



## COMBATING BOKO HARAM TERRORISM IN NIGERIA: EXPLORING THE ROLE OF LITERACY

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### Abstract

The Boko Haram Terrorist upheaval easily stands out as the worst security challenge Nigeria had ever faced since the end of Nigeria-Biafra Conflict (1967-1970). This devastating insurgency is a hideous war of attrition characterized by guerilla war tactics, deployment of improvised explosive devices, suicide bombings, kidnapping and massive bloodletting. This paper identifies literacy as a critical component in the overall elements leading to the Boko Haram terrorist uprising. The paper is equally primed to locate and properly situate literacy within the entire gamut of elements surrounding the emergence, rise and sustenance of Boko Haram terrorist mayhem in Nigeria. Arising from this study, is the recommendation that government takes immediate action to improve on the literacy level in the flash point States of North East Nigeria.

**Key Words: Boko Haram, Terrorism, Literacy.**

### INTRODUCTION

The Boko Haram terrorist group has since 2009 constituted itself into a formidable threat to the sovereignty and security of Nigerian state. It has, through aggravated acts of extreme violence, mayhem and unrelenting insurgency mounted a morbid campaign of fear and insecurity against Nigeria and other countries within the sub-region. The actual name of this group which is now generally referred to as 'Boko Haram' is 'Jama'atu Ahlus-sunnah lidda'wal Jihad' (Arabic) meaning 'people committed to the prophet's teachings for propagation and Jihad' (Alao, Atere and Alao 2012). The concept of

BokoHaram is a combination of Hausa word (Boko) meaning western education and Arabic word ‘Haram’ which means evil or forbidden – (Enuka and Ojukwu citing Nwogu 2012 and Murtada 2013) a nickname given to the group within the Maiduguri neighborhood at inception to reflect their penchant and avowed hatred for western education and civilization. The conviction of the Boko Haram sect is that what has been constructed as evil in the society is a consequence of western education (Enuka and Ojukwu 2017). This explains how the Boko Haram tag stuck and overshadowed the group’s original identity.

As a ruthless terrorist group, Boko Haram was designated as a foreign terrorist Organization on November 14, 2013 by the United States Department of state ([www.refworld.org](http://www.refworld.org), 2018). In 2015, Boko Haram pledged allegiance to ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria). ISIS accepted the group’s pledge and the group began calling itself ISIS-West Africa (Country Report 2017). Apart from its consuming predilection for Sharia and Islamic state, the other vital driving force is the group’s total rejection and aversion for literacy in the western education tradition. It is like an article of faith, and underscores the guiding principles of the sect’s world view. Herein lies the core of Boko Haram’s philosophy. As a former British colony, Nigeria is a country founded virtually on western civilization, which is basically anchored on western education system. However Boko Haram took advantage of the prevailing high incidence of illiteracy in the North East of Nigeria. In a study by UNICEF, states in North East and North West Nigeria, have female primary net attendance rates of 47.7 percent and 47.3 percent, respectively, meaning that more than half of girls are not in school. In North Eastern and North Western states, 29 percent and 35 percent of Muslim Children, respectively, receive Qu’ranic education, which does not include basic skills such as literacy and numeracy. The government considers children attending such schools to be officially out-of-school. In North Eastern Nigeria, 2.8 Million Children are in need of education-in-

emergencies support in three conflict-affected states (Borno, Yobe, Adamawa). In these states, at least 802 schools remain closed, and 497 classrooms are listed as destroyed with another 1,392 damaged (<https://www.unicef.org.nigeria>, 2013).

This concept of 'Boko Haram' hoodwinked the unwary youths who flocked to join the terror group. Consequently Boko Haram exploited the environment of mass illiteracy and poverty by recruiting members from mainly non-literate population. A wide variety of reasons have been adduced by scholars for the emergence of Boko Haram but this paper while appreciating their contributions identifies the literacy gap as a critical factor in addressing this terrorist implosion. It is within this framework that Omilusi (2016) argues that any counter insurgency project must now include a holistic plan for the compulsory education of northern youths and the economic empowerment of its underclass which will wean its desperate peasantry and disoriented hoi polloi away from the sedulous and seductive lore of the paradisiacal paeans of Islamic militancy.

