

Resistance to Boko Haram: Civilian Joint Task Forces in North-Eastern Nigeria

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Abstract. *The vast bulk of youth studies on Africa are skewed towards the view of youth as enfants terribles and 'coming anarchy,' with little or no attempt to understand and explain ways in which youth have created and continue to create alternative lives for themselves under conditions of great adversity. Such popular narratives - while rooted in ideas of youth idleness, ennui and engagement in crime - are mute on the considerable social agency and potential shown by Africa's youth, as well as their legitimate grievances against alienating and corrupt governments that have dashed their promise of maturity. Drawing on a case study from northern, especially northeastern, Nigeria, my overriding aim in this article is to show how a cohort of youth – the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) or yan gora ('men with sticks') – from this impoverished region are coping with the violent campaign of Boko Haram and 'government haram,' especially in ways that both underscore their social agency and their capacity to make a difference in their local communities. A key argument emerging from the analysis suggests that youth are not simply victims or perpetrators of terror, but also active agents of counter-terrorism in their local communities. In making this case, the article draws on a range of sources, including press materials, formal and informal interactions with affected Nigerians, and cumulative observation of unfolding events in northeastern Nigeria.*

Keywords: *Boko Haram, Civilian Joint Task Force, Youth, Nigeria, Insurgency.*

Introduction

Despite the disillusionment and criminalisation of the young... the fact should also be underlined that *young people do not simply reproduce state violence... but rather find ways of appropriating it and subverting it* (Argenti, 2002:151, 146; my emphasis).

A major lacuna in the field of youth studies is the inattention to the positive contribu-

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tions of youth in society. Although the view that youth should not be merely conceived as agents (or victims) of violence is belaboured in the literature, this view appears to be a mere addendum, or a sort of *a priori* disclaimer. A few authors have highlighted the critical role youth can play in processes of peacebuilding. In *Gettin' My Word Out*, for example, Leonisa Ardizzone (2007) examines how youth activists respond to injustice, counteract violence, practice social responsibility, and form collaborative networks of individuals and organisations. In *Youth Peacebuilding: Music, Gender and Change*, Lesley Pruitt (2013) examines music as a tool for engaging youth in peacebuilding activities in Australia and Northern Ireland, countries that appear overly peaceful, but where young people still face structural violence at the community level. Stephanie Schwartz's *Youth in Post-Conflict Reconstruction: Agents of Change* addresses a critical issue of conflict reoccurrence and recidivism of violence in post-conflict societies. Yet, the role of youth as agents of counter-terrorism in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in West Africa, remains unexplored.

Drawing on a case study of the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) – or *yan gora* ('men with sticks') – in the restive northeast of Nigeria, I seek to expand the African youth literature by providing cases of positive contributions of youth to counter-terrorism activities in their local communities. In so doing, I take up issue with skewed narratives that portray Africa's youth as hopeless 'troublemakers' and *enfants terribles*. I argue that such popular narratives — while rooted in ideas of youth idleness, ennui, and engagement in crime — are mute on the considerable social agency and potential shown by Africa's youth, as well as their legitimate grievances against alienating and corrupt governments that have dashed their promise of maturity. Thus, a key argument emerging from the analysis suggests that youth are not merely victims or perpetrators of terror but also *active agents* of domestic counter-terrorism efforts in their local communities.

The rest of the article is divided into five parts. The first aims to rethink the dominant youth narrative. The second part looks at the violent campaign of Boko Haram in northern, especially northeastern, Nigeria. The third part focuses on state security responses, and popular reactions, to the Boko Haram insurgency. The fourth part investigates how local youth are putting up a vigorous resistance to the Boko Haram menace in their local communities, with particular attention to the Civilian Joint Task Force. The fifth and final part concludes with some recommendations.

Rethinking the youth narrative

'Youth' is a highly context-dependent and fluid signifier. In Africa, there is a fluctuation surrounding the age by which someone is defined as youth (as Figure 1 illustrates). In the West, youth is generally identified with a biological age group – one that is understood as a transitional phase when a person moves from a time of dependence (childhood) to interdependence (adulthood). In Africa, however, youth is never fully reducible to chro-

nology. In fact, the majority of young Africans are defined in terms of social expectations and economic responsibilities. In Sierra Leone, for example, the period of *youthhood* is over when one marries. Boys tend to marry later than girls because of the time it takes them to acquire the money and status required for marriage. Thus, boys remain youth for much longer than girls. Africa's youth are therefore in danger of an 'indefinitely prolonged' youth status, as their efforts to become adults are thwarted (Cruise-O'Brien, 1996: 58). The lack of gainful jobs in many African countries, including Nigeria, pushes an increasing number of youth into a criminal-political economy. This reinforces Patrick Murphy's (2003: 64) 'revolutionary' and 'delinquent' youth models – the former views youth as rebelling against political and socio-economic marginalisation, while the latter views youth not as 'revolutionary idealists' but as 'alienated opportunists exploiting the economic spoils of social turmoil.' Faced with shrinking space to 'grow up' in a traditional sense (that is, to secure a job, get married, start a family, rent a house, support their relatives, and gain social recognition as adults), young men across Africa are often left with violence as the most readily available way of 'proving' their manhood. Thus, Africa's 'youth crisis' should be seen as 'the upshot of the failure of capacious young cohorts to "accomplish" adulthood' (Smith, 2011: 97).

