove inadequate. Along the same line, Boko Haram's beheadings do not exhibit the same targeting or operational profile as those conducted by the Islamic State. Given the fact that Boko Haram's use of the tactic was prompted by the group's desire to swear allegiance to ISIS in 2015, it is surprising that their operational profile did not match the group they were attempting to emulate. What is important for this thesis is not just the type of violent actions employed by the group, but also the style (i.e., target, time, message, and audience). One might assume that Boko Haram,

based on their rhetoric and their purported allegiance to the Islamic State, would target Westerners, foreigners, or aid workers. However, they targeted local villagers (including Muslims) and members of the Nigerian state primarily.

The operational profile of the two splinter groups seems to dispel any question of accessibility. Some argue that Boko Haram's targeting of local populations is the result of a lack of accessibility to higher profile targets that are more consistent with anti-West rhetoric. However, the targeting of local populations forced the fragmentation of the group and spawned a splinter group that call themselves the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) who began to target Christians. ISWAP embodied a completely different targeting and operational profile based more closely on rhetoric and assumptions due to their allegiance to the Islamic State. A previous splinter group, the Ansaru, targeted foreigners and foreign interests.<sup>91</sup> Thus, other targets have been accessible. The targeting of villagers and Muslims, that go against assumptions based on group motives and rhetoric, are choices. The group was cautioned by ISIL and by some of its own members because of the trend of targeting, but Abubakar Shekau and others made the choice to remain continue the trend.

### **Islamic, Economic, or Something Else?**

Boko Haram has gone against assumptions through other forms of violence as well, not just beheadings. As beheadings are more performative and arguably hold more symbolic weight by virtue of their unique histories, they are regarded by many to be definitive of group messaging. Suicide bombings are similar. Suicide attacking has had a long and complex history, as described previously. Suicide bombings and other suicide attacks are often indicative of power imbalances and group desperation, a kind of David and Goliath-ethic except for the fact that

David's devotion pushes him to suicide in this case. Because of the performative and symbolic value of suicide bombings, they have been carefully analyzed across different groups.<sup>92</sup> While suicide bombing does not comprise a major part of Boko Haram's actions, its trends indicate patterns that are consistent across all of their targeted attacks according to the Nigeria Security Tracker (NST).<sup>93</sup> Namely, a surprising shift in tactics in 2015: for the first time, the group attacked more mosques than churches.

Between 2011 and 2017 however, the most intense for suicide bombings, the most attacks were conducted against government targets (52) and then markets (47) while Christian religious targets (12) and educational institutions (11) were dead last comprising less than 10 percent of all attacks.<sup>94</sup> The focus on non-ideological, civilian, and Muslim targets goes against the rhetoric of the organization and is more complicated than their adoption of 'exclusive loyalty.' As Jason Warner and Hillary Matfess from the Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point write, this pattern "not only debunks classifications of Boko Haram as a primarily anti-Christian group, but it also stands in stark contrast to Boko Haram's propaganda in which it casts itself as the vanguard and protector of Muslims in the north."<sup>95</sup> They posit the reason for their targeting of Muslims is their adoption of the concept of exclusive loyalty to those they consider true Muslims and their disavowal of all others.<sup>96</sup>

Another way in which the group has gone against assumptions based on their motives is their confinement to (or containment in) West Africa. They have not moved outside of West Africa. The group is known to have expanded their reach and activities outside Nigeria and mostly into Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. However, they have not left West Africa to attack Western targets, as some accounts predicted by linking the group's early actions to Al-Qaeda and ISIS.<sup>97</sup> Much has been written about the likely threat of Boko Haram to the "U.S. homeland" or

Europe, for example. There is little evidence to substantiate these claims, but they remain the topic of regular discussion. Because Boko Haram has been going against assumptions and defying predictions for so long, there is a seeming randomness to their actions. They attack Christian targets, Muslims, women, young men, civilians, government forces, other group members, education institutions, internally displaced persons, and markets among others. The seeming randomness of their targets, and the inability for analysts to predict their actions based on motives, prompts some to rely on economic explanations for conflict.

Critical analysts often argue: if Boko Haram's forms of violence are not based on ideological motivations derived from their Islamic beliefs, then they may be explained by latent economic resentments or elite manipulation.<sup>98</sup> This is the same tendency that Mamdani and Horowitz warn against. It is a product of the same logic that employs explanations based on motives mentioned above; it merely transitions the focus from ideological motivations to economic motivations. In the case of Boko Haram, possibilities of economic motivations are endless. Northern Nigeria, particularly the northeast, has struggled with relative underdevelopment in comparison to the rest of Nigeria in almost every facet of their post-colonial development. As one scholar writes, "If, in global terms, Nigeria was economically on the periphery, northern Nigeria was the periphery's periphery."<sup>99</sup>

From prioritization of educational and institutional development of the southern regions by colonial occupation, to abandonment and neglect of northern elites' home regions through 1970, to structural adjustment and rapid de-industrialization in the 1980s and 1990s, to increasing control over economic and political power in the south, to privatization policies and transition to civilian rule in 1999, northern Nigeria suffers from rising poverty and economic crisis.<sup>100</sup> This economic and political backdrop coupled with the fact northern Nigeria's

population is more than the two other regions combined gives many scholars the analytic itch to describe Boko Haram as a reflection of the region's poverty. This description is not borne out in the group's rhetoric, however. Except for one statement by made by Ansaru, the splinter group, Boko Haram seldom speaks on poverty. Michael Nwanka remarks that, "Yusuf and Shekau hardly ever mention poverty, nor do they promote a vision of society that would alleviate northeastern Nigeria's basic economic issues."<sup>101</sup>

Nwanka writes that even if the group were partially influenced by factors such as "harsh socio-economic conditions, teeming youth unemployment, lack of economic and social mobility, elite greed and corruption and religious complacency," this is no longer the case, nor can these be considered definitive motives for the group's actions.<sup>102</sup> There is a difference between analysis of a group's rhetoric and analysis of a group's actions but, given the hundreds of sermons and messages given by leaders, it is interesting that the group's leaders have not spoken much on material inequalities or material aspirations. Furthermore, according to Bruce Hoffman, groups engaged in terrorism tend to seek acknowledgment and legitimacy for their actions through their rhetoric. If their actions were based on economic aims, their rhetoric would most likely reflect them. Economic factors undoubtedly aided the spread, recruitment, and control over populations, but the group's actions were not prompted by economic resentments and motivations alone.

Boko Haram's motivations are neither solely Islamic in origin, nor purely economic. A focus on perceived motivations and group characteristics can yield conflicting results when transitioned into distinct contexts. Forms of violence are different depending on the interplay of many factors within place, time, actor, and audience. It is inaccurate to say that all religious extremist groups engaged in terrorism have the same forms of violence when even those that ally

themselves with the same organization (e.g., ISIL) are distinct. Careful attention to the trends and tendencies of types and styles of violence that a group chooses to commit provides valuable insight into group motives and characteristics. This is not to say that ideological or economic motivations do not play a part in forms of violence by any means. Each dimension constitutes an aspect of the conditions that determine Boko Haram's mobilization and development.

Performative violence, with the theoretical framework provided by Mamdani and Horowitz, offers an alternative glimpse into these processes and how they work together.

### **Islamic Identity in Northern Nigeria through Colonization**

The fact that there is seldom rhetoric about economic inequality or desperation does not mean that it does not constitute a major part of the group's mobilization. Horowitz's reframing through group comparison and the struggle for relative group worth is more accurate and more indicative of the group's characteristics. Group worth can be measured in many different ways. In many cases, there are various interrelated dimensions that determine a group's relative self-esteem. Relative economic inequality is one avenue by which a group can be mobilized, but group comparison also includes losses of political power, control over national languages, or colonial bestowal for instance. Boko Haram's claims to legitimacy, based on pre-eminence and exclusive domination, all revolve around a link to the sacred: Islam. The link to Islam is fostered by both the unique history of Islam in northern Nigeria as well as the legacy of colonial occupation. The prompt to group mobilization is found in the socio-economic backdrop of the north and the loss of control by the Native Authority after independence. The confusion spurred by Boko Haram's forms of violence is merely a product of the complex development of the group.

The colonial encounter in Nigeria began on the coast with the Portuguese like many other states in the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and continued with the British under the guise of abolishing slavery at the turn of the nineteenth century. The British and French drew borders without adequate consideration of ethnic composition or traditional homelands. Nevertheless, by the 19<sup>th</sup> century all the major ethnic groups in the north of Nigeria had adopted Islam. Moreover, greater attention to the south as a hub for western trade provided a geographic benefit to southern Nigerians. Settlers developed infrastructure, churches, and schools which contributed to the Westernization, modernization, and Christianization of the south. The north held on to their Islamic history and identity through conquest which reached the north in 1914, in contrast to the south which had been colonized by 1897 and had officially adopted the name “Nigeria.”<sup>103</sup>

Northern states were left underdeveloped throughout the transition to federalism and subsequent developments of the political system. The military was mostly made up by northerners because of the colonial system and, upon independence, tended to control the state through military coups and authoritarian rule.<sup>104</sup> Coupled with the larger population in the north, northerners enjoyed political power and legitimacy while they suffered from increasing vertical and horizontal inequalities. There were multiple debates over whether the country should adopt Sharia law as a legal framework throughout the transition to federalism, but the robust Christian and secular minorities successfully fought against the amendments.

The Native Authority (NA) had a grip on intelligence and control over activities, albeit authoritarian and brutal, until their gradual dissolution between 1967 and the late 1970s. Transition into the federalist system, and more regional policing architecture, put more responsibility on local governments that “with their poor staffing and funding situation, and constantly changing political leadership, [had] lost the capacity to monitor their constituencies



and prevent potentially undesirable developments from taking root.”<sup>105</sup> Cities in the north were reduced to “urban jungles” wherein disaffected and disillusioned youths were funneled either into semi-criminal gangs or religious sects. Conversely, one scholar notes that part of Nigeria’s decentralization has taken the form of cultural self-determination. He writes, “In Yorubaland it is taking the form of Yoruba nationalism, in Igboland it is taking the form of new demands for confederation, and in the Muslim north it is taking the form of *shariacracy*.”<sup>106</sup> The breakdown of legitimate authority has given figures like Mohammad Yusuf, and later Abubakar Shekau, opportunities to capitalize on popular and widespread grievances.

Pre-colonial Nigeria has long ties to Islam, particularly in the north. The northeastern area of Nigeria where Boko Haram has taken root most (Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa states) has an even longer history with Islam. The Kanuri people who descend from the Kanem-Bornu empire adopted Islam as early as the year 1000.<sup>107</sup> Consequently, when the Islamic revival of the Sokoto Caliphate (1804) spread across Nigeria, the Fulani Muslims who spearheaded the caliphate were regarded by the Kanuri as “comparative newcomers.”<sup>108</sup> Since the Sokoto Caliphate, northern Nigerian Islam has continued to be dominated by these relative newcomers, not to mention the loss of power from colonial borders drawn by France and Britain that split the Kanuri people between three different states.<sup>109</sup> Given this history, doctrinal differences within the Muslim community have continued to plague the north with the rise of sectarian Salafi and Shi’a minorities that were “bitterly opposed” to the two rival Sufi brotherhoods that comprised the majority of Nigerian Muslims.<sup>110</sup> These were exemplified by the reformist Salafist group Jama’atu Izalatil Bid’a wa iqamat al-Sunna, otherwise known as ‘Yan Izala,’ established in 1978 that produced a young Mohammad Yusuf.<sup>111</sup>

Mamdani prompts scholars to consider when identities become legal and institutional, rather than cultural or customary. How, for example, ethnicity becomes an issue when there are limitations imposed on free movement because of one's ethnic identity markers. Northern trends on Islam are not just religious or cultural, but increasingly legal and institutional. Mazrui asserts, amidst the confusion of many scholars surrounding the trends of northern Nigeria's Islamic militancy, "What has not been discussed is whether the rise of Shari'ah militancy is itself a consequence of globalization. One of the repercussions of globalization worldwide has been the arousal of cultural insecurity and uncertainty about identities."<sup>112</sup> The result of the 1999 election, and the shift of political power away from the north and to the south (the perceived vanguard of modernization/westernization in Nigeria), is the profound resistance of the north to the "Trojan Horse" of the south through alternative legal frameworks. Northerners not only began to rely more heavily on Sharia for customary law or cultural identity but actively transitioned the framework into questions of criminal justice. In Nigeria under colonial rule, issues like "marriage, divorce, inheritance, succession, and certain forms of property" were subjected to either African customary or Sharia law while criminal law was "British-derived with suitable imperial and colonial amendments."<sup>113</sup> And, while there have been debates about whether to implement Sharia law into the constitutional legal framework since Nigerian independence, certain groups in the north began to exhibit militant tendencies when they saw little hope for its nationwide establishment after 1999.