## **2. Conceptual Clarifications:**

### **Terrorism**

Terrorism is a hideous concept that portends fear and danger. It connotes terror and conveys destruction against mostly unarmed persons. It is also relative and could mean different things to different people. According to Kaarbo and Ray (2011) the standard summary to this controversy asserts that 'one person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter' because terrorism is a highly charged political term used by most people to refer to political violence, any other political tactic of which they disapprove. The Middle East crisis between Israel and the Palestinians captures the competing perceptions of terrorism. Grenville (2002) had argued that in these conflicts with the Palestinians, the Israelis claim the moral high ground by pointing to the means their opponents employ, notably suicide bombings. The Palestinians in contrast, focus on ends.

Israel they argue is intent on continuing its occupation of the west Bank and the Gaza strip. Opposing this occupation is legitimate in their eyes, and the huge disparities in strength leave them no alternative to terrorism. From whatever angle one tries to explain terrorism, the bottom-line is that it involves violence against mainly defenseless people to achieve a political goal.

Johnson (1984) defined terrorism as the deliberate, systematic murder, maiming and political menacing of the innocent to inspire fear in order to gain political end. Terrorism is a reckless abuse of violence by its perpetrators which are largely non state actors and some states, which sponsor terrorist activities. It is a horrendous and destabilizing experience, which usually threatens the sovereignty and peace of a country and undermines the state and government of the day.

Kaarbo and Ray (2011, citing Title 22 of the US Legal Code (section 2651d1) defines terrorism as pre meditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by sub-national groups or clandestine agents. In his own contribution Graham (2004, citing Keohane 2002 and Hewith, 2003) conceives terrorism as ‘deliberately targeted surprise attacks on arbitrarily chosen civilians, designed to frighten other people’, terror is armed or brutal force against those who can be terrorized....ie, who cannot fight back.

### **Literacy**

Literacy is essentially conceived and understood within the context of being able to read and write. However it has gone beyond that simplistic connotation. Alberta education (2018) defines literacy as the ability, confidence and willingness to engage with language to acquire, construct and communicate meaning in all aspect of daily living. Language is explained as a socially and culturally constructed system of communication.

Literacy is both culturally bound and cuts across cultures. It is the first step towards the development of the mind to fully understand and participate in the complex dynamics of the human society. The UNESCO Institute for statistics defined literacy as the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society (UNESCO, 2004, 2017). Other international Organizations or Assessment programmes also have their own definitions of literacy.

For the European literacy network; (European Declaration of the Right of Literacy) literacy refers to the ability to read and write at all levels whereby individuals can effectively understand and use written communication in all media (print or electronic) including digital literacy. Given the scope of the concept of literacy, it is easily discernible to appreciate the role or place of literacy in the process of national development. It is both critical and fundamental and represents the basis of all forms of social transformation.

The immense relevance and impact of literacy has been duly recognized by the UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) which produced the human development index using education as one of its indications. (en.m.wikipedia.org, 2018) literacy is equally considered as a basic human right-essential for lifelong learning and social change. As supported by the 1996 Report of the International Commission on Education, for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, and the 1997 Hamburg Declaration, “Literacy broadly conceived as the basic knowledge and skills needed by all in a rapidly changing world is a fundamental human right.... There are millions, the majority of whom are women who lack opportunities to learn or who have insufficient skills to be able to assert their

rights.. Literacy is also a catalyst for participation in social, cultural, political and economic activities. (en.m.wikipedia.org,2018).

### **3. Emergence of Boko Haram**

The group that later metamorphosed into the Boko Haram terror group as we know it today began as a disparate band of Islamic youths who worshiped at the Indimi mosque in Maiduguri, Borno State. These youths led by Mohammed Yusuf came under the tutelage of a cleric in the wahhabi-salafist tradition named Ja'afar Mahmud Adam, who was widely known as Sheikh Ja'afar. (Smith, 2015). This fold of religious zealots, in the course of time began to identify with leading politicians in Borno State as militias in the process leading to the 2003 General elections in Nigeria.

According to Abba (2012) the militias were allegedly armed and were used extensively as political thugs. After the elections, and having achieved their primary purpose, the politicians left the militias to their fate since they could not continue funding and keeping them employed. With no visible means of sustenance, some of the militias gravitated toward religious extremism. Mohammed Yusuf who later became the protagonist of the Boko Haram ferment suffered the same fate. His group worked assiduously for the election of Ali Modu sheriff as governor of Borno State in 2003 with the understanding that sheriff will institute strict Sharia law in the state. In line with this assurance, Mohammed Yusuf nominated a member of the Boko Haram sect, named Boji Foi to be appointed the commissioner for Religious Affairs in Borno State. However, the governor reneged on his promise of instituting strict Islamic law in Borno State. As a result, the Yusuf group (Boko Haram) technically withdrew its support for the State Government and pursued its own separate

agenda of realizing the institution of Sharia law across Nigeria (worldwatchmonitoring.org 2019). In the unfolding circumstances, Boko Haram provided sanctuary to criminal elements, social deviants, dregs of society and indeed the hoi polloi who were drawn by the rabid demagoguery of Mohammed Yusuf under the banner of fanatical Islam. With his rising profile and cult figure status, Mohammed Yusuf broke away from the main stream Islam of the Indimi Mosque and charted his own uniquely outlandish course.