Table 1: Definitions of Youth Age, the Age of Majority¹, and the Age of The Right to Vote in Commonwealth Countries in Africa

Country	Youth age	Majority age	Voting age
Botswana	12-29	19	21
Ghana	15-35	18	18
Malawi	14-25	18	18
Namibia	15-30	21	18
Seychelles	15-30	18	18
Sierra Leone	15-30	18	18
Tanzania	15-35	18	18
Zambia	15-25	21	18
Uganda	18-30	18	18
South Africa	15-35	21	18
Lesotho	12-35	21	18
Zimbabwe	15-30	18	18
Nigeria	12-30	18	18
Swaziland	12-30	21	18
The Gambia	12-30	18	18
Kenya	15-35	18	18
Mozambique	18-35	18	18
Mauritius	14-25	18	18

Source: (Chigunta, 2002:3).

1 The age at which most civil rights are accorded to young people (United Nations 1999, cited in Chigunta, 2002:3).

The field of youth studies is awash with narratives that are heavily skewed towards criminalising 'Africa's restless youth' (Gavin, 2007), especially their propensity to violence and 'rebellion' (Waller, 2006). In his controversial essay 'The Coming Anarchy,' Robert Kaplan (1994: 3) compared West Africa's youth to 'loose molecules in a very unstable social fluid... clearly on the verge of igniting.' Yet such mainstream image of youth as troublemakers need not merely be cast in the negative light; it can also imply 'the productive unsettling of dominant epistemic regimes under the heat of desire, frustration, or anger' (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2011: 268). Contrast, for example, the child soldiers of Sierra Leone, the very symbol of civil disintegration, with the heroic 'young lions' of South Africa, who were harbinger of democracy and played a central role in countering the terrors of apartheid. Another example is post-war Sierra Leone which has seen an upsurge in self-organised social networks, institutions and business cooperatives among youth, as the example of the motorbike taxi riders illustrates. Through these creative ways, Sierra Leonean youths are assuming greater control over their lives, bringing about sustainable change to their situations, and contributing to broader nation-building (Denov, 2010). The key point here is that youth can stand for many things at once: 'for the terrors of the present, the errors of the past, the prospect of a future' (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2011).

While the popular discourse of 'youthhood' in Africa as a problematic transitional period, clearly demarcated from adulthood, tends to be couched in, and defined by, 'fixed and consolidated power arrangements' (Denov & Maclure, 2006: 75), the social theorist Michel Foucault (1981: 71) reminds us that prevailing discourses are fluid and not unassailable: 'We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy.' In Nigeria, youth resistance and opposing strategy tends to occur in hostile socio-economic environments (such as northern Nigeria and the oil-rich Niger Delta) where unemployment and poverty are rife (Agbibo, 2013a, b). As Wyn and Dwyer (1999: 14) argue, 'where structured pathway do not exist, or are rapidly being eroded, individual agency is increasingly important in establishing patterns... which give positive meaning to lives.' Indeed, the resilience and social agency of youth, especially the emergence of ingenious youthful entrepreneurs, is one that is becoming increasingly evident across West Africa and the Sahel. In their paper entitled 'Reflections of Youth: From the Past to the Postcolony,' Comaroff and Comaroff (2011: 277) consider ways in which youthful entrepreneurs in West Africa are bypassing or transcending modernist modes of production. Drawing on examples from the Sahel, they invite readers to consider:

The burgeoning "bush economies" of Cameroon and Chad where "market boys" cross borders, change passports, trade currencies, and traffic in high-risk cargo like guns and drugs; in so doing, they invent fresh ways of getting rich on the margins of global markets. Or consider the ferociously escalating teenage diamond trade

– another amalgam of danger, desire and deregulation – that provisions armies in West and Central Africa, setting up innovative configurations of libertarian commerce, and profit. Or observe the young Mouride men from Senegal who have taken to translocal enterprise with such energy that they talk of New York as “a suburb of Dakar”; their remittances finance reconstruction of urban neighbourhoods at home, transform local power relations, and, concomitantly, highlight the dwindling capacity of the nation-state to sustain its infrastructure (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2011: 277).

The above examples demonstrate that Africa’s youth are making positive contributions and asserting their social agency in their local communities under conditions of great adversity. Unfortunately, such active youth engagement often go unnoticed and are yet to penetrate mainstream literature, which is still directed by narrow perspectives of Africa’s youth-as-trouble and advances a dualistic framework that views Africa’s youth as *either* makers *or* breakers. In the next sections, I offer an alternative perspective to this popular narrative through the lens of local youth resistance to the threat of Boko Haram in northern Nigeria.