### **Early Mobilization through Political Islam**

Yusuf mobilized youth and found tremendous popular support in Maiduguri in this socio-economic, legal, political context throughout the early 2000s. The group's early origins were

based in a profound rejection of the secular state and increasing claims of separation from Nigeria or, more aptly, southern Nigeria. The group based their claims of legitimacy on Political Islam. Political Islam is simply an example of religious, cultural, and traditional identities made political, in this case, through an opposition to the colonial legacy of Nigeria. The group's origins are not merely anti-colonial, Islamic extremist, or market-based, but an interesting mixture of identities mobilized by the political climate and socio-economic conditions of the period. The name by which they are most popularly known, Boko Haram, suggests this relationship of political Islam as perceived by their "audience." *Boko* is a carryover word for *book* in Hausa that roughly translates to 'the education system imposed by the colonial administration.' *Haram* is an Arabic word that describes that which is prohibited by Islam. Because of their rhetoric around the prohibition of Western education, locals began to call them by this name. Even though they fought hard against the name and attempted to rebrand themselves multiple times, the name remained, partly because of its accurate description of the group.

The first uprising that group members engaged in was between December 2003 to October 2004 when about 200 men attempted to leave the secular state and set up a revolutionary Islamic community in Kanama, Yobe State.<sup>114</sup> Led by Muhammad Ali under the flag of the Taliban, they also launched a series of "deadly attacks on police stations, government buildings and prisons in Kanama, Damaturu, Gwoza, Bama and the Mandara Mountains along the Nigeria-Cameroon border."<sup>115</sup> Mohammad Yusuf was blamed for the insurrection and the resulting death of public officials and police officers, so he went into self-imposed exile in Saudi Arabia. Yusuf returned to Nigeria in 2005 after he swore to never espouse a violent jihadi ideology.<sup>116</sup> Between 2005 and 2009 he reneged on his promise and built a base of "mosques, schools, clinics, and

similar ancillary facilities” for the sect in Maiduguri known as the Markaz Ibn Taymiyya.<sup>117</sup> Yusuf, through incendiary sermons and sophisticated rhetoric, criticized Governor Ali Modu Sheriff of Borno State (Maiduguri is in Borno State) for the bad governance and corruption, even though they worked together to get Sheriff elected in 2003.<sup>118</sup> He also criticized the opulence and consumption of the Westernized elite in the south of Nigeria and became increasingly radical against the secular state. This sets the stage for the violent uprising in 2009.

In January 2009, the Nigerian state began enforcing a law which held that motorcyclists must wear helmets. Motorcycles have always constituted a major part of Nigeria’s transportation sector, the “Okada Man” as a permanent fixture in Lagos for example. The enforcement of the law sparked comical displays of individuals wearing helmets fashioned out of pumpkins, painted pots, and rubber tires.<sup>119</sup> The initiative took a dark turn in Maiduguri, however. During a funeral procession, police forces and the ‘Operation Flush’ initiative intercepted Yusuf’s sect and asked them why they were refusing to wear helmets. The exchange quickly soured and between fourteen and seventeen members (accounts differ) were shot and wounded by state forces.<sup>120</sup> Mohammad Yusuf swore vengeance against the state and less than a month later the sect launched attacks against police stations in Borno, Bauchi, Yobe, Gombe, Kano, and Katsina states. According to an official report, “800 people were killed in the ensuing violence in Borno, including Christians and 22 policemen killed by the sect” and more casualties were recorded in other states.<sup>121</sup> Governor Modu Sheriff of Borno State referred to Yusuf as a lunatic and remarked in a statement following his extra-judicial killing, “You know, I can’t understand this kind of law, or even this type of emotions. Why should a man kill over 700 people and when he dies, you want to make him a hero of sorts?” Yusuf’s deputy Abubakar Shekau responded in

2010 when he emerged as the leader of the sect. In a raid on Bauchi prison, the group released 721 prisoners, many loyal to Boko Haram, and killed five prison guards.<sup>122</sup>

This case, the motorcycle helmet law that led to violent insurgency, is an example of what Horowitz and other social identity theorists call an anxiety reaction. Horowitz writes that while “fear flows from a recognizable danger and gives rise to a proportionate response, anxiety flows from a diffuse danger of exaggerated dimensions; it limits and modifies perceptions, producing extreme reactions to modest threats.”<sup>123</sup> Many analysts familiar with the case explain that an uprising would have taken place in Maiduguri even if the police did not begin enforcing this law because the conditions were ripe for an anxious reaction. Yusuf’s group had been looking for a way to legitimize their rhetoric against the state and the killings in the funeral procession merely provided an outlet for their frustration. While a catalyst might have presented itself regardless, it is worth noting that the government’s actions were by no means tactful. Regardless of whether the group would have been mobilized in another event, the fact that the police intercepted the group in a *funeral procession* leads one to believe that they were in some way attempting to provoke the group.

### **Death, Vengeance, and Kinship**

Abdul Raufu Mustapha writes that Boko Haram’s activities, particularly in the years following 2009, have been dominated by two powerful ideals: death and vengeance.<sup>124</sup> The forms of violence dictated by these distinct but interrelated ideals suggest a similar kind of group involvement as Horowitz describes. He uses the analogy of a family resemblance, “the idea, if not always the fact, of common ancestry makes it possible for ethnic groups to think in terms of family resemblances—traits held in common, on a supposedly genetic basis, or cultural features

acquired in early childhood—and to bring into play for a much wider circle those concepts of mutual obligation and antipathy to outsiders that are applicable to family relations.”<sup>125</sup> Horowitz explains that this relationship is the reason ethnic groups are willing to kill and, more importantly, die for people they have never met. Vamik Volkan echoes this relationship in *Bloodlines* (1997) when he writes about group formation and subsequent mobilization based on chosen traumas.<sup>126</sup> For a religious group, mobilization of group membership is not solely based on a common history, or chosen traumas, but also considerations of the future. Group formation is facilitated by a shared history, but the promise of reaching paradise through death provides yet another mobilizing factor.

Mustapha writes that many Boko Haram fighters are motivated by a profound desire to die for the cause. One suicide attacker in 2012 (attack on a plaza in Kaduna in April) who did not die in the attack wept over his failure. Once apprehended, Mustapha Umar told police that he wept because “not dying with the victims of the attack had denied him the opportunity to make heaven.”<sup>127</sup> Ironically, the group is also mobilized and revitalized any time their members are killed. In 2010, after the arrest and extra-judicial killings of members in 2009, Abubakar Shekau threatened vengeance in a pamphlet that read: “we will not forget the way our members were killed... Whoever had a hand in the killing of our members from the state governor down to district and ward heads, we have not forgotten you.”<sup>128</sup> This makes for a dangerous combination: the power of religious martyrdom and promise of paradise coupled with the bond of kinship and vengeance. Shekau speaks on this combination in later rhetoric, “We rescued over 2,000 brothers—most of whom are commanders. Look at the video—they are laughing and being welcomed by their brothers. In fact, one of the commanders who was rescued stole a gun at the barracks gate immediately upon being released and started fighting right there!”<sup>129</sup>

## **Caliphate in a Post-Colonial Caliph**

In 2011, Boko Haram's attacks took on an international focus with the car bombing of the United Nations building in Abuja. Even though Abuja is the administrative and political capital of Nigeria, this is one of only three attacks the group has conducted in the city. In total, 46 people have died due to Boko Haram's attacks in Abuja, including 21 members of the group, 23 civilians in the attack on the UN, as well as a beer distributor and his wife in a separate attack in 2011.<sup>130</sup> One would assume that Boko Haram would attack the nation's capital more often and with greater vigor, but the capital has been largely unscaled in comparison to the north. The attack on the UN in 2011 is also one of the only examples of the group's focus on international targets. The UN is a profoundly symbolic institution, as the attack on 11 September in the United States illustrates. However, the group's "international focus" has been largely confined to its engagement with the West African states Niger, Chad, and Cameroon.

Horowitz writes that "The moral basis of ethnic claims lies in group legitimacy within a territory."<sup>131</sup> This, along with the history that tied the group to political Islam, kept the focus on the Nigerian state within their territorial bounds and off international targets. David Cook recognizes that, "Radical Salafi groups like Boko Haram usually veer between some type of withdrawal from wider society and a violent confrontation with it."<sup>132</sup> Boko Haram's forms of violence reflect this tendency. They are focused both on the development of their own version of an Islamic State as well as a symbolic rejection of the secular state of Nigeria. They are caught between two extremes: the imposition of a radical form of Sharia law, whereby their militants are expected to be the legal, political, and religious leaders, and the protection over what they see as their territory. This tension is exemplified in a statement by Shekau: "We are an Islamic

Caliphate. We have nothing to do with Nigeria. We don't believe in this name.”<sup>133</sup> This explains part of the reason why their activities have been confined to the northeastern region of Nigeria as well as their curious lack of focus outside of Africa. The fact that they claim an Islamic State does not take away from the fact that much of their identity is built on a rejection of Nigeria's colonial history rather than a rejection of the West in general. The group is inseparable from this history and the place in which it occurred.

The rejection of western education is arguably the most prominent of all Boko Haram's platforms, and it is based on two major grievances. One reflects the group's anti-colonial roots, and another arises out of the belief that men and women should not occupy the same places in education, worship, or work. This is an example of a symbolic battle over legitimacy that Horowitz describes. Struggles over dominance can often take more symbolic forms through battles over a national language, education tradition, or religion. These are all present through Boko Haram's connection to Islam. Their priority of Arabic is clear, even though they often revert to their indigenous languages. In one sermon, for example, two orators speak in Kanuri, one in Hausa, but Shekau cautions the audience against the other languages, “However, remember that our language is Arabic, and other languages are simply used out of choice.”<sup>134</sup> Most schools established by the colonial administration were also connected to churches or Christian teachings in some way. This in one major way in which language is linked to religion (English to Christianity and Arabic to Islam). Education institutions created by the British are ideal targets for a group attempting to deny legitimacy based on language and religion.

Western schools are also seen as haram because men and women are not supposed to occupy the same spaces in classrooms according to their interpretation of Islam.<sup>135</sup> I find it necessary to mention that gender inequalities, like those pictured here, are not necessarily the



result of Islam or Islamic teachings. Amira Mashhour recognizes in an article on Islamic law and gender equality that most gender inequalities in Islamic countries are not based on Islam but are rather the result of “traditional, patriarchal, male-dominated societies’ practices that aim to dominate women and to find any pretext to suppress them.”<sup>136</sup> Men in these societies often seek justifications by “applying conservative and literal interpretations of various Quranic texts or by abstracting certain passages out of their contexts.”<sup>137</sup> These statements anticipate another tendency that is revealed through the group’s forms of violence, a gendered dimension discussed in my final chapter. Nevertheless, given the group’s combination of political Islam and rejection of colonial legacies, their choice of western education institutions over international targets is understandable.

### **Shifting Targets**

In the early years of the organization there were multiple kidnappings of foreigners and Christians linked to the group. Smaller abductions of women for the purposes of marriage were also common. The Chibok abduction in 2014 seems to be a major divergence from actions that came before it because of it was the first instance of mass kidnapping. The event seems to have not only set off a chain of similar mass kidnappings but also revitalized the group’s overall actions in subsequent years. Chibok somewhat determined the group’s perception as female focused, but this common perception hides the fact that the group has also kidnapped scores of young men. By 2016, Human Rights Watch reported that over 10,000 boys had been abducted by the group which surpasses estimates of women abducted during the same period.<sup>138</sup> Similarly, between 2017 and 2020 the group abducted 1,385 children, the majority of whom were male (969; female, 415; unknown, 1).<sup>139</sup> Aside from kidnappings, two other dimensions of their

targeting profile seem to be gender-specific, but I argue that they are more reflective of the group's mobilization through anti-colonial political Islam rather than a fixation on women.