Owolade (2014) observed that Yusuf built a mosque in the north east to propagate his own teaching against western education. His teachings largely attracted many dissatisfied youths who having been indoctrinated to believe that western education is forbidden, rejected the western schools which they were already attending. Slowly but steadily, Yusuf built a reputation for himself and his group: that of utter rejection for western education and civilization and the inevitability of Jihad as the surest means to realize the Eldorado of Islamic state in Nigeria. He saw Nigeria as a creation of British colonialism that was fraught with errors. He believed that Boko Haram would correct that mistake. According to Smith (2015 citing Marc Antoine Perouse de Mont Clos 2014), Yusuf felt that British Colonialism and the creation of Nigeria had imposed an unIslamic way of life on Muslim through all the layers of a modern state – western school, a western legal system, western democracy... He advocated the development of an Islamic state where Muslims principles and Sharia law would be obeyed. From 2002 to 2008 marked the formative stage of Boko Haram during which period, Yusuf strived to achieve the first segment of the sect's goal: that of propagating the teaching of the prophet. However, various scholars have accused Yusuf of departing from authentic Islamic teaching to espousing militant and radical views mostly out of context with the Koran. No less a person than his teacher, Sheik Ja'afar out of exasperation for the heresy he was spreading boldly rebuked Yusuf thus: You are not a prophet. You have not

yet proven your faith or moral character to your neighbors. If it took prophet Mohammed 23 years preaching Islam, for how many years have you preached before you decided to judge Muslims as unbelievers because they have western education, or because they work for the government. You did not have sufficient religious knowledge or even enough general knowledge. You only know about your little town. Smith (2015).

It is against this backdrop of questionable academic, religious and moral credentials that Yusuf began the second phase of the Boko Haram agenda – that of jihad when his group confronted Nigerian security forces in 2009 – an incident that later snowballed into unrelenting terrorist attack on the Nigerian State. Unfortunately for Yusuf he lost his life in the midst of violence within that period. Boko Haram thrived on a system that was intrinsically chaotic. For six years (2002-2008) the group acted as law unto itself without scant regard for constituted state authority. Yusuf took advantage of an inchoate Nigerian state apparatus, corrupt and inept leadership at all levels of society, crippling poverty in the midst of ostentatious display of wealth, and a suffocating culture of anomie among the people. The Boko-Haram proponent saw a society without hope or direction. He saw the people's alienation, fervor of discontent and hopelessness, and decided to impose his own perception of an ideal Islamic society. Ezenwa (2019).

According to Agbo (2011) the ideological mission of Boko Haram is primarily to overthrow the Nigerian state and the impose strict Islamic Sharia Law on the entire country. Their main enemies are the ruling class or government and the educated elite (Akinfala, Akinbode and Kemmer, 2014). Emphatically in their own words 'we want to reiterate that we are warriors who are carrying out Jihad (Religious war) in Nigeria and our struggle is based on the tradition of the Holy Prophet. We would never accept any system of government apart from the one stipulated by Islam, because that is the way that the Muslim can be liberated



(Suleiman, 2011). The terrorist group actually took Nigeria by storm and surprise. The depth and breadth of the colossal carnage the group unleashed on the country has ruffled Nigerian military establishment. The group is responsible for numerous attacks in the north east of Nigeria and the lake Chad Basin in Cameroon, Chad and Niger that have killed thousands of people since 2009.

According to *Information Nigeria* (2018) Boko Haram has killed a large number of people and has also rendered well over 2 million people homeless, many property and farmlands in the remote parts of north east destroyed. The group terrorist activities ignite humanitarian crisis and acute food shortage which left thousands of people in famine, while many have become dependent on aid agencies for food, water, shelter and healthcare. After what could be regarded as the first baptism of fire in a violent encounter with Nigerian security forces in July 2009, the Boko Haram sect went underground. The group resurfaced in 2010 under the new leadership of Abubakar Shekau to mount a string of well coordinated attacks across some northern states. The attacks while using mostly basic weapons, nevertheless reveals a level of coordination and capacity that the authorities seem to have underestimated, with violence in four states: Kano, Bauchi, Yobe and Borno. Smith (2015).