The Problem of Boko Haram in Northern Nigeria

‘Boko Haram’ (‘Western education is sin’) is a colloquial name that was ascribed to the jihadist group led by Muhammed Yusuf and his successor Abubakar Shekau because of the content of their doctrine and preaching against Western education (Hausa: *makarantun boko*). However, Boko Haram has rejected this ascription and, instead, propagates the official name *Jama’at ahl al-sunna li-’l da’wa wa-’l-jihad* (Sunnis for Proselytization and Armed Struggle). Muhammed Yusuf (1970-2009), born on 29 January 1970 in Yobe State, founded Boko Haram in 2002 in Maiduguri, the capital city of Borno state, north-eastern Nigeria, with the goal of establishing sharia government under the Senator Ali Modu Sheriff (Governor of Borno, 2003-2011). Yusuf established a following as a *malam* (teacher) and preacher from about 2002, taking a very hard line against secularism and Western influence (Higazi, 2015). Yusuf led Boko Haram until he suffered extrajudicial death in the hands of Nigerian security forces following sectarian violence that broke out in July 2009 and during which an estimated 1,000 Boko Haram members were killed (Agbiboa, 2012, 2014). Before the 2009 security crackdown on Boko Haram, there was significant contact between the group and Borno State government. For example, Alhaji Buji Foi, former Chairman of Kaga local government in Borno and the Religious Affairs Commissioner in Borno when Ali Modu Sheriff was governor, was a member and sponsor of Boko Haram (Mustapha, 2014). The police in Maiduguri executed Foi during the 2009 uprising.

Yusuf established a religious complex in his hometown that included a mosque and a school where poor families from across Nigeria and from neighbouring countries en-

rolled their children. However, the centre had ulterior political goals and soon it was also working as a recruiting ground for future jihadists (Agbibo, 2012). Boko Haram thus includes members who came from neighbouring Chad and Niger and speak only Arabic. The sect was able to attract more than 280,000 members across northern Nigeria and these two countries (Umar, 2011). Boko Haram gained lots of support among the poor and alienated Northern population. This is not unrelated to the fact that Boko Haram, under Mohammed Yusuf, made education and informal jobs available to its marginalised members of the community. Governor of the Borno State, Kashim Shettima, gives us some insight into the appeal of Boko Haram. Shettima argues that despite its misguided ideology, Boko Haram's slain leader Mohammed Yusuf,

retained the loyalty of his supporters by providing one meal a day to each of his disciples. He also had a youth empowerment scheme, under which he helped his disciples to go into petty trading and wheelbarrow pushing. He also arranged cheap marriages between sect members, which enabled many of them to marry, which gave them personal dignity and self-worth (cited in Mustapha, 2012).

A recent analysis of 144 imprisoned Boko Haram members shows that the median age of the group's members is thirty years (United States Institute of Peace [USIP], 2014). This youthful membership is not surprising if we recall that in Nigeria, 'youth' has come to occupy 'a category of risk, it labels a dangerous, insurgent and unpredictable force which threatens the social and political fabric' (Pratten, 2012). Boko Haram's foot soldiers are also drawn from unemployed youth (graduates) and street children (*almajiri*) in northern Nigeria. Recent reports have also revealed that some members in the Nigerian security sector and the government have strong links to Boko Haram. In January 2012, for example, former Nigerian President, Goodluck Jonathan, claimed that 'Some [Boko Haram members] are also in the armed forces, the police and other security agencies' (*Punch*, 2015). Shortly after this rather bizarre claim, in February 2012, the commissioner of police in charge of criminal investigations in Abuja, Zakari Biu, was dismissed from the Nigerian police force for his role in the escape of Boko Haram suspect Kabiru Sokoto. Sokoto is believed to have masterminded the bombing of St. Theresa's Catholic Church in Madalla, Niger State, in which over 40 people died. Sokoto's escape also led to the sacking of the former Inspector General of Police, Hafiz Ringim (*Elombah*, 2012).

Boko Haram's initial doctrinal slant came from the Salafi-inspired reformist group *Jama't Izalat al Bida'a wa Iqamat as Sunna* (Arabic for 'The Society of Removal of Innovation and Reestablishment of the Sunna' - JIBWIS, also widely known as *Izala*). This movement is a *Wahhabi*, anti-Sufi movement established in 1978 in Kaduna by Sheikh Ismaila Idris (1936-2000). It was one of the fast-growing Islamic reform movements in Nigeria, shaped by the teachings of Sheikh Abubakar Gumi, who was Grand Qadi of northern Nigeria. *Izala's* main purpose was to 'purify' Islam from Sufi mysticism and other sup-

posed innovations (*bida'a*) (Umar, 1993: 154-178).² Boko Haram is vehemently opposed to what it sees as a Western-based incursion that threatens traditional values, beliefs, and customs among Muslim communities in northern Nigeria. Yusuf told the BBC in 2009, 'Western-style education is mixed with issues that run contrary to our beliefs in Islam.' Elsewhere, the leader maintained that 'Our land was an Islamic state before the colonial masters turned it to a *kufir* (unbelief) land. The current system is contrary to true Islamic beliefs' (Badar, 2014: 41).

Since July 2009, Boko Haram's message has been decidedly one of *jihad*. This *jihad* seeks to destroy the Nigerian state and anything not Islamic. This includes Christianity in northern Nigeria, which is why so many Christians have been killed and displaced during the insurgency. In addition, any Muslim who opposes Boko Haram was perceived as an apostate or hypocrite (*takfir*). This is why the predominantly Muslim inhabitants of places outside Boko Haram's control, within northern Nigeria, are viewed as justifiable targets for attack. On 28 November 2014, for example, hundreds of people were killed during Friday prayers by bombs launched by Boko Haram fighters (Mustapha, 2014).