First, Boko Haram's slavery has been largely focused on women. Most notably, the rhetoric surrounding the Chibok girls was based almost entirely on enslavement. Yet, members of Boko Haram routinely claim that they would enslave Western leaders and sell them in the markets as well as those who support them: Shekau says in a "Message to the *Umma*," "Whoever refuses to follow Allah and prefers to be an unbeliever, he is a ram ready for sale. Jonathan, Obama, and Bush, if I capture you, I will sell you."<sup>140</sup> Alternatively, Muhammad Abubakar says, "[whoever] supports the unbelieving nations, he is an enemy to us and a target for our forces. We will enslave him and sell him in the markets."<sup>141</sup> Much of the rhetoric from group spokespeople has been gender-neutral when it comes to enslavement; they suggest that not just women, but all unbelievers deserve to be enslaved. This has a long history in the region. The Kanuri people, the ethnic group that constitutes the majority population in Boko Haram, were known for raiding south for the purposes of slavery well before the Portuguese reached the shores of Africa.<sup>142</sup>

Second, markets are seen as traditionally gendered, but they are also places of economic engagement and represent long lasting colonial legacies. Under British rule, the market is where colonial administrators collected taxes. More importantly, they represent soft-civilian targets, those with few security measures in place and often crowds of civilians. Many onlookers were surprised when Boko Haram somewhat shifted their focus to soft targets such as markets, bus stops, and IDP camps. Some argued that the change in targets was due to changes in accessibility; it is easier for a female suicide bomber to enter a market undetected rather than a government building or police barracks. While this is true, it is equally true that it is difficult for women to enter a mosque or religious center undetected. To circumvent this difficulty, the group

sent male suicide attackers to religious centers instead. This suggests agency in the choice of targets and, further, suggests a significant divergence from commonly held assumptions about the group. The shift of targets is part of a trend that carries over to multiple forms of violence; namely, the targeting of local civilians from the community, mostly Muslims, rather than non-Muslim religious institutions and government buildings.

Both the Ansaru and ISWAP split from the group because they were displeased with Boko Haram's targeting of local Muslims. Abu Usama Al-Ansari wrote in 2013 on the group's split, "We, the mujahidin of Ansaru, have announced our disassociation from the operations that target Muslims in their markets, their fields, and even their mosques... Since it is not right or just that such actions be ascribed to us, after their perpetrators took responsibility for them, we do not agree with them or support them."<sup>143</sup> ISWAP similarly disassociated when they pledged allegiance to the Islamic State and began targeting Christians in 2016. Even Mamman Nur, the mastermind behind the attack on the UN headquarters in Abuja in 2011 and right-hand man to Shekau, spoke out against his leader in an infamous exposé on 4 August 2016. Interestingly, at one point, Mur criticizes Shekau for refusing to follow the commands of the Islamic State: "they said that since the apostates committed the offence of apostasy, they should be asked to repent, but they should not be captured as slaves. Even if it is a woman... If they refuse to repent, they should be killed."<sup>144</sup> Mur also criticizes Shekau for targeting mosques and Muslims fleeing from Boko Haram's violence.

While scholars have been surprised about their targeting of Muslims after 2015, the shift is consistent with earlier rhetoric. One can see early on in their forms of violence that they intended to kill Muslims who they believed to be apostates or even those who did not want to implement Sharia law. In the raid on Bauchi prison in September 2010, the first attack with

Abubakar Shekau as leader, the group left a message that read: “Any Muslim that goes against the establishment of Sharia [law] will be attacked and killed.”<sup>145</sup> This shift is based on a mix of all the factors that have driven the evolution of the Boko Haram insurgency since 2002: claims to group legitimacy based on political Islam and a rejection of Nigeria’s colonial legacy.

Horowitz’s commentary on Freud’s “narcissism of small differences” elucidates this point; he writes, “It is often said that the greatest conflict arises between groups that are only slightly different from each other. Comparison is then thought to be more plausible; small differences are an implied criticism of ourselves.”<sup>146</sup> This, coupled with the doctrinal differences and Islamic sectarianism on which Yusuf capitalized, explains the group’s profound antipathy toward other Muslims and blatant disregard for those they swear to represent.

## **Conclusion**

Some argue the group has been limited and confined to the northwest because it never reached the level of strength or power required to directly confront the Nigerian state nor the international community. They did reach this height of strength and power, however, during the most violent years between 2014 and 2016. By January 2015 the group controlled over 20,000 square miles of territory, an area larger than Switzerland and over 210-times larger than Malta.<sup>147</sup> During this time they were able to establish and solidify control over large swaths of territory while also staving off frequent attacks from the Nigerian government. Instead of moving their activities south, they chose to focus their violence on local communities within their control, many of them Muslim majority. They chose to assert their political identity over the westernizing influence of the south and cleanse the north of any colonial remnants. Because Islam has such important and deep roots within the broader community as well as the Kanuri people, it is

unsurprising that the religious identity became political in this way. Moreover, the transition to civilian rule in 1999 provided the ideal conditions for Yusuf and Shekau to mobilize.

Boko Haram can be better understood by the relationship between their violent performances and instances of performative violence. They were radicalized and mobilized through a concurrent adoption of political Islam and rejection of Nigeria's colonial legacy. In looking at their forms of violence, one sees the way in which their types of violence have been prompted by external pressures, while their styles of violence result from the cultural and contextual context that frames the group. Different groups and organizations of the same background might exhibit quite different forms of violence, not to mention those from completely different contexts. It is unlikely that Islamic State actors in Iraq will have identical forms of violence to an IS cell in Mozambique because they are based in distinct contextual backgrounds. The common misconceptions of Boko Haram result from a lack of understanding of this relationship between types and styles of violence. It benefits conflict analysts to look at types and styles of violence to explain actions within specific timeframes, based on factors other than ideological motivations. Analyzing a group's actions based on one's perception of the group's motives given their ideological or organizational characteristics can lead to flawed conclusions.

## V. BOKO HARAM'S FORMS OF VIOLENCE IN CONTEXT

### Introduction and Theoretical Framework

Groups engaged in terrorism such as Boko Haram are, by definition, groups engaged in various forms of violence for the purposes of political transformation. The forms of violence an organization chooses can often indicate or reveal the objects of their frustration as well as the interplay of various external and contextual factors. Phenomena unique or particular to a group such as targeted outbursts against women, children, aid workers, oil drillers, foreigners, members of specific religions, or locals in rural areas are often suggestive of latent resentments, external pressures, and internal dilemmas.<sup>148</sup> Importantly, however, specific forms of violence will often have catalyzing events that can determine the time in which specific forms become common.<sup>149</sup> Groups like Boko Haram are neither stagnant nor completely independent. Violent actions are the result of careful planning and historically or contextually informed targets, as well as accessibility, novelty, and desperation.<sup>150</sup>

Diana Taylor develops the relationship between the “spectacular” and that which it renders visible or invisible in her book *Disappearing Acts* (1997).<sup>151</sup> She remarks that public spectacles are the “locus for the construction of communal identity.”<sup>152</sup> Building on Benedict Anderson’s statement that communities should be distinguished “not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined,” public spectacles also reflect the imaginative construction of reality over and against historical facticity.<sup>153</sup> This relationship is important for an understanding of violent performances, performative violence, and how they

both relate to the spectacular. Boko Haram, and other groups engaged in terrorism, rely on spectacles of violence to gain media attention and international recognition for their political or ideological goals. However, as Charmaine Pereira recognizes, it is important to acknowledge that which is hidden in the “shadow of the spectacular.”<sup>154</sup> This is why Diana Taylor’s self-proclaimed goal for the book is “to make visible again, not the invisible or imagined, but that which is clearly *there* but not allowed to be seen.”<sup>155</sup>

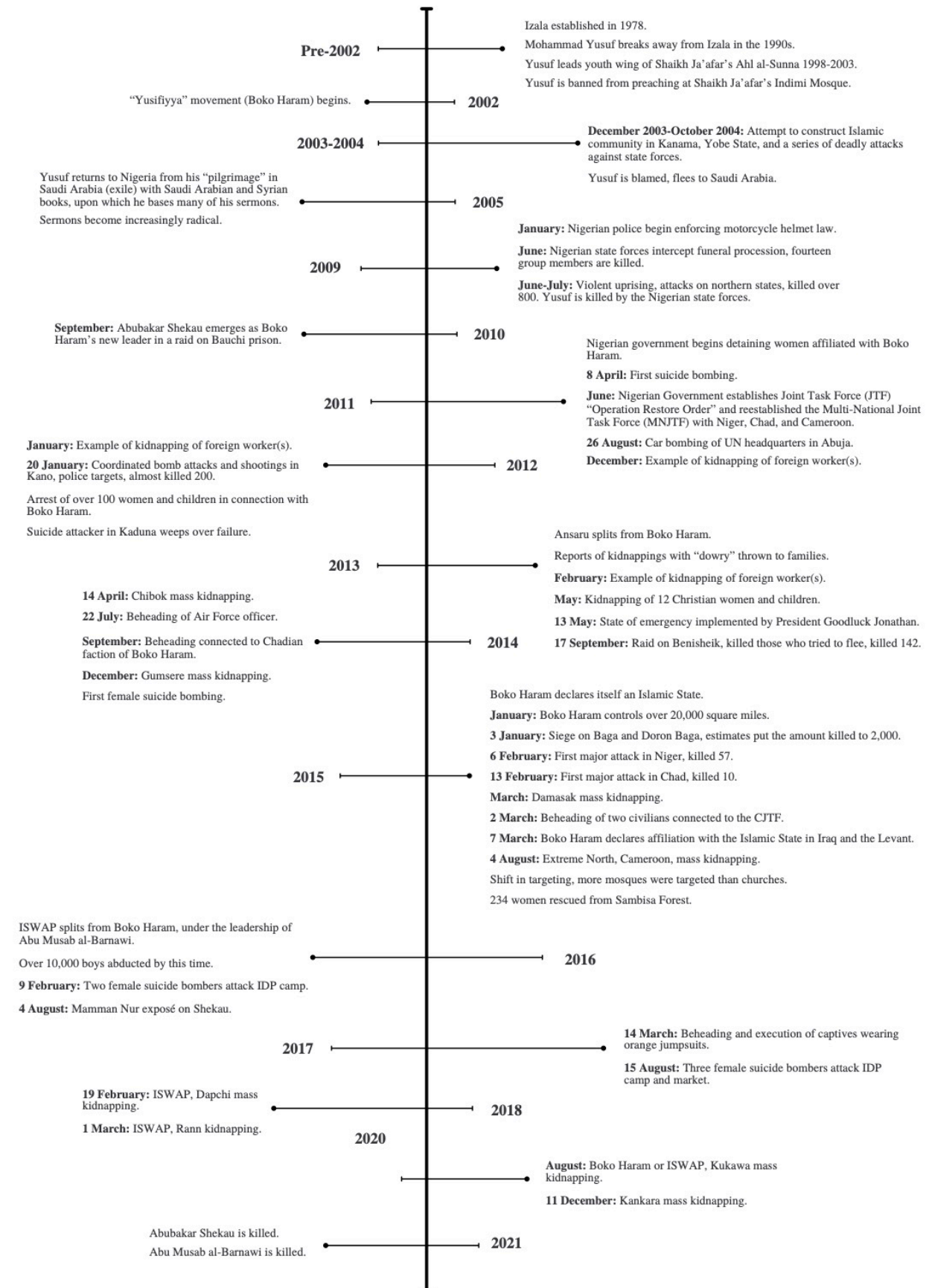
In the previous chapter I explore how many of Boko Haram’s trends of violent actions are surprising because they challenge common assumptions about the group as an anti-Christian organization, for example, organized around attacking the West or protecting local Muslims, but how these tendencies arise out of context. In this chapter, I demonstrate how analysts can better understand Boko Haram through a consideration of how their distinct styles of violence are determined by their context. I outline Boko Haram’s forms of violence in five different sections that I have determined to be the most comprehensive look at their methods, roughly organized in increasing order by the amount of symbolism inherent in the act: bombings or other targeted attacks, kidnappings, systematic rape, suicide bombings, and lastly, beheadings. I argue that it is not only the *types* of violent actions that are important, but also the *styles* of violent actions; these two dimensions comprise my understanding of Boko Haram’s forms of violence.