Thereafter, Boko Haram embarked on series of attacks through bomb explosions, suicide bombings and other forms of violence. Between May and June 2011, Boko Haram raised the bar of terrorism when it carried out bomb explosions at President Jonathan's inauguration in Abuja and successfully sponsored suicide bomb attack on the Building housing the Office of the Inspector General of Police, with varying degrees of casualties. From January 2013 to March 2015, 356 reported incidents can be attributed to Boko Haram in Borno, Adamawa, Yobe, Plateau, Kano, the Federal Capital Territory (Abuja) Gombe, Kaduna, Bauchi in Nigeria. Occasionally in Cameroon (since February

2013) and Niger (Dumba and Diffa since January 2015) which led to the killing of over 8000 civilians and following military operations since February 2015, during which territories previously held by Boko Haram were recaptured, mass graves or other sites with decomposed bodies were discovered allegedly containing bodies of civilians killed by Boko Haram (Nicholas 2015). Against this rising tide of terrorism cycle, the US Africa Command (AFRICOM) Commander Cater F. Hamlin on September 2011 listed Boko Haram as one of the three African Terrorist groups. The others are Alshabab of Somalia and AlQuaeda in the Islamic Maghreb across the Sahel region. He observes that they ‘have very explicitly and publicly voiced intent to target westerners and US specifically’ and that he was concerned with ‘the voiced intent of the three Organizations to more closely collaborate and synchronize their efforts (Mojeed, and Schmitt, 2011). In the last decade, Boko Haram maintained a fairly consistent aggression against the Nigerian state, with uninspiring counter measures from Nigerian security forces. Boko-Haram therefore emerged on the throes of a broken and shattered society – a society without order or rule of law, a people mired in the cesspool of corruption, under the choking grip of a predator state. If Nigerian State was not so debased and distorted, Mohammed Yusuf could not have groomed and nurtured his group between 2002 and 2008 under the very nose of security forces, and no attempt was made to nip it in the bud before the mayhem of 2009. Ezenwa (2019).

#### **4. Boko Haram Terrorism and Literacy**

The single most persuasive and compelling issue in the Boko Haram doctrine of resistance and terror is the ruthless attack on western education. Given the state of backwardness in the access and availability of educational institutions in Borno State and the north east of Nigeria generally, the anti-western education propaganda of the Boko Haram sect gained a major foothold. It may also be necessary to observe that the distrust between fanatical Islam and western

education had existed before Boko Haram. Dikki (2017 citing wood 2011) contends that Maududi – the progenitor of Islamic fundamentalism and a strong influence on Yusuf ‘laments the corrupting influences of secular western education on Muslim youths. ‘Corrupted secularist Muslims’, Maududi avers, reconfigure Islam along Christian lines. There is therefore an existing culture of mistrust and suspicion of western education and values by a section of the Muslim religion especially the fundamentalist strain like the Sunni sect (salafism). It is therefore a cardinal principle of the Boko Haram group to destroy all structures associated with western education. This is in line with the teachings and doctrine of wahhabism movement – a Sunni Islamic fundamentalist group which advocates a strict form of adherence to the Sharia law and its implementation in Nigeria (David 2011). While this anti-western education campaign of Boko Haram raged, some scholars as noted by Mba et al (2015 citing Oloja, 2013) stated that individual and group grievances such as poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, discrimination and economic marginalization can be used as mobilizing instruments by sinister groups to find support and recruits for terrorist activities. Although literacy was tangentially included, this paper *contends that the leading factor of primary significance is the literacy vacuum – a syndrome that generates other systemic problems*. This syndrome of literacy vacuum was captured by Eme and Onyishi (2014) without assigning it the due status of primacy when they observed that a number of factors were responsible for violent conflicts in Nigeria. These include poverty, unemployment, religious influences, ethnic rivalry, growing acculturation, resources control agitations and ignorance. Most critical of these factors however is **IGNORANCE** which leads to suspicion and mistrust. Ignorance within the context of literacy naturally elicits inadequacy, self doubt and fear of being exploited or marginalized in virtually all aspects of socio-economic and political activities. The ill-educated one is a cheap target of wanton indoctrination without capacity for discernment. As a result, the non-literate