Why Boko Haram Rebel

Boko Haram became a full-fledged insurgency following confrontations between the group and Bauchi State's security service, charged with enforcing a new law that required motorcyclists to wear crash helmets. Members of Boko Haram reneged on this law. This led to a violent clash between the state enforcement agencies and the group, which left 17 Boko Haram members injured. Boko Haram mobilized its members for reprisal attacks which led to the deaths of several policemen and civilians. The riot was temporarily quelled in mid-2009 after Nigerian forces captured and killed the Boko Haram leader, Mohammed Yusuf. Following the death of Yusuf under police custody, and the arrest of hundreds of Boko Haram members, the group went underground, but only to recuperate (Agbibo, 2012). Yusuf's death compelled Boko Haram to 'transform itself into a network of underground cells with a hidden leadership – a situation that today makes any military solution illusory' (Marchal, 2012: 3). Boko Haram soon announced its re-emergence with more advanced tactics and sophisticated attacks, including the bombing of police headquarters and UN building in Abuja in 2011. In the first ten months of 2012 alone more than 900 people died in attacks perpetrated by the group - more than in 2010 and 2011 combined (Agbibo, 2012). Recently, Boko Haram's *modus operandi* has involved the use of *gunmen* on motorbikes, assassinating policemen, politicians, or anyone critical of the group, including Muslim clerics who disclose information regarding their whereabouts to state security services (Human

2 *Izala* are now strongly against Boko Haram and in that respect they are a bulwark against the *jihadists*, in Nigeria and Niger.

Rights Watch, 2012). In particular, suicide bombing has become a major strategy and trademark of Boko Haram. A particularly disturbing practice is the use of young children (in several cases, the children used are aged 10 or even younger) to carry out bombings – they are indoctrinated, and then bombs are strapped to their bodies and detonated by the children themselves.

For many Boko Haram members, the extrajudicial killing of their founder, Yusuf, served to foment pre-existing animosities toward the Nigerian government and its security forces. In the group's bid to avenge the death of its founder, almost every individual and group outside its network was impacted, particularly the Nigerian police and army. Boko Haram's most frequent targets have been police stations, patrols, and individual policemen at home or in public including those who were off-duty or retired (Agbibo, 2013a, b). They have used petrol bombs, improvised explosive devices, and armed assaults in these violent attacks (Forest, 2012). In 2012, Boko Haram launched several attacks against police officers, Christians, and perceived moderate or liberal Muslims who allegedly cooperated with the government or opposed the will of the group. Among the demands of the group are the release of its imprisoned members and the prosecution of those responsible for the killing of Yusuf.

Beyond this 'psychology of vengeance,' the extent of relative poverty and inequality in the north has created a fertile ground for the growth of Boko Haram. Isa (2010: 329), for example, argues that Boko Haram communities are wrecked by chronic 'poverty, deteriorating social services and infrastructure, educational backwardness, rising numbers of unemployed graduates, massive numbers of unemployed youths, dwindling fortunes in agriculture... and the weak and dwindling productive base of the northern economy.' For Mustapha (2012), 'Boko Haram is the symptom of the failure of nation-building and democratic politics in Nigeria. It is the misguided cry of a disgruntled youth crushed by the socio-economic system on the one hand and then repressed by the state on the other.' It is this perceived injustice that has de-legitimated the modern secular state in Nigeria in the eyes of Boko Haram members, and made Sharia law increasingly attractive to a large section of the northern population (Mustapha, 2014: 168). Furthermore, the state of alienation from the secular state explains the emergence of 'God's warriors' dedicated to cleansing society through Sharia, as a divine 'cure' to corruption and injustice, and jihad as a legitimate method, embracing death in the process (*ibid*). The power of this doctrinal commitment to 'God's work' may explain why individuals, who are not themselves poor, are nevertheless drawn to Boko Haram. For example, 'children of notable public figures, including a nephew of the then serving Governor of Yobe State, a son of the secretary to Borno State Government, and five children of a local wealthy contractor' all joined Boko Haram at its inception (Mustapha, 2014: 168).

When Mustapha Umar, the suspected Boko Haram member, did not die in his suicide mission to bomb a plaza housing the offices of some newspapers in Kaduna in April

2012, he was reported to have wept bitterly over his failure to die during the mission. Umar reportedly told Nigeria police he 'was unhappy because not dying with victims of the attack had denied him the opportunity to make heaven' (Chiedozie, 2013). What this suggests is that the motivation for Islamist extremism may not lie in immediate economic deprivation or religious indoctrination, but from perverse 'rational' pursuit of 'an afterlife consumption motive' or the search for assurance and security in a changing world (Mustapha, 2014: 168). As the Governor of Borno State, Kashim Shettima, argues:

For me, there are two major factors that drive the Boko Haram sect, which are spiritual belief and economic desires. Those with spiritual beliefs are led into believing that when they kill, they obtain rewards from Allah and the rewards translate into houses in paradise. When they are killed, they automatically die as martyrs and go to paradise straight away. In other words, death is the beginning of their pleasure. Then, whoever they target to kill is an infidel and will go to hell. They mostly target security personnel, government officials and politicians. They also target residents who they assume support government and security agencies or do not share their ideology of being opposed to western education... One dangerous thing about their ideology is their belief that when they attack a gathering or a community, any righteous person in the sight of God, who dies as a result of their attack, will go to paradise, which means they would have assisted the person to go to paradise in good time by their actions, and any infidel killed by their attack will go to hell, which to them is what he or she deserves and no regret for his death. This is the spiritual aspect that drives the sect, to the best of my understanding (Abah and Idris, 2014).