Moreover, understanding types and styles of violence aids the understanding of spectacle and its relation to the everyday. “Understanding public spectacle,” Taylor explains, “is dependent on a complex scene of interface: understanding *both* the local cultural specifics of national dramas *and* the way that national and international spectacles interface and produce each other.”<sup>156</sup> While types refer to the performances of violence, styles refer to the performative nature of the acts, as discussed in my literature review. Types of violence are determined by

external pressures, prompts, and precedents. Therefore, they are often the objects of external focus from the media or analysts in order to detect patterns (e.g., rise of kidnappings during a specific timeframe). Styles of violence are determined by more localized cultural and historical context (e.g., targets of kidnapping, trends of sexual violence against hostages, preferential treatment of men or women). Thus, I argue, special attention to style reveals distinctive characteristics that differ even between groups engaged in seemingly identical ideologies. Many of Boko Haram's actions have been prompted by government policies, precedents set by other groups, or media attention, but their unique styles of violence arise out of their distinct background, a background and cultural context that is often hidden by spectacular events. Figure 1 features many of these spectacular events for reference.<sup>157</sup> It is not an exhaustive or comprehensive list of events, but it features the major attacks and formative events in the group's development.



**Figure 1: Timeline of Boko Haram’s Formative Events and Major Attacks**



## **Bombings and Other Targeted Attacks**

This section encompasses the broadest scope of activities and is the most comprehensive in accounting for Boko Haram's tactical and strategic profile since 2002. Suicide bombings, even though they are targeted attacks, are separated from this section because of the symbolic weight they carry as well as the implications entailed in losing members of the group. While suicide bombings have not become a dominant tactic in the group's portfolio, some scholars suggest that their underutilization of the tactic should not be seen as an inherent deficiency of their execution.<sup>158</sup> Rather, their tendency to underutilize suicide bombing might suggest that their other tactics of traditional guerilla warfare have not been adequately beaten back to force them into acts of desperation. Many groups utilize suicide bombing because they have few other options. However, since Boko Haram's other tactics have proved particularly effective against state forces and civilian populations, it is likely that Boko Haram uses suicide bombing mainly for its symbolic value. Their tactics and targets have evolved throughout the group's development and reflect contextual or external pressures as much as ideological goals. To understand the general trends of bombs and targeted attacks, it is important to briefly recount major events in the group's evolution.

As discussed, the Boko Haram insurgency has its origins in the teachings of Mohammad Yusuf throughout the early 2000s in Maiduguri, Borno State. Even though the group actively separated itself from nonmembers and became increasingly hostile toward the Nigerian government, Yusuf kept the group relatively peaceful under his leadership. In 2009 violence broke out after government and state forces killed and wounded several group members after they refused to abide by a new law requiring Nigerians to wear helmets on motorcycles.<sup>159</sup> Over 20 attacks on police stations ensued in 2009, but government forces were successful in

suppressing the initial uprising, killing Yusuf and several of his supporters in the process.<sup>160</sup>

Under the leadership of Yusuf's successor Abubakar Shekau, the group was reinvigorated and the new leader contributed mightily to its violent trends and tendencies.

Boko Haram sustained incredible momentum in both tempo and success of attacks between July 2009 and March 2013 but experienced a stark decline between March 2013 and April 2014.<sup>161</sup> Many onlookers attribute the decline in efficacy and incidents to the state of emergency imposed by the Nigerian government as well as increased patrolling in urban centers, civilian and vigilante militia movements, and forces from surrounding nations. In 2014, the tide began to change again, and Boko Haram reached new heights of violence and territorial control: by January 2015, they controlled a territory of around 20,000 square miles.<sup>162</sup> The group pledged allegiance to ISIS in March 2015, but ideological factionalism caused a rift within the group. ISIS overlooked Shekau and named the eldest son of the late Mohammad Yusuf, Abu Musab al-Barnawi, the "governor" of their West Africa Province, which enraged Shekau and the group splintered.<sup>163</sup> Reports maintain that the reason for the split is found in Shekau's explicit targeting and overall treatment of Muslims, discussed in the previous chapter as a result of Boko Haram's development through anti-colonial political Islam.

Before 2015, Boko Haram targeted more churches than mosques which reflected the ideology underpinning their rhetoric more accurately, but in 2015 this tendency flipped according to the Nigeria Security Tracker (NST) dataset.<sup>164</sup> This is one of the most surprising findings, but consistent with their shifts in targets and tactics across the board. Between the insurgency in 2009 and the Chibok kidnapping of 2014, their tactics relied mostly on terrorism in the main population centers of Nigeria. Boko Haram bombed major targets including the capital of Nigeria and carried out regular assassinations of political targets.<sup>165</sup> Their targets included

entities consistent with the rhetoric of the organization such as government buildings, police stations, large civilian gatherings, Christian churches, and schools to a lesser extent.

Interestingly, they avoided attacking mosques, journalists or media representatives, and the Nigerian military during this phase.<sup>166</sup> This is interesting because it seems to suggest a closer adherence to what analysts often assume to be the group's overall motives.

After the state of emergency and counterterrorism tactics deployed by the government, Boko Haram was forced out of the major high-population urban centers and into the rural areas of northeastern Nigeria where they controlled huge swaths of territory. Alexander Thurston describes their new profile during this phase: "The group offered civilians a stark choice: embrace Boko Haram's brand of Islam, or face violence."<sup>167</sup> In a Muslim-majority region of Nigeria, many of their victims became local Muslims who did not conform to their version of Islam. By all accounts, Boko Haram has killed more Muslims in attacks than Christians, while the official targeting by Shekau started in 2015. This caused the rift between Shekau and the splinter ISWAP faction. Upon announcement of the split, al-Barnawi promised to "blow up every church [they were] able to reach," while "ending attacks on mosques and markets used by ordinary Muslims."<sup>168</sup>

This rhetoric mirrors earlier remarks about Boko Haram's tendency of indiscriminately targeting Muslims. An earlier splinter group, the Ansaru, split from Shekau's Boko Haram well before they pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in 2015. Jacob Zenn asserts that the 2011 car bombing on the UN headquarters building in Abuja was conducted by militants more closely tied to Ansaru or Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Other scholars dispute this claim because it is unlikely that Mamman Nur (mastermind behind the attack) acted without Shekau's approval and there is little evidence that there has been any connection between AQIM and Boko

Haram.<sup>169</sup> Nevertheless, the Ansaru split from the group by 2013. The leader of the Ansaru, Abu Usama Al-Ansari, released a statement that condemned Shekau's faction for the indiscriminate targeting of civilians and non-combatants, particularly Muslims.<sup>170</sup> Al-Barnawi and ISWAP's remarks about the specific targeting of Muslims by Shekau's faction, coupled with the knowledge of the steady increase of civilian and Muslim deaths, represent a major way in which Boko Haram's subvert assumptions about their spectacular persona.

### **Kidnapping**

While I have already discussed the Chibok kidnapping, because of its central importance in the development of Boko Haram, I find it helpful to begin this section with the case. On the night of 14 April 2014, Boko Haram operatives entered the dormitories of the Federal Government Girls Secondary School in Chibok and forced 276 girls aged 16 to 18 into a convoy of trucks and motorcycles over a period of about four hours. Fifty-seven women were able to escape during the initial transportation by jumping from the trucks, and others have been rescued on several occasions by Nigerian Armed Forces, but the event remains one of the largest and most significant in the group's history. This event swiftly gained international attention and social media websites were flooded with the use of the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls. This abduction somewhat determined the perception of the group as mass kidnappers who target women. Often when their name is mentioned, this is the most common event tied to the group. The Chibok abduction was the first mass kidnapping the group attempted and successfully conducted; it also changed the dynamics of the group's violence and determined its perception until the present day.

Before the 2014 abduction in Chibok, Boko Haram conducted smaller abductions of individuals that were disorganized and seemingly isolated incidents. Moreover, they were not used as new recruits or enslaved by the group for a time afterward, and only on some occasions did the group ask for ransoms. For example, several kidnappings in December 2011, January 2012, February 2013 conducted by Boko Haram targeted foreign workers on oil and construction sites and did not ask for ransoms.<sup>171</sup> The acts were mainly seen as threats to the companies or attempts to control resources. These early kidnappings do not reflect the modus operandi of what the group evolved into and how it is known today. Before the Chibok kidnapping, there are also reports of Boko Haram members entering Maiduguri in 2013 and grabbing girls, throwing 1000 to 2000 Naira at their families, and claiming it is their dowry in exchange for the women.<sup>172</sup> Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest the prevalence of “donations” of daughters by fathers who sympathized with Boko Haram’s cause prior to 2014.<sup>173</sup> This type of kidnapping of young women as well as the “donations” (a kind of abduction by another name) represent a shift in 2013 toward more gender specific targets and tendencies. Boko Haram’s tactics of kidnappings changed markedly in the lead up to 2014.

Boko Haram’s choices of kidnapping victims became increasingly gender specific and performative in 2013. In May 2013, after a long and fierce battle against state forces in Bama, Borno State, Boko Haram militants captured 12 Christian women and children.<sup>174</sup> Over 50 people were killed in the attack, and over 105 inmates were released from the police barracks. Abubakar Shekau claimed responsibility shortly after. According to Shekau’s statement, the attack and abduction was in response to a 2011-2012 Nigerian government policy wherein over 100 women and children had been detained in connection to Boko Haram. Among those detained were the wives of Shekau and many other high-ranking members of Boko Haram. As two

scholars explain, these arrests were not unusual; it was a common practice of the Nigerian state to target suspects' families and friends, but the tactic backfired in this case.<sup>175</sup> In videos leading up to the incident Shekau accused the government of kidnapping women and asserted that he had every intention to target state forces' wives and children in retaliation.

The Chibok event is seminal because it is the first kidnapping that targeted a massive number of young women, but Shekau also warned of the incident beforehand. Leading up to April 2014 Shekau released a video statement warning that girls should stay home because Western education is sinful. He declared that "In Islam, it is permissible to abduct infidel women. Next, we will start abducting women and selling [them] in the marketplace."<sup>176</sup> After the abduction, Shekau reiterated his promise to sell the infidel women as slaves. The event set the stage for later abductions. In many ways, Boko Haram played into the media attention they received from the event and even capitalized on it. They embraced the media attention they received in 2014 and subsequent mass and spectacular kidnappings have been consistent with that model. A group's style can change and evolve as a part of a dialogue with the media and, in some respects, the public. They shift and shape themselves as they receive attention and prompt reactions.

There have been 6 mass kidnappings (over 100 people) conducted by Boko Haram and ISWAP to date, with reference to available evidence and excluding the infamous Chibok kidnapping, that illustrate the same trend as Chibok. On 18 December 2014, members of Boko Haram killed over 30 people and kidnapped around 100 before dawn in Gumsere near Chibok, Borno State. While there was a large military presence in Chibok after the abduction in April 2014, Gumsere is about 20 km away, and "far in the bush."<sup>177</sup> Some reports describe militants rounding up the men and shooting them at point-blank range, and then forcing women and

children on to a truck.<sup>178</sup> In another case, residents of Damasak in Borno State claim in March of 2015 that over 400 women and children were taken by militants, but the government denied the “fresh abduction.”<sup>179</sup> On 4 August 2015, Boko Haram militants killed at least 8 people and kidnapped 135 people in the Extreme North region of Cameroon. There is no information on the demographics of the abductees in this case, only that there were six men and two women killed in the raid.<sup>180</sup>

On 19 February 2018, the splinter group ISWAP entered Dapchi in Yobe State and abducted 109 schoolgirls in broad daylight. The leader of the splinter group released 103 girls in March 2018—all except for one Christian girl who refused to convert to Islam, while 5 girls died of suffocation in the initial kidnapping.<sup>181</sup> In August 2020, Boko Haram or ISWAP insurgents killed at least eight soldiers and abducted over 100 young men and girls from Kukawa and other communities. While the numbers are difficult to rely on for accuracy, locals report that hundreds of young men and women were abducted and, depending on the gender, they were “forcefully tasked to carry arms” or “turned into sex slaves.”<sup>182</sup> Lastly, on 11 December 2020, Boko Haram operatives targeted the Government Science Secondary School in Kankara, Katsina State and almost half (333) of the 800 students were missing after the attack.<sup>183</sup> There are conflicting reports about the ratio of men to women who were taken.