group is prone to be swayed by all manner of persuasions especially one with religious bent like the notion that ‘Allah forbids western education’. The magic wand of Boko Haram was to exploit the gullibility of the unwary masses with the promise of paradise in the hereafter. To prove its anti-literacy stance, Boko Haram began series of lethal attacks on Educational Institutions in the North East and beyond. The first causality was the Gombe State University where Akhoragbon (2012) reports the bombing and destruction of the building housing the University Senate. Next was the Bayero University Kano where Muslim worshippers in the university were bombed on April 29, 2012, which resulted in the death of two professors and 17 others (Adamu, 2012). The Nigerian media also got their share of the Boko Haram insurgency, when the Abuja office of This Day Newspaper was bombed simultaneously with its office in Kaduna alongside the Sun and Moments Newspapers on April 26, 2012, killing 8 persons and destroying several cars (Ahokegh 2012). Boko Haram attacks on education was ferocious. It recognized literacy as the gateway to enlightenment and understanding of social change. The terrorists knew that it was only in an environment characterized by mass illiteracy that its antics and ploys of recruiting innocent youths as suicide bombers and underage fighters could flourish ostensibly in the name of Allah. It is vital to observe here that Yusuf according to his own account did not have any formal education (Anonymous, 2012).

In March 2002, some 12 public schools in Maiduguri were burnt down during the night with as many as 10,000 pupils forced out of education, (Eme and Onyishi 2014). Boko Haram is its rabid obsession against western education through its leader Yusuf, questioned the scientific principles of a spherical earth and source of rain. Yusuf urged his followers to ignore the notion of a spherical earth, the Darwinian principle of evolution and the concept of rain originating

from water evaporated by the sun because the knowledge is contrary to Islamic teaching (BBC News 2009).

According to UNICEF (2015) since the beginning of Boko Haram insurgency, in 2009, over 1.8 million people have been displaced from their homes across North East Nigeria. An estimated 3 million children need emergency education support so that they can get back to school. Over 2295 teachers have been killed, 19,000 displaced and almost 1,400 schools destroyed in North East Nigeria since the start of the Boko Haram insurgency. Easily described as the height of Boko Haram assault on literacy and education was the abduction of 276 Chibok school girls in April 2014 (Human Right Watch 2014), which set off a global alarm of consternation and condemnation. The attack on education and literacy by Boko Haram insurgents negates and stultifies the human development process in the North East of Nigeria. It arrested, distorted and totally disarticulated the cause of education and knowledge through literacy. As a result, the affected societies were returned to the state of nature with innocent and impressionable youths being reduced to suicide bombers and under age fighters. Boko Haram literally suspended civilization and development of a people in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. To underscore the liberating influence of literacy, Burns ([www.brookings](http://www.brookings) 2018) asserted that enlightenment through education remains the most powerful tool of challenging authority and liberating the human mind, an inspiration to leaders and followers world wide, a method for effective change and a framework of values by which that change can be measured.

Literacy empowers the people to regain their humanity, to stand for themselves. It equips the youths with the knowledge to identify and realize their potentials. According to Zoulay (2018) literacy is the first step towards freedom, toward liberation from social and economic constraints. It is the prerequisite for development, both individual and collective. It reduces poverty and inequality,

creates wealth and helps to eradicate problems of nutrition and public health. Boko Haram fights literacy because of its liberating value. The terror sect recognized the ripple effect of literacy on the development of the human capital and struggles to destroy it. Literacy represents the most assured means to recreate the north east region and weaken the stranglehold of Boko Haram terrorism. It is more enduring and promising as a counter insurgency option and engaging developmental paradigm. As a development strategy, literacy rate impacts the development of the country in the following ways:

- i. High literacy affects the quality of the human population.
- ii. It makes them more aware and politically vigilant.
- iii. It makes a human resource more of an asset than a liability.
- iv. High literacy rate will allow people to avail better job employment opportunities and contribute to the growth of the economy (<https://www.brainly.in>,2019).

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## **Conclusion**

It is evidently obvious that Boko Haram terrorism is inexorably tied with the group's avowed determination to destroy literacy in the North East of Nigeria and beyond. The sect's campaign of terror is predicated on the principle of anti-literacy, a brutal attack on western education and all that it stands for. By extension, the terror sect opposes western civilization and values.

This paper therefore contends that the attack on literacy was the decisive driving factor in the Boko Haram terror campaign in Nigeria. Through its sustained teaching that 'western education is a sin or forbidden, the terror group garnered support among people in the North East and beyond with many youths enlisting to fight under the inspiration of Boko Haram for what they hardly understood. The defeat of Boko Haram terrorism will not come through the barrel of the gun or other forms of military counter terrorism strategy. To degrade and ultimately defeat Boko Haram would be achieved through the process of compulsory mass literacy programme for the children and youths of school age in the North East states and indeed across the whole Northern Nigeria in view of its endemic literacy challenges.

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