State Responses and Popular Reactions to Boko Haram

The Nigerian state has responded to the Boko Haram crisis with both a 'soft-hand' and a 'heavy-hand,' two approaches best understood as running concurrently rather than sequentially. The soft-handed approach has involved an attempt to engage Boko Haram members in political negotiations and/or dialogue. In April 2013, for example, former Nigerian President, Goodluck Jonathan, established a 26 member amnesty Committee on Dialogue and Peaceful Resolution of Security Challenges in the North, headed by Nigerian Special Duties Minister Kabiru Tanimu and comprised of former and current government officials, religious authorities, and human rights activists. This committee had a three-month mandate to try to convince Boko Haram to surrender its arms in exchange for a state pardon and social integration. However, Boko Haram leader, Shekau, responded to the amnesty entreaties by saying that his group had done no wrong and that an amnesty would not be applicable to them, arguing that it was the Nigerian government committing the atrocities (Chiles, 2013). In a video released on May 13, 2013, Shekau vowed not to cease his group's violent campaigns to establish an Islamic state in Nigeria (IRIN, 2013). A week after Boko Haram's amnesty rejection, the

group launched two devastating attacks. In the first attack, members of Boko Haram, disguised in Nigerian military uniforms, driving buses and machine gun-mounted trucks, laid siege to the town of Bama, Borno State, killing 55 people, mostly police and security forces, and freeing over 100 prison inmates. In the second attack only a few days later, Boko Haram members killed 53 people and burnt down 13 villages in central Nigeria's Benue State where violent confrontations between pastoralists and nomads had been commonplace (Agbiboa, 2013d). Following the attacks, President Jonathan announced that, 'What we are facing is not just militancy or criminality, but a rebellion and insurgency by terrorist groups which pose a very serious threat to national unity and territorial integrity.' Jonathan further stated that, 'it would appear that there is a systematic effort by insurgents and terrorists to destabilize the Nigerian state and test our collective resolve' (Agbiboa, 2014).

Boko Haram's persistent violent campaign led the Nigerian president to revert to a hard approach, declaring a state of emergency on 15 May 2013 in Borno, Adamawa and Yobe – all three northern states where Boko Haram has been most active – in an attempt to restore order and reclaim control of the territories. Jonathan vowed to 'take all necessary action... to put an end to the impunity of insurgents and terrorists,' including the arrest and detention of suspects, assaults on Boko Haram hideouts, the lockdown of suspected Boko Haram enclaves, raids, and the arrests of anyone possessing illegal weapons' (IRIN, 2013). To this end, the government established a special Joint Task Force (JTF) and ordered 8,000 soldiers to the restive region in a direct military offensive against Boko Haram members, the largest military deployment since Nigeria's Civil War (1967-70). However, far too often, members of the JTF have been accused of killing innocent people in the name of counter-terrorism. In Borno State, for example, the JTF resorted to extra-legal killings, dragnet arrests, and intimidation of the hapless Borno residents (Human Rights Watch, 2012). As noted by Solomon (2012: 9) '[f]ar from conducting intelligence-driven operations, the JTF simply cordoned off areas and carried out house-to-house searches, at times shooting young men in these homes.' In a series of interviews with residents in the city of Maiduguri, Human Rights Watch reported that:

During raids in communities, often in the aftermath of Boko Haram attacks, members of the security forces have executed men in front of their families; arbitrarily arrested or beaten members of the community; burned houses, shops, and cars; stolen money while searching homes; and, in at least one case, raped a woman. [In addition] Government security agencies routinely hold suspects incommunicado without charge or trial in secret detention facilities and have subjected detainees to torture or other physical abuse. (Human Rights Watch, 2012: 58)

In a firefight between the JTF and Boko Haram in Baga, a village on Lake Chad near Nigeria's border with Cameroon, up to 187 people were allegedly killed, and 77 others

were injured (*Premium Times*, 2013). At least 2,000 houses, 64 motorcycles, and 40 cars were burnt in the wake of the attack (*ibid*). Notably, residents of Baga accused the JTF, not Boko Haram, of firing indiscriminately at civilians and setting fire to much of the fishing town (Chiles, 2013). This lends evidence to the view that the Nigerian state apparatus 'kills even more civilians than Boko Haram does' (Marchal, 2012: 1).