The last two mass kidnappings suggest a slight shift in targets, increasingly towards young men or non-Muslim women in the case of the Dapchi kidnapping. This might not be a shift, but a trend hidden under the media attention around the kidnapping of women. Two journalists from the Wall Street Journal remark in 2016 that “While the world focused on Boko Haram’s mass kidnappings of women and girls, the Islamist group was stealing an even greater number of boys.”<sup>184</sup> Over three years, according to reports by Human Rights Watch, “Boko



Haram [kidnapped] more than 10,000 boys and trained them in boot camps in abandoned villages and forest hide-outs.”<sup>185</sup> The issues latent in Boko Haram’s abductions of females are not necessarily demonstrated by the numbers, but rather in the style of their kidnappings, their treatment, and their experiences once in captivity.

Young men who are kidnapped by Boko Haram are often indoctrinated into the ideology and forced to fight for the group, while young women are taken as wives, enslaved, or forced to participate in suicide attacks. In each case, some young men and some young women choose to fight with their captors, but many others are forced into submission. Involvement in Boko Haram is a complex spectrum that includes choice, pressure, coercion, and force. The trends of mass kidnappings, mostly informed by the precedent of Chibok, and the more frequent “everyday” abductions, which often targeting young men of fighting age, indicate a more complicated and nuanced story than traditionally acknowledged. This section reveals two major dynamics at play: media attention of Chibok triggered similar events and influenced the style of Boko Haram’s kidnappings, while the trend of kidnappings reveals distinct treatment and experiences between men and women. Young men are abducted in similar numbers but receive less attention, while women receive much more attention but are treated much worse in captivity. The unequal treatment between men and women is demonstrated in two of the following sections (see sections on *Systematic Rape* and *Suicide Bombings*), but I develop this relationship in even greater detail in the following chapter.

### **Systematic Rape**

The systematic rape of women has become a grim and frequent practice conducted by Boko Haram over the course of their rise to power. One scholar writes, that the “Systematic rape

of women by Boko Haram is a fundamental aspect of the organization's strategy for continuity."<sup>186</sup> For example, a majority of the 234 women and children rescued from the Sambisa Forest in 2015 were found pregnant.<sup>187</sup> In the Chibok kidnapping in 2014, all 276 women who were captured fell into the age range of 16-18. They chose the school carefully. Not only relevant to the militants was their makeup of mostly Christian students, but especially young and "fertile" as well. All the girls from Chibok who were successfully captured by Boko Haram experienced sexual violence at some point during their capture.<sup>188</sup> In contrast to an earlier incident in Maiduguri in 2013 in which women were separated into "old" and "fertile" categories and the latter were captured and raped, the captors did not have to "sort through" the women in Chibok because they were all within the age range they would accept. There are other reports, also from 2013, that describe how older women with children are spared from rape and are instead killed.

The group's style reflects their particular cultural and societal context. Militants are told that they are fulfilling their duty, that taking wives and sex slaves is central to establishing continuity in the movement. It is doubtful that many of the militants believe un-consensual sex is out of the ordinary; it is merely a means to a necessary end. While Boko Haram's style of systematic rape is mainly preoccupied with organizational continuity through pregnancy, it is distinct from their splinter group's style. In al-Barnawi's ISWAP, Muslims are often spared from rape and Christians are enslaved. In the Dapchi kidnapping for example, to appease the concerns of Muslims and represent the ideological rift between ISWAP and the Shekau faction, all the Muslim women were returned and only the Christian who refused to convert was taken as a sex slave.<sup>189</sup> Further, on 1 March 2018, ISWAP militants captured three aid workers in Rann, Borno State, executed the two Muslims who they deemed apostates, and declared the Christian a slave.<sup>190</sup> The choice of sexual violence and enslavement seems to have shifted along religious

lines for ISWAP after 2016, but arguably stayed the same for Shekau's faction. ISWAP, in this symbolic way, attempted to assert their separation from Shekau's Boko Haram and adhere to the ideology established by the Islamic State.

### **Suicide Bombings**

From a Western perspective, contemporary suicide attacks have become increasingly associated with religious or Islamic terrorism. Commentators on suicide fighters tend to focus on the origins of the motivations and postulate reasons based on their ideological or religious backgrounds. While in the United States, suicide attacks like mass school shootings are considered the results of non-ideological causal factors such as systematic deprivation, humiliation, and personal unhappiness.<sup>191</sup> Within these perceptions of Western and non-Western suicide attacks lie a distinction between "someone who kills in order to die and someone who dies in order to kill."<sup>192</sup> This distinction rests on the assumption that there are some suicide attackers that are forced, either through coercion or human condition, to commit this act of violence and there are others who intend on killing as many people they can to get to paradise or to further their cause, and they do not mind dying in the process. The latter conception is often used to demonize an actor's ideological motivations, and the former is often used to condemn the conditions that determined the actor's choice. One is based on context-dependent motives, while one is based on essentialist conceptions of motives (in this case Islamic extremism), but neither consider how context, ideology, precedent, and culture might work together in all cases.

Even though Boko Haram formed in 2002, their first suicide bombing did not take place until 8 April 2011. Given the presumed connection between Islamic extremist organizations and suicide bombing, one would assume that suicide attacks would constitute a major portion of

Boko Haram's tactics. Surprisingly, suicide attacks never became a dominant form of violence for the group, comprising only 15% of Boko Haram's attacks.<sup>193</sup> Neither did the group ever become particularly effective in suicide attacks, if efficacy is determined by lethality. In comparison to other groups between 1980 and 2001 wherein suicide attacks accounted for roughly 46% of global terror deaths, Boko Haram's suicide attacks only accounted for 21.5% of total terror deaths on average between 2011 and 2017.<sup>194</sup> The inefficacy of Boko Haram's suicide attacks in comparison to other groups is observed most acutely with reference to Palestinian suicide bombings between 2000 and 2005. According to one analysis, suicide attacks accounted for a mere 0.6% of Palestinian terrorist activities between this timeframe but accounted for more than 50% of total deaths.<sup>195</sup>

Following attacks in the 1990s and before, scholars traditionally associated suicide attackers with the demographic of "uneducated, unemployed, socially isolated single men in their late teens and early 20s."<sup>196</sup> This demographic began to change in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, particularly with reference to Boko Haram who have been pioneers of gender "equality" in this form of violence. Boko Haram surpassed the record for the proportion of female suicide bombers previously set by the Tamil Tigers who became known for their reliance on suicide bombing as a tactic. By 2017, Boko Haram deployed 244 female suicide bombers in comparison to 44 by the Tamil Tigers. This comprised a majority (56%) of the suicide attacks conducted by Boko Haram, excluding cases with an unidentified gender which would raise the number to 72.2%.<sup>197</sup> There is also a tendency found in Boko Haram to employ children as suicide attackers as well. Many children have been taken from their families as orphaned infants, or are the result of in-group pregnancy, or lack of alternatives, but they grow and fulfill distinct roles depending on their gender. As mentioned, many boys have been kidnapped by Boko Haram and are mostly

forgotten, while many girls have been kidnapped to enslave or employ as suicide bombers. It is important to recognize the group's targeting and employment of children, but I am interested in the gendered treatment between children, youth, and adults within the movement more broadly.

The unprecedented use of female suicide attackers not only reveals an interesting gender-specific dimension to Boko Haram's forms of violence, but also how the focus of the media has somewhat determined and reinforced this dimension. Generally, female suicide attackers present a tactical advantage because in many cases their movement is not as limited by heightened security measures. Female suicide attackers also present a political advantage for groups engaged in terrorism due to the amount of media attention females receive in comparison to male attackers. The first female suicide bombing (2014) in the Boko Haram insurgency did not appear until three years after the group's first suicide bombing (2011). Warner and Matfess posit two main reasons for this: first, the imposition of a state of emergency by the Nigerian government in 2013 and, second, the increased media attention that the group received because of the Chibok abduction in 2014.<sup>198</sup>

The state of emergency imposed new limitations on movement and raised the standards of vetting for venues such as markets, border barricades, government buildings, police barracks, and other public areas in general. Women were less expected for attacks, able to travel into markets and other public spaces more organically and able to hide bombs under their clothing more discretely. Additionally, the Chibok kidnapping made group members plainly aware of how much media attention the employment and exploitation of women could elicit. While there is much to condemn about Boko Haram's "utilization" of women, I am careful not to characterize female suicide attackers as passive instruments or essential victims in conflict. As mentioned previously, involvement and action in the group is a spectrum that spans from choice

to force, for both men and women, and there are many women who chose to attack for the group. These choices are complex and nuanced, however. Like their male counterparts, many are forced into the movement by lack of alternatives, the likelihood of security and protection, ideological identification, or family dynamics. A combination of factors has contributed to the rise of female suicide attackers in Boko Haram, from the prompt of gendered security measures to media attention, to agency and limited alternatives. I address this combination of factors and how aspects of it are often missed through a focus on the spectacular in my next chapter.

Much like the demographics of the bombers, the choice of targets for Boko Haram have evolved over time and exhibit interesting tendencies. Overall, Boko Haram's strategic profile "depends on the surprising combination of paired attacks, young and female perpetrators, and [the targeting of] civilian spaces."<sup>199</sup> Before 2014, however, their profile looked quite different. As Warner and Matfess describe, there have been four main stages in the group's evolution on suicide attacks. They dubbed the first period from 8 April 2011 to 12 May 2013 the learning phase because they mostly targeted government institutions and Christian institutions with minimal efficacy and were mostly confined to the state of Borno. In this period, they utilized lone attackers almost exclusively. The second phase, from 12 May 2013 to 14 April 2014, is known as the dormant phase because they were inactive during this time except for one suicide bombing.<sup>200</sup> Due to the state of emergency in Nigeria, a Joint Task Force (JTF) and other counterterrorism measures put the insurgency on their back foot. They no longer had access to urban centers, nor control over the same territories, so their activities were largely confined to unpatrolled and rural areas.

The third phase was initiated with the Chibok kidnapping in April of 2014 and ended in December of 2015. The events in Chibok, coupled with the limitations presented by the Nigerian

security apparatus, created one of the deadliest periods of Boko Haram's suicide attacks. They transitioned to the use of young women, coordinated attacks, and a diverse, seemingly randomized, set of targets. While the previous periods saw a seeming unwillingness to target Muslims and a general trend toward targeting Christian churches, this tendency reversed in 2015.<sup>201</sup> They also expanded into the larger area of northeastern Nigeria and entered the Lake Chad Basin in June 2015. One finding describes a gendered dimension to the targeting as well: "While men focused on religious and government targets, women (almost exclusively) targeted civilian and non-secular spaces... women and children (often in groups) carried out the majority of attacks."<sup>202</sup> The last phase begins in January 2016 and continues into the present, although there has been a steady decrease in both incidents and fatalities since 2017 according to the Nigeria Security Tracker (NST).<sup>203</sup> Nevertheless, this phase is marked by the same tactics (the utilization of coordinated attacks of young women and children), but the group has transitioned slightly to the targeting of internally displaced persons (IDP) camps instead of markets and bus stops.

## **Beheadings**

Beheadings and the threat of beheadings often receive large amounts of press and media attention because of the unique symbolism behind the act. The act of beheading has historically been connected to capital punishment or political revolution (e.g., the guillotine in the French Revolution). Decapitation is also gruesome and lends itself to spectacle. Groups engaged in terrorism are engaged in not only acts of violence, as discussed, but also acts of symbolism. Indiscriminate attacks with no claim, reason, or platform declared are not normally acknowledged as acts of terrorism. Moreover, acts of terrorism traditionally receive much more

attention the more symbolic the act. Many groups have implemented forms of violence like kidnapping, suicide bombing, kneecapping, hijacking, and others to the extent that they become “signatures” of the groups. As Mahmut Cengiz writes, “For Salafi Jihadist groups, the signature method has been beheadings.”<sup>204</sup>

Accordingly, one would assume that Boko Haram would employ this form of violence expertly and the targets would match the rhetoric of the organization: Westerners. Most of the beheading videos that were passed around dark corners of the web around 2014 featured mainly Westerners beheaded by ISIS. Cengiz’s study on beheadings among groups engaged in terrorism describes the evolution of beheadings as currently established between 2014 and 2020.<sup>205</sup> Boko Haram ranked the third highest, following the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant and the Mozambiquan cell of the Islamic State. Boko Haram and ISWAP beheaded 128 people collectively between 2014 and 2020 with 117 victims and 11 victims, respectively.<sup>206</sup> Interestingly, Boko Haram began the practice of beheading only after they pledged allegiance to ISIS in 2015.<sup>207</sup> However, while ISIS became known for targeting Westerners (e.g., soldiers, aid workers, and other foreigners) and ISWAP became known for targeting Christians, Boko Haram victimized locals.

This contrast between the two sects in Nigeria echoes a dynamic consistent across multiple forms of violence. Namely, al-Barnawi’s ISWAP adheres to the rigid ideology established by the Islamic State, while Shekau’s Boko Haram subverts expectations. Beheadings for Boko Haram became tools for the spread of threats about territorial control rather than symbolic threats against the West. This goes against assumptions about Boko Haram based on their ideological motivations for adopting this form of violence. While the type of violence (beheadings) matches the organization they attempt to emulate (the Islamic State), their style is



quite distinct. There are local resentments tied to the beheadings by Boko Haram. For example, on 22 July 2014, a 6:46-minute long video was released by *Sahara Reporters* that showed the decapitation of a Nigerian Air Force officer who claimed to be a Muslim affiliated with ‘Izala.’<sup>208</sup>

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Izala (*Jama’atu Izalatil Bid’a wa iqamat al-Sunna*, Society for the Removal of Innovation and Re-Establishment of the Sunnah) is a rival Salafi sect in Nigeria out of which Boko Haram’s original leader, Mohammad Yusuf, rose to prominence and spawned a bitter rivalry. Notwithstanding this affiliation (or, precisely because of it), the sect chanted “Allah is great,” and that they had been given “an unbeliever,” while they paraded his severed head around.<sup>209</sup> The Muslim officer was a believer but represented both a connection to the Nigerian state and a local rivalry between two seemingly kindred Salafist traditions. Another example of Boko Haram’s distinct targeting styles is found in a video released by the group on 2 March 2015 entitled “Harvest of the Spies,” wherein two local civilians were beheaded for spying on behalf of a police officer.<sup>210</sup> These two men, Dauda Muhammad and Muhammad Awwal, were purportedly connected to the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) and were killed because of this allegation.<sup>211</sup>

Another similar video was released by Boko Haram on 14 March 2017 called “Exposing the Secrets of the Hypocrites.” One man was beheaded and two were shot at point-blank range, but the significance of the video is found in its staging: the captives were “paraded wearing the orange jumpsuit, a symbol of Guantanamo prisoners.” This was even after Shekau was denied leadership of ISWAP, but further represents the faction’s symbolic support of the Islamic State through a localized style. In September 2014, the Chadian faction of Boko Haram released a video of their own that featured the gruesome beheading of three herdsmen because they

“aligned themselves with unbelievers.”<sup>212</sup> The herdsmen were identified as part of the Chadian Kanembuwa ethnic group and the sect claimed they were civilian fighters from the CJTF.<sup>213</sup> This is an example of how the Chadian group adopted a type of violence from Boko Haram that Boko Haram adopted from the Islamic State, while each group adopted a localized style. Given the profound symbolism inherent in the act of beheading, special attention to the styles in which beheadings are conducted provides tremendous insight into how context informs a group’s forms of violence. Instead of understanding Boko Haram’s beheadings as merely “copycat” versions of the Islamic State’s, the styles they employ are important and informative on their own.

## **Conclusion**

What is interesting about Boko Haram’s forms of violence as discussed throughout this chapter is the fact that they challenge common and long held conceptions about the group. These forms of violence are performed within a larger context of external pressures and formative precedents, but they also carry insight due to their performative nature. It is informative to look at all aspects of their forms of violence to gain a full account of the group. The styles of violence are as important as the types of violence a group chooses to commit because they present variables and insights that often go unacknowledged. This distinction between type and style of violence is guided by Diana Taylor’s discussion of public spectacle. As Taylor states, “Spectacles cannot be understood as separate entities; they can be understood only as they interface with spectators and with other national and international spectacles.”<sup>214</sup> Spectacles are interconnected and often determined by seemingly disconnected precedents (e.g., past successes of other groups engaged in terrorism), but they also rely on spectators to sustain the spectacle (e.g., attention of mass media and international politicians). Taylor’s goal is to make “active

spectators, or witnesses, of us all.”<sup>215</sup> Active spectatorship establishes a “responsibility that one may not want to assume.”<sup>216</sup>

One must ask, what is overlooked by a focus on the spectacular? Given the spectacular kidnappings conducted by Boko Haram and the subsequent media attention and international outrage that ensued, one might assume that they are focused exclusively on female kidnappings. This does not explain the 10,000 missing boys uncovered by Human Rights Watch, nor the scores of women beaten, raped, killed, or subjugated to profound structural violence on a daily basis. Given the rhetoric about ‘taking women as wives,’ one might assume that they are essentially passive victims without agency, while it may be a rational calculation on the part of the woman. Given the pledge of allegiance to the Islamic State and anti-West rhetoric, one might assume the group would have more robust international ambitions, but they terrorize local populations and wage an internal war against the Nigerian state. If analysts consider only the patterns and trends of types of violence, they might miss the distinct group characteristics implicit in their performative styles.

Upon examination of Boko Haram’s violent performances throughout this chapter, the five types of violence reveal two main performative styles that differ from other groups: namely, the targeting of locals (most often Muslims) and a significant gender-specific dimension in the employment and exploitation of women. The first is explained with reference to their historical development through anti-colonial political Islam as discussed in the previous chapter, while the other remains an open question. Boko Haram’s bombings and other targeted attacks suggest a shift in tactics toward population centers filled with local remnants of foreign occupation, while the group’s beheadings suggest a blatant disregard for doctrinal directives imposed by the Islamic State against the targeting of Muslims. Kidnappings, systematic rapes, and suicide

bombings suggest an alternative tendency in the employment and exploitation of women, which has prompted a great deal of analysis and attention. I argue, however, that those analyses are most often conducted with reference to spectacular events without consideration of how spectacles relate to the everyday. In the next chapter, I discuss how an insular focus on Boko Haram's gendered performances, abstracted from their context, often disregards that which is visible but "not allowed to be seen."<sup>217</sup>

## VI. GENDER IN BOKO HARAM'S SHADOW

### Introduction and Theoretical Framework

Spectacular phenomena may prompt an interest or curiosity into a previously hidden dynamic at play. In the case of Cynthia Enloe, her *feminist curiosity* was prompted by an encounter with a tremendous, albeit normal, power imbalance between an American soldier, his laundress, and the general trend of “base women” during the Vietnam war. She recounts the event that sparked her transition into feminist research in an interview in 2014.<sup>218</sup> A colleague of hers at Clark University and the only draftee at the university spoke about his experience in the Vietnam war. The guest speaker discussed the “hooch girls” who ordinary American soldiers paid to do their laundry. During the teach-in she thought, “what if one sees the whole Vietnam War through this woman’s eyes? Not only the US Vietnam War, but also the earlier French Vietnam War?” This is a standpoint that is opposite from those traditionally recognized in the study of international relations. Feminist curiosity is about taking seriously the lives of women. “Taking seriously” does not mean valorizing women, but rather “listening carefully, digging deep, developing a long attention span, being ready to be surprised.”<sup>219</sup> Enloe develops this consideration through her fifteen books, countless articles, and lectures all over the world on gender and militarism, geopolitics, and political theory, among other topics.

I adopt Enloe’s feminist curiosity as a theoretical framework in this chapter. Her book, *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases* explores how the idea of feminist curiosity should be introduced into the field of international relations. It is a bottom-up approach to research that starts with one

simple question: *where are the women?* The second edition of the book, published in 2014, is more of a rewrite of the 1989 publication—updated with stories and examples that match today’s global context. There are many insights in the book about how research should be conducted, what deserves attention, and how the field of international relations has historically lacked a consideration of women’s lives. Adopting the infamous second-wave feminist motto “the personal is political,” one of her main insights is that the “personal is international.” International politics is made up of familial relationships and personal interactions that, when realized, can foster a profound respect for the ‘other.’ This statement however, like the one from which it is derived, is a palindrome. The “international is personal” is just as accurate, for Enloe, and almost more important to recognize. International politics is not merely made up of the personal, but explicitly relies on it.

Tax revenues, spy agencies, and diplomatic meetings do not hold up international politics alone. The international’s reliance on the personal implies that “governments depend on certain kinds of allegedly private relationships in order to conduct their foreign affairs.”<sup>220</sup> Uncovering the key role of diplomatic wives in building trust between diplomatic husbands, considering the steady flows of sexual services required by military bases, and discussing the centrality of a military wife’s gratitude on their husband’s will to fight all describe war between states rather differently than traditional explanations. Enloe also recognizes that women are diverse, rational, and calculated actors. Feminist-informed research is not only about increased visibility of the lives of women, but also respect for the diversity of women. Enloe remarks that “Feminist attentiveness to all sorts of women is not derived from hero worship.”<sup>221</sup> Women of different classes, groups, and backgrounds have made calculations to cope and benefit from conditions imposed by structures of power. Some women have benefitted from other women’s labor made

cheap, turned other women into “exotic landscapes” to fulfill the desires of men, or settled in colonies in search for better lives in the lands of other women. An adequate understanding of these relationships is crucial to make sense of history as well as international politics.

My central point in this chapter is that Boko Haram’s relationship to women and gender is more complicated than onlookers tend to recognize. The group’s exploitation of women through systematic sexual violence, mass kidnappings, and enslavement do not reflect essential characteristics of the group itself nor a significant divergence from gender norms in Nigeria, but rather reflect widespread issues that are often overlooked. I argue that even actions particular to the group (e.g., the prevalence of female suicide attackers) are products of this wider context. The interplay between the government, media, and spectacular events targeting women is what initially prompted my interest into the gender dynamics of Boko Haram’s forms of violence. By focusing on the women in, around, and affected by Boko Haram, I realized that many widespread issues in Nigeria have been hidden by well-intentioned efforts to “protect” women from the group. By employing Cynthia Enloe’s theoretical framework, I move past the simplistic idea that women are merely the passive victims of Boko Haram and recognize the diverse experiences, conditions, and limitations of women in the group and in the rest of Nigeria. While Boko Haram’s exploitation of women is often seen as a problem that is unique or specific to the group, I find that the group’s actions with and towards women are reflective of much more widespread and common state of oppression in male-dominated societies.

### **Performances Mediated through Spectacle**

In 2014 the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls began to trend on Twitter and set off an international movement based on the abduction of 276 girls from Chibok. Protests were held all

over the world, and it triggered the likes of Michelle Obama, and other celebrities, to enter the movement. In a famous video address, the First Lady pleaded with the world to protect the birthright of women to seek education and described the incident as indicative of the multitude of challenges women face by merely attempting to fulfill the most basic aspirations.<sup>222</sup> She likened the situation to that of Malala Yousafzai who was shot and almost killed because of her work on women's rights to education in Pakistan, and subsequently earned the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014. Along with Michelle Obama, other activists called for an increase in efforts by the Nigerian government as well as the international community to find and rescue the abducted girls. Rumors spread that the Nigerian state forces had knowledge of the raid ahead of time and failed to act, which set off other waves of protests.