Both the soft and heavy-handed approaches of the Nigerian government have divided Nigerians along two opposing lines: those who support the use of coercion, and those who support conciliation. Advocates of the coercive approach argue that force rather than dialogue is more effective in dealing with terrorist organizations. As argued by a prominent Nigerian constitutional lawyer, Yahaya Mahmud, the Nigerian government had no choice but to take military actions against Boko Haram:

No government anywhere will allow a group to usurp part of its territorial sovereignty. The declaration of a state of emergency was necessitated by the constitutional obligation to restore a portion of Nigeria's territory taken over by [Boko Haram] which involves the suspension of constitutional provisions relating to civic rights. (Anyadike, 2012)

However, there is a legitimate concern that coercive responses is forcing Boko Haram to shift their bases and arena of violence, with grave consequences for Nigeria's neighbours. As Nigerian political scientist Kyari Tijani has pointed out, 'Boko Haram cannot face Nigerian troops in conventional war; the troop deployment to northern Borno means they will move out to other towns and cities with less military presence and launch guerrilla warfare' (Anyadike, 2012). In recent years, the conflict has become increasingly regionalised because Borno State – Boko Haram's birthplace and stronghold – shares borders with Cameroon, Chad and Niger, with long established economic, religious and ethnic ties across porous boundaries. By February 2015, soldiers from these three border countries were fighting in Borno, confronting Boko Haram in areas that the Nigerian military had retreated from. Predictably, there has been large-scale internal displacement of people, estimated at over one million by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and Nigeria's National Emergency Agency (NEMA). On 3 March 2015 UNHCR stated that 100,000 people had fled northeastern Nigeria into eastern Niger, 66,000 had fled to northern Cameroon, and 18,000 to western Chad (including 15,000 after the attack on Baga in January 2015) (UNHCR, 2015).

Youth Local Resistance to Boko Haram: the Civilian Joint Task Force

An underreported but fundamental aspect of the on-going Boko Haram counter-insurgency is the way in which frustrated youth (*yan gora*) in affected local communities in the northeast are exercising their considerable agency amidst on-going conflict. Armed with machetes and sticks, these local youth are mobilizing themselves against Boko Haram elements in their communities, complementing the counter-terrorism efforts of

the state's Joint Task Force (JTF) (which has now been disbanded and replaced with the army's 7th Infantry Division) and the Multinational Task Force (MJTF) through provision of combat support and intelligence gathering. Far from being lawless mobs, the *yan gora* function as community-based police forces. The emergence of anti-Boko Haram youth vigilantism in Maiduguri occurred from the grassroots, in reaction to the failure of the Nigerian military to protect civilians against Boko Haram. While the *yan gora* originated in acts of necessity undertaken in the face of relentless terror, their noble intentions also have a tenuous existence in the middle of endemic corruption, political factionalism, and electoral machinations that speckles the Nigerian political landscape. Most youth involved in the *yan gora* are largely teenagers without basic education. Some have lost their parents and siblings to Boko Haram attacks and are on a revenge mission. Others have been maimed and incapacitated for the rest of their lives in the process of fighting Boko Haram. Interviewed members of the *yan gora* say they were motivated to organise themselves because they had grown tired of being targeted by both Boko Haram and the state's JTF – in other words, many of these local youth – mostly young men – are caught between Boko Haram and 'government haram.' One member of the *yan gora* reported: 'We are into this to salvage our people from the Boko Haram who had killed our people, security operatives, and destroyed our economy.' Another member noted:

The army took us as the enemy... We didn't see them as here to protect us. [If there was a Boko Haram attack] they don't come on time, they arrest whoever they see, or open fire, or burn shops and houses in revenge... People were pressed to the wall, we needed to stand, to protect ourselves (cited in IRIN, 2014).

The impact of the CJTF is increasingly felt across northeastern Nigeria, but particularly in Maiduguri, the largest city of Borno state, where angry vigilante youth groups (comprising some 500 youths) – officially known as 'Civilian Joint Task Force' (CJTF) – are tracking down Boko Haram members in their communities, whom they turn in to state security forces or kill themselves. The CJTF was formed in Maiduguri in June 2013 and because of its numerical advantage and local knowledge, the CJTF quickly drove Boko Haram out of the city by identifying members house by house. The CJTF has since become regimented into sectors and sub-sectors, with Maiduguri and other hot spots they are defending having sectors and sub-sector leaders. CJTF members operate a number of checkpoints in Maiduguri where they conduct stop and search operations. In doing this, however, they expose themselves to attacks by Boko Haram. In June 2015, for example, a male suicide bomber sent by Boko Haram militants killed three civilians JTF and injured several others at a checkpoint near Maiduguri (*Sahara Reporters*, June 13, 2015).

According to the Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), the *yan gora* are the 'eyes and ears of the security forces... they are often the first responders to trouble' (IRIN, 2014). While armed with only rudimentary weapons such as sticks, knives, and

old rifles, the CJTF's local knowledge, and in some cases personal knowledge of Boko Haram, has helped them identify Boko Haram members in their local communities. In the process, the *yan gora* have helped in the improvement of civil-military relations. In fact, in some areas the *yan gora* fight alongside Nigerian soldiers and provide the military with local intelligence and manpower. However, the relationship between the CJTF and state security forces have not always been cordial, with reported cases of police brutality against some youth vigilantes. In 2014, many angry youth took to the streets chanting anti-military slogans in Hausa: *Sojoji ne Boko Hara, Soja oga Boko Haram* (translation: soldiers are the real Boko Haram; soldiers are the masters of Boko Haram). These youth were angry at soldiers who tried to shield five men who the *yan gora* had arrested. The protest resulted in the death of at least two members of the CJTF, as well as some injuries (Agbiboa, 2014).