The kidnapping was condemned by many prominent scholars and clerics from Nigeria and the Islamic world, but Boko Haram quickly dismissed these sources as apostates and infidels working on behalf of the West.<sup>223</sup> In contrast, the kidnapping was lauded by many groups and individuals who share the same ideology as Boko Haram. The Islamic State, for instance, cited the kidnapping in Chibok as justification for their own kidnapping and sexual enslavement of Yazidi women in Iraq.<sup>224</sup> Overall, there have been hundreds of articles published in newspapers, scholarly journals, and thinktank reports following the event in Chibok. Importantly, the media attention gave the group a platform to dispel their intentions, aspirations, and warnings. Few other spectacular events have received as much attention, nor as much praise from extremist groups. The importance of these two dimensions in determining the group's rhetoric is clear in Abubakar Shekau's message following the incident in which he claimed responsibility for the event. He focuses, in different parts, on both the opposition to Western education and the importance of adopting Islam.



Shekau opens the video by speaking in Arabic, “Amazing! Allah is great... This message is about the girls whom we abducted from the Western schools. This message is about the girls whom the tyrants of the world, Obama, François Hollande, and Jonathan are speaking about.”<sup>225</sup> He remarks that all the women have left Christianity and are now devoted to Islam—which contradicts later statements. Shekau asserts that he will not release any girls until his brothers are released from prison. Then he switches to Hausa. Addressing another audience, he begins to speak about his own enslavement of the girls, and he promises to sell the women into slavery. While Shekau says that there is no way a Muslim can become a slave, he also says that “even if they become Muslims, [abducted women] are still slaves.”<sup>226</sup> The women are destined for enslavement because they participate in a system imposed by Western civilization. Shekau says he is the person “who has the right to emancipate them.”<sup>227</sup> Most of Shekau’s rhetoric is grounded on an opposition to the West through the imposition of Islam on local representatives of a Judeo-Christian tradition.

The original intention to abduct women can be found in earlier rhetoric by Shekau and Boko Haram due to actions by the government. Two major events connected to actions by the government prompted a greater focus of the group on women: first, the mass arrest of wives and family members connected to Boko Haram in 2011 and, second, the state of emergency in 2013. In 2011, the government of Nigeria implemented a policy of detaining wives, children, and others related to Boko Haram insurgents as a ‘weapon of war’ against the group.<sup>228</sup> While this was not a unique instance as the Nigerian government has been known to target insurgents’ families, the significance is found in the direct effect the strategy had on Boko Haram’s rhetoric and future actions.<sup>229</sup> The arrests prompted a slew of video messages from Shekau on the “abductions” of the “group’s women.”

Shekau released the first message in January 2012, threatening to kidnap the wives of government officials in direct response to the kidnapping of their own wives.<sup>230</sup> In September 2012, Shekau claimed that the women were being held by the “infidel enemies of Allah,” and claimed that “they are even having sex with one of them.”<sup>231</sup> In October 2012, in a message to President Goodluck Johnson, Shekau says “Since you hold our women in captivity, you should wait and see what will happen to your women.”<sup>232</sup> Two other video messages in 2012 follow similar lines of rhetoric. The detainment of family members without a doubt triggered the group’s profound fixation on “taking back wives” and led to an increase in mass targeting of women. Some analysts were ahead of the curve on Boko Haram’s shift into targeting women, but some of their statements merely foreshadow the same flawed gender-analysis that continues to penetrate mass media interpretations of events. Zenn and Pearson write in 2014 that all the women detained or abducted by the state and Boko Haram “were targeted for instrumental purposes, as none of those captured on either side had any direct involvement in the conflict.”<sup>233</sup> This statement deserves a bit of scrutiny.

As the general population is undoubtedly directly involved in the conflict, so too are women as active and deliberate participants (particularly those intimately connected to combatants on each side). This statement merely assumes the same rhetoric common among mass media that denies women agency in large scale conflict. The government’s detainment of women is treated as “seizing assets” or “confiscating the property” of Boko Haram. While Boko Haram’s response (e.g., increase in targeting of women) is problematic in itself, the government’s actions and media portrayal of women as essential victims reflect the predominate attitudes towards women that prompted these abductions in the first place. Namely, the attitude holds that women require “protectors” as sheep require shepherds.

Boko Haram's shift towards greater exploitation and, in the next case, employment of women was further catalyzed by the conditions imposed by the state of emergency in 2013. The choice of female suicide bombers seems to be a direct result of the state of emergency implemented by President Goodluck Johnson on 13 May 2013. As discussed in the previous chapter, the declaration of a state of emergency in three states in northern Nigeria, due to increasing attacks by Boko Haram, created new limitations on the movement of male combatants and forced the group to seek alternatives. Increased securitization and the formation of the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) forced Boko Haram out of urban environments in three northern states and restricted the movement of men significantly. This forced the group to diversify their targets as well as the demographics of their suicide attackers, so they would be able to carry out surprise attacks. Following the dormant phase of the group's suicide bombing efforts, also discussed previously, the first female suicide bombing was conducted in 2014.<sup>234</sup> A similar trend of employment of female suicide attackers can be seen in Palestine in the early 2000s due to heightened security measures and the limitations on the movement of male combatants.<sup>235</sup>

Upon a mere glance of Boko Haram's spectacular actions, one might assume that their actions represent phenomena that are unique to the group. This is due in large part because of the portrayal by mass media and the international community more broadly. However, I find that their actions are rather reflections of deeper and more widespread issues in Nigeria that the group merely brought to attention. To make myself abundantly clear, it is not my contention that Boko Haram should be excused in any way because they might be acting within the "status quo." Instead, I assert that bringing attention to these issues can confront and combat the routine subjugation that permeates societies across the globe. It is not merely an issue confined to Nigeria, West Africa, or the "global south" but a worldwide issue that Boko Haram's

performances of violence brought to the fore. In the following sections, I will discuss the ways in which Cynthia Enloe and others can uncover what may lie in the shadow of the spectacular.

### **Where are the Women?**

Cynthia Enloe asserts that women should not be considered passive victims devoid of calculation, deliberation, and decision-making. She writes that women are “not just the objects of power, not merely passive puppets or unthinking victims.”<sup>236</sup> Men and women make decisions and choices depending on their circumstances and both should be the subjects of research in international relations. Enloe urges us to ask the question, *where are the women?* And further, ask, *how did they get there, who benefits from their being there, and what do they themselves think about being there?* No doubt, the image of the Chibok girls taken from school is seared in the global mind’s eye, but the role of women in the organization is more nuanced. From female recruiters to cashiers, cooks, volunteers, wives, suicide attackers, and sex slaves, there are diverse experiences in the Boko Haram group because, like men, women are forced into the group by misfortune and lack of opportunity as much as they are by conviction or abduction. There is a thin line between forced involvement and recruitment for all genders. Instead of a neat binary between voluntary or forced involvement, it should be considered a spectrum.<sup>237</sup>

A Mercy Corps from 2016 included interviews from 47 former youth members of Boko Haram and 26 youth who resisted recruitment to share their reasons for resistance or involvement in the group.<sup>238</sup> Some women felt compelled to join the movement when their husbands joined, not because of coercion but a societal expectation.<sup>239</sup> Alternatively, some women joined because of the possibility to study the Qur’an and learn more about their religion.<sup>240</sup> While, admittedly, there are many women who were kidnapped and forced to convert to Islam (e.g., girls in

Chibok), so studying the Qur'an full-time is not as attractive. Notwithstanding, the possibility of study presents a particularly compelling opportunity for other women who are unable to spend their time studying religious texts in their own communities. In many cases, women could also become teachers and preachers for other women in the group, and this attracted other women to join.<sup>241</sup> Boko Haram also became popular because Mohammad Yusuf encouraged marriage, an institution that grants status to women in Nigeria, and bolsters possible opportunities.<sup>242</sup> Women have not only been recruited by husbands through convincing discussions but have actively recruited their husbands and family members to join on personal and ideological bases.<sup>243</sup> Wives of prominent members in Boko Haram such as Aisha, one of the wives of Mamman Nur, describe how they enjoy respect and status in the movement, and how they profit from other abducted women as slaves.<sup>244</sup>

Women can be found in the organizational structure of Boko Haram in four different areas: as “cocoon” for the movement (i.e., for reproductive means), as weapons of attack, fulfilling domestic roles, or as bargaining chips.<sup>245</sup> As marriage, which carries a certain expectation of reproduction, is incredibly common in the movement, so is the use of women for reproduction without qualification or legitimation through marriage. Sexual reproduction is instrumental for the movement’s “continuity” because it provides more members. Boko Haram’s suicide attackers are predominately women. The choice that faces female suicide attackers is not between suicide or life, but rather between suicide or violence and harassment by their male counterparts.<sup>246</sup> As mentioned, women are also often employed as domestic servants and confined to the houses of their husbands but are able to enjoy status and respect within the movement as well as more freedom to escape, if they so choose. On the other end of the spectrum, women are also used as bargaining chips to sell for ransom or to trade for group

members imprisoned by the state. These women are kept under the strictest conditions and often do not receive the same benefits as wives or suicide attackers.<sup>247</sup>

The importance of a gender analysis is not found in the numbers of women kidnapped in comparison to men (the raw number is commensurate between genders) but rather the different experiences of men and women in the group. There is little evidence, for example, that men are the victims of sexual violence or rape within the group. Neither are men expected to fulfill the same duties as women in domestic roles, nor forced to marry into the group as children, nor expected to bear and raise children. There are profound differences between experiences. These are reflected in the cultural and historical context of Nigeria, but more generally in other societies where women are oppressed by men. Enloe's call to ask the question (*where are the women?*) is not just a call for greater attention on women's actions within these groups. It is also a call to commit greater attention to the capacity for women to serve as activists and provide insight into conflict resolution mechanisms. The need for feminist curiosity in these mechanisms is discussed in the next section.

### **Security for Whom?**

Another one of the major insights that Cynthia Enloe contributes through her feminist curiosity is a shift of focus to an informed and serious consideration of the lives affected by installations of power that are often taken for granted. Debates around the placement of military bases, for example, often revolve around the geopolitical issues of placement, erosion of state sovereignty, or international economic security. A feminist analysis, rather, takes seriously the lives of sex workers within the proximity of the base, women who are sexually assaulted by members of the military and the groups that attempt to support those affected, how the base

might reshape the local economy, or how it might reshape the tensions within the community.<sup>248</sup>

Enloe's feminist curiosity urges us to "unearth those voices that have been silenced, those experiences that have been rendered invisible and those lives that have been marginalized."<sup>249</sup>

While the media attention surrounding the 2014 Chibok kidnapping brought women's rights to the fore, other voices have been drowned out or rendered invisible because they either do not fit into the same mold as young Christian schoolgirls taken in the night or they are not near the same number of people taken at one time. The main avenues of acquisition reflect the deeply entrenched and widespread issues that face women on a day-to-day basis in Nigeria. Boko Haram acquires women through three main avenues that all include marriage, to some degree: mass kidnappings and other incidents of "abduction by lawful marriage," by "donation" from families seeking protection, and by recruitment through consensual marriage.<sup>250</sup> Even before Chibok, militants were known to enter cities, take daughters from their families in broad daylight, and then give the families a "dowry" of 1000 to 2000 Naira and never return.<sup>251</sup> In other cases, fathers who were sympathetic to the movement gave their daughters and wives as gifts to the Boko Haram militants in exchange for protection or as declarations of loyalty.<sup>252</sup> It is inconceivable, one scholar writes, that "[a victim's] mother could have donated her daughter and/or husband to Boko Haram," pointing to the gender inequality inherent in this action.<sup>253</sup>

Many women have also joined the movement as willing participants in marriage, which is better than the alternatives in many cases. These women are often given better lives and are not always subjected to the violent activities that abductees are forced to carry out, such as suicide bombings or burning village homes. Regardless of whether a marriage is forced, women are often locked into the situation. Even if they escape, they and their children are regarded with great suspicion by their communities, feared to have been indoctrinated or brainwashed by Boko

Haram.<sup>254</sup> Often they are cut out of the community or even blamed for the sexual violence they experienced. Their futures are marred by their years in captivity.