The *yan gora* has recorded great success against Boko Haram since its formation in 2013. In March 2014, members of the CJTF killed at least 207 Boko Haram militants who stormed a military barracks and a neighbourhood of Maiduguri. In particular, the CJTF's cooperation with regular security forces has also helped deter attacks in Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State and push the Islamists out into more rural areas. In late 2014 the *yan gora* played a fundamental role in repelling multiple attacks on Konduga, for example, which is critical because the town stands between Maiduguri and Bama, the second city in Borno, which from September until March 2015 was controlled by Boko Haram. According to the Civilian JTF spokesperson and legal adviser, 'We are not going to be weary; we will intensify our efforts by ensuring that our communities are peaceful and the residents are free from attacks and molestation by the misguided insurgents' (*Nigerian Eye*, February 21, 2015).

Given its success in tracking down Boko Haram members, the CJTF has, itself, become a major target of Boko Haram's attacks. While the CJTF succeeded in Maiduguri, it was less so in other insurgency-affected areas. Attempts by the CJTF to carry out operations in some of these areas resulted in heavy casualties. For example, Boko Haram killed at least 100 *yan gora* in 2013 and twice as much in 2014. The *yan gora* were particularly susceptible to ambush and could not defend themselves without military assistance (even with) when heavily armed Boko Haram fighters launched concerted attacks on specific towns or villages. On 5-6 May 2014, Boko Haram attacked the town of Gambaru Ngala where they overpowered the *yan gora* and killed more than 300 people (BBC News Online, 13 May 2014). In January 2015, Boko Haram fighters killed hundreds of the inhabitants of Baga, targeting people of all ages and both sexes. The reason given in a video released by Boko Haram was that the Baga people had been cooperating with the Nigerian military. In June 2015, facts emerged on how hundreds of CJTF members in Borno State were killed while attempting to prevent bomb strapped Boko Haram insurgents from detonating their bombs in large crowds (*All Africa*, 30 June 2015). The

Bornu state political leadership in northern Nigeria have commended the efforts of the *yan gora* to protect their communities from Boko Haram killings, with the Nigerian president describing them as 'new heroes of the nation' (Agbiboa, 2014). According to Governor Kashim Shettima of Borno:

I have never been as proud of our youth in Borno State as much as I am today. The youth have since 2013 rose in firm defence of the good people of Borno State, and today, they have once again proved to all of us, that they have by playing complementary roles, taken our collective destiny in their hands and we are full of gratitude to them for their sacrifices that cannot be sufficiently rewarded (*Information Nigeria*, 2015).

In spite of the CJTF's success, many northern residents and observers have expressed concerns that the *yan gora* are 'hapless victims' and 'brewing trouble' which could transform into new militias or semi-criminal outfit if their activities are not regulated by the state. Some also fear that the actions of the CJTF are inciting Boko Haram to target civilians even more. In this respect, various questions have been raised: What will be the fate of the *yan gora* when the Boko Haram insurgency is degraded and or finally defeated? Will they join or be integrated into the Armed Forces of Nigeria? Will those of them that have been involved in numerous killings be rehabilitated and counselled and reintegrated back to the society? Will the State and Federal Government keep a record of those that participated in the struggle? Will they be compensated and assisted to start a new life? (Okoye, 2015). The popular images and questions surrounding the *yan gora* as 'heroes,' 'hapless victims' and 'brewing trouble' reveal the logic of opposite extremes and ideological norms of youthhood which combine to deny youth agency, as well as to exoticize, decontextualize and essentialize youth experiences (Denov, 2010: 13). In this way, the complexity of the everyday lived realities and actions of youth in northern Nigeria are lost. This is not to trivialise the apprehensions over the possible hijack of the *yan gora* by politicians and or religious extremists. For example, in the 2015 Nigerian elections some of the *yan gora* were mobilised as political thugs. Nonetheless, these growing anxieties should not detract from the current reality that concerned local youth in northern, especially northeastern, Nigeria are taking the initiative to organise themselves and risk their lives (and those of their loved ones) everyday to protect members of their communities from Boko Haram and to support state security forces in their counter-insurgency efforts. As one member of the *yan gora* said:

We are aware of the security situation in the Northeastern states of Borno, Yobe and Adamawa, and it is our duty to ensure that our communities are safe and secure... We are not going to be weary; we will intensify our efforts by ensuring that our communities are peaceful and the residents are free from attacks and molestation by the misguided insurgents (*Punch*, February 21, 2015).