Because it is legitimized by law, marriage is a traditional, established, and widely accepted way to control women. Arranged and forced marriages are common in Nigeria, particularly in the impoverished north. One scholar writes, “insurgents who are marrying off prepubescent girls are not doing anything that the local population is not already familiar with. Such arranged and forced marriages are routine.”<sup>255</sup> As of 2009, in the Nigerian context that framed the Boko Haram movement, 75 percent of sexually active girls aged 15-19 were married.<sup>256</sup> The majority of marriages were arranged for the girls, while those who resisted faced threats or abandonment by their families.<sup>257</sup> In most of Nigeria as of 2016, all women could legally hold and dispose of property except for in the northern states where only married women held such rights.<sup>258</sup> As I discussed in my chapter on anti-colonial political Islam, certain forms of property, inheritance, succession, marriage, and divorce have fallen under the purview of customary and Sharia law since before colonial rule. This gives some insight into the importance of marriage in northern Nigeria as well as the gendered nature of the institution.

Just as the use of marriage is not unique to Boko Haram, sexual violence is more widespread as well. The Nigerian security forces have been found to be the perpetrators of sexual violence in numerous cases. Witnesses recount rapes as frequent occurrences at checkpoints, for example.<sup>259</sup> There are gendered dynamics connected to marriage even in the punishment of sexual violence, as a 2021 news article in the Nigerian newspaper, *Punch*, documents numerous soldiers being released from duty after “attempting to have sex with a colleague’s spouse,” as well as charges for rape.<sup>260</sup> Moreover, women in camps and around informal settlements also face regular sexual violence while conducting daily activities such as collecting firewood or



showering. One scholar who lives in Nigeria writes that state officials and law enforcement forces have targeted women on the streets of Abuja, “dragging them onto buses and sexually assaulting them, accusing them of being prostitutes.”<sup>261</sup> The women are forced to pay 5,000 Naira to be released and if they cannot pay, they are “tortured, brought before a mobile court, and then sent to a “rehabilitation camp” for sex workers.”<sup>262</sup> Rape continues to present an epidemic of sexual violence in Nigeria, as reports of rape increased under the COVID-19 lockdowns to a record 11,200 in 2020—including some who were raped to death.<sup>263</sup>

In a chapter in *Gender, War, and Militarism* (2010), Liz Kelly argues that a continuum approach to “rape in conflict” and “everyday rape” more accurately addresses the issue of sexual violence.<sup>264</sup> This depiction fits well into my argument throughout this thesis. Kelly writes, “Sexual violence is a continuum, some is out of the ordinary and unbearably brutal, much is banal and unbearably mundane; we need all of it in our sights.”<sup>265</sup> She illuminates many of the consequences of accepting the common idea of ‘rape’ as “sex in coercive circumstances,” rather than the more accurate and inclusive idea of ‘rape’ as coercive, unwanted, or unrequested sex.<sup>266</sup> The focus on rape as either a consequence of war or criminal violence ignores the harms that sex as usual entail for women. Examples of this can be seen in the many cases in which marital rape is not criminalized; every sexual act is considered inherently consensual as soon as women are married.<sup>267</sup> Additionally, by treating rape only as a brutal and incredibly traumatic experience, many women and men are convinced that their, sometimes routine or conventional, experiences with sexual violence do not constitute rape. Many of these issues arise out the same tension that forms the basis of my analysis: the everyday status of women is often hidden by a focus on the spectacular. By untangling these false distinctions, analysts can more accurately assess and address the issues that spectacles bring to light.

An illustrative example of this is the absolute dearth of opportunities for women in education or economic development in the north, in comparison to women who live in other areas of Nigeria, or men in general. Much of these arise from cultural factors like the routine marriages of young women or gender roles in labor forces, but the numbers are astounding. For instance, only 3 percent of girls complete secondary school in the north, while about 75 percent of girls in the rural northeast have never attended school at all.<sup>268</sup> Over two thirds of girls in northern Nigeria are unable to read, compared to about 10 percent in southern Nigeria.<sup>269</sup> Furthermore, there are more than twice the amount of women in comparison to men that live below the poverty line in Nigeria.<sup>270</sup> Women comprise a little over 45 percent of the labor market in Nigeria, but by all accounts women earn about 76 percent of men's earnings for the same or similar work.<sup>271</sup> These are just a few of the limitations placed on women in Nigeria and reflect a pattern of "neglect and abuse that women have suffered for years."<sup>272</sup>

Additionally, when we speak about heightened security measures, protecting internally displaced persons (IDP) camps or increased patrol in certain areas for instance, there are profound implications for the people living under those conditions of which we should be made aware. This protection of women is grounded in the following sentiment: "Men living in a dangerous world are commonly imagined to be the natural protectors. Women living in a dangerous world allegedly are those who need protection."<sup>273</sup> Cynthia Enloe asks us to be constantly aware of the word security and its seemingly well-intentioned spokespeople. Much of the attention from the international community is around "protecting" women and girls, offering aid to government forces for heightened security measures and an increase in militarization. These calls for security are largely grounded in the arguably naive perspective that Boko Haram

or similar non-state actors are the only problems and fails to account for the fact that the issues are much more widespread.

“Camps” such as those for refugees and internally displaced persons (IDP), increased patrols, and securitization are all installations of power that are rife with sexual violence. In 2016, Human Rights Watch reported that 66 percent of women had experienced sexual violence in the camps, and most actions had been committed by government officials in charge of the camps.<sup>274</sup> Other sources have also documented the presence of transactional sex due to the lack of adequate provisions in the camps; women are forced to exchange sex for food, protection, and resources from others living in their community.<sup>275</sup> Much more has also been written about the problem of sexual violence carried out by UN peacekeeping forces.<sup>276</sup> By treating Boko Haram’s violence as unique or spectacular, policymakers are permitted to disregard the implications of their actions and, more broadly, how the international community’s well-intentioned calls for heightened security measures put women further at risk.

For example, attempts to implement the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325, and the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda instituted by it in 2000, have been based on a lack of feminist curiosity to say the least. The National Action Plan iterations of 2013 and 2017 attempted to incorporate issues of gender into counterterrorism efforts in Nigeria but failed to account for the complex implications of actions on women in context-specific situations. Specifically, this is due to the “continued lack of recognition—and at times denial—of the harms engendered by security actors and essentialist, discrete notions of women’s roles.”<sup>277</sup> By developing an agenda for Women, Peace, and Security, dictated by the roles and experiences in Global North, so called “gender-neutral” security measures have had damaging gendered harms.

Namely, an assumption in the National Action Plans of female-victims and male-perpetrators has led to arbitrary detentions or extrajudicial killings for many young men around “fighting age” and the sexual abuse of women under the “protection” of security forces.<sup>278</sup> Along the same line, men are given more resources for rehabilitation and reintegration while women, considered non-radicalized victims, are returned to their communities with little support.<sup>279</sup> Moreover, “gender-neutral” policies such as closing markets in rural areas to curb attacks have had a significant impact on women because, in these areas, they tend to be the main sellers yet have less access to resources and savings.<sup>280</sup> The killing and detainment of young men has also been a significant source of issues because the increase of responsibility on women for decision-making in communities challenge gender roles. These dimensions are not unique to Nigeria but stand to show that women should be regarded as sources of insight in both conflict analysis and conflict resolution. Their perspectives should be incorporated into questions of “security” to achieve a closer approximation of the word, informed by knowledge and experiences too often disregarded.

## **Conclusion**

One of my favorite quotes is from the American pragmatist John Dewey on the dangers and implications of a lack of consideration in retributive justice. Dewey writes that by “killing an evil-doer or shutting him up behind stone walls, we are enabled to forget both him and our part in creating him.”<sup>281</sup> The same logic holds true in this instance: by treating the status of women in the Boko Haram movement as a unique phenomenon, journalists, politicians, and conflict analysts, among others, fail to acknowledge their part in its development. Importantly, Charmaine Pereira makes the point that when we focus only on spectacles of violence, “the

diverse categories of women are rendered less visible,” and further, the idea of “women as victims obscures understanding of how gendered relations and processes are embedded in complex social relations.” A better way forward is to recognize the tendency of groups to mirror the conditions that frame them and attempt to understand underlying issues by listening to the voices hidden behind the spectacular.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Boko Haram and ISWAP have survived to the present day. Reports from 2021 suggest that both major leaders, Abubakar Shekau and ISWAP's Abu Musab al-Barnawi, have been killed.<sup>282</sup> While Shekau has been "killed" three or four times and reemerged with an even greater appetite for vengeance, reports seem to be more credible this time. They suggest that Shekau was killed not by state forces, ethnic militia organizations, or civilian fighters, but rather in confrontation with ISWAP forces who asked that he swear allegiance to al-Barnawi.<sup>283</sup> Shekau's final confrontation is characteristic of his life at the helm of Boko Haram. In many ways, he was killed by his inability to escape the background and context that framed the group's actions. His explicit targeting of Muslims caused a rift, and eventual split, between the two factions and subsequently, caused his death. His death does not imply the inevitable demise of Boko Haram, however. Boko Haram and ISWAP are both well-equipped to continue their activities and it will be interesting to see how their forms of violence unravel as new leaders emerge.

This thesis has examined the ways in which a performance lens can help analysts understand how individual historical and cultural contexts shape a group's forms of violence as much as international precedents, global media trends, and government actions. Boko Haram's case shows that it is important to consider the interplay between localized context and international spectacle to better gauge phenomena often considered unique or specific to a group. At times, focusing on the wicked, targeted spectacles that come to define a group can in fact hide many of the issues that continue to affect other people on an everyday basis. I argue that conflict

analysts should employ this performance lens to avoid the confusion of a group's violence abstracted from context. If precautions are taken, aid is given, and interventions are staged based on a group's motivations, the trends of their types of violence, or shifts in media attention, conflict resolution mechanisms and actions, however well-intentioned, will prove inadequate.

This thesis has been geared at theory building, providing for better conflict analysis of violent non-state groups. My findings can be incorporated into considerations of violent groups all over the globe. This thesis illuminates the false distinction between apolitical and ideologically determined groups through a consideration of how context informs a group's forms of violence. I discuss the ways in which assumptions about a group's actions are normally based on what analysts perceive to be a group's motivations, rooted in ideological, economic, cultural, or organizational factors. Analysts often waver between extremes, while a group's actions are often determined by a combination of factors. Many of Boko Haram's actions are determined by their origins, development, and mobilization through what I term anti-colonial political Islam. This context explains the divergences between the group's types of violence and the group's performative style that normally confuse passive analysts. Another peculiar style of violence, gender-specific treatment, and targeting, arises out of a historic and cultural context that is often overlooked by a preoccupation with the group's spectacular persona. Boko Haram's treatment of women is reflective of more widespread issues in both the localized context of northern Nigeria *and* male-dominated societies all over the world.

This thesis questions many of the misguided assumptions that often cause harm to the people most affected by this conflict. For example, the focus on safety for Christians and Westerners over other demographics as a result of perceptions around Boko Haram's motivations proved inadequate when the group destroyed accessible soft-civilian targets in Muslim-majority

areas of Nigeria. In 2016, the rift between ISWAP and Boko Haram led to an increase in Christian targeting, but few analysts could reconcile the two strategic profiles based on the two groups' seemingly identical origins. Security measures that are built around Boko Haram's explicit targeting of women, and the assumption that gendered treatment is a unique characteristic of the group, fail to account for the harms that an increase in "protection" entail. These are all key examples of how a performance lens can help analysts avoid and prevent real harms against those most at risk. Understanding both types and styles of violence, how they interact, and how they contribute to greater systems of violence, can help strengthen the field of conflict analysis.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> “The Chibok Girls: Survivors of Kidnapping by Boko Haram Share Their Stories,” accessed August 12, 2022, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/the-chibok-girls-survivors-of-kidnapping-by-boko-haram-share-their-stories-60-minutes/>.

<sup>2</sup> David Cook, *The Boko Haram Reader: From Nigerian Preachers to the Islamic State*, ed. Abdulbasit Kassim and Michael Nwankpa, 1st ed. (Oxford University Press, 2018), 314, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190908300.001.0001>.

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