In an effort to sanitize the operation of the CJTF and instil patriotism and discipline in the *yan gora*, the Bornu State government, under Governor Shettima, introduced a reorientation course – known as the ‘Bornu Youth Empowerment Scheme’ (BOYES) – for members of the CJTF. Shettima regarded the first batch of 800 BOYES youth volunteers as the greatest assets of Borno because of their zeal and commitment toward ensuring the immediate return of peace in the state. In Shettima’s words:

[BOYES aims to] ensure our youths discover or rediscover their potentials, enhance these potentials with necessary skills, indoctrinate them into having a better organised love for their fatherland, make them conscious of what goes within and around them, train them to be conscious of the security of wider civilian population without taking laws into their hands so that they can lawfully help in policing their own communities (*Nairaland Forum*, 2013).

In Borno State, most CJTF members now receive \$100 per month from the government (Agbibo 2014; IRIN 2014). However, the government has balked at the idea of arming the *yan gora*. The Bornu State government recently announced its plan to employ over 5,000 Civilian JTF members as street vanguards. According to Alhaji Nasiru Surundi, Bornu Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, the plan is part of the on-going efforts of the state government to ensure healthy, safe and clean environment as well as to create job opportunities for the teeming youth:

... We thought it wise to employ some of our youth as street vanguards to assist us in cleaning shops, markets, streets and government offices. Some of the youths have also been doing stop and search as part of the measures to check Boko Haram insurgents and the state government is paying them monthly. Many of them are also doing the jobs without pay and because we don’t want to leave them idle, we will employ them as our sanitation vanguards and pay them N10,000 monthly (*360 news*, July 24, 2015).

Also, efforts to integrate the *yan gora* into the Nigerian Security Service are underway. Speaking at a two day summit on Security and Governance in the northeast organised by the CLEEN Foundation, Barr Jubril Gunda, legal adviser of the CJTF, disclosed that 360 CJTF members have been integrated into the conventional security agencies including 200 in the Nigerian Army, 120 into the Department of State Service (DSS), and about 40 about to be recruited into the Air force. According to Gunda, the current number of the CJTF members in Borno is 25,000 (*All Africa*, 30 June 2015). Meanwhile, many northern residents and astute observers remain suspicious of the power ceded to the *yan gora*. They recognise that the ‘goodness’ of any action is never absolute, regardless of the evident ‘evil’ of its target. If history has proven anything to Nigerians, it is that power no matter who wields it, will eventually corrupt, as was the case with the ‘Bakassi Boys’ of southeastern Nigeria (McCall, 2004). This notwithstanding, I argue that the Bornu state government’s investment in, and focus on, on youth sensitization and education

is not only key to turning the tide of the Boko Haram menace, but also fundamental to regenerating battle-damaged northern Nigeria. In the book *Youth in Post-conflict Reconstruction*, for example, Stephanie Schwartz (2010) documents a positive scope for youth's roles in post conflict reconstruction that can be enhanced by reintegration, education, employment, and empowerment programmes, as opposed to humanitarian, psychosocial or advocacy initiatives. Schwartz argues that even the programmes with a higher success potential are conditioned on other factors for their effectiveness. For example, *reintegration* was found to be successful when focused not only on family reunification (as in the DRC) but also on community reintegration through acceptance and reestablishment of youth roles (as in Mozambique), which, in turn, might involve vocational training or religious practices, as well as conflict resolution workshops and youth voluntary corps (as in Kosovo) (Schwartz, 2010; Achvarina, 2012: 1093-1095).

Conclusion

A nation that does not take care of its youth has no future, nor does it deserve one.

Oliver Tambo, late president of the African National Congress

This article has underscored the role of local youth in northeastern Nigeria as victims and agents of counter-terrorism. Considering their sheer number, creativity, vital force, and local knowledge, youth in northern, and especially northeastern, Nigeria should be seen as key actors in the on-going battle to defeat Boko Haram. According to a CJTF leader and local hunter: 'We know we don't have the AK-47 and other weapons that Boko Haram fighters have, but we have the heart, we also have dane guns, talismans, and charms. And most importantly, we have God on our side.' Given that the best efforts of the *yan gora* might not be enough in the face of a very sophisticated and ruthless enemy, their gradual integration into the ranks of the Nigerian force and local counter-terrorism operations is a welcomed development. In this respect, it is important to rethink the popular perception of youth in northern Nigeria, and much of Africa, not just as 'a signifier of exclusion, of impossibility, of emasculation, denigration, and futility...' but especially as 'a constant source of creativity, ingenuity, possibility, [and] empowerment' (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2011: 280). Besides from this, to overcome Boko Haram, it is vital to improve intelligence gathering among security agencies in Nigeria and its neighbors; national and regional forces must be proactive in nipping planned Boko Haram attacks in the bud before they are executed. Moreover, critical issues of poverty and youth unemployment, which creates a sense of frustration and hopelessness among youth in (northern) Nigeria, need to be addressed to prevent youth from easy manipulation by political opportunists and religious extremists. In this regard, the BOYES initiative of the Bornu State government is a step in the right direction. Also, in the context of the current Boko Haram insurgency, the payment of some compensation (by the Nigerian

government) to victims of the group's violence, no matter how limited, will go a long way in assuaging their sense of victimization and alienation from the state. Finally, there is need for a concrete ideological intervention to counter the appeal of Boko Haram's violent Salafist ideology.

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