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Boko Haram’s Dual Narrative

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Boko Haram has traditionally been reported by Western media as a radical Islamic terrorist organization with the sole intent of imposing Sharia law.¹ This essay will reveal that a different narrative exists within African media. This latter account does not reckon Boko Haram exclusively and consistently as a religiously motivated terrorist group. By supporting Adam Muhammad Ajiri, professor of Islamic studies’ claim, this second narrative portrays Boko Haram as “a faithless Muslim organization engaged in carnage”.²

The Qatari media company, *Al Jazeera*, argues that Boko Haram is the consequence of Nigeria’s incapability of granting opportunities to bucolic and semi urban youth.³ Founded in 2002 by Mohammed Yusuf, Boko Haram attracted unemployed youth by confronting “police violence, corruption, poverty, and poor governance”.⁴ Since Mohammed Yusuf had been killed in 2009 amid an arrest carried out by the Nigerian government, Boko Haram had initially began killing corrupt Muslims in the government.⁵ The recent calamity that garnered international attention was the Chibok kidnapping of 276 schoolgirls on April 14 2014, of which has been famously broadcasted by Michelle Obama’s participation in the #BringBackOurGirls campaign.

The intent of this essay is to evaluate the way in which Western media has used the Chibok kidnapping to portray Islam in contradistinction to African media’s portrayal of Boko Haram. This paper will accomplish this first by revealing African newspapers portrayal of Boko Haram as a

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³Ibid.
⁴Ibid.
⁵Ibid.
functioning apparatus in comparison to simplified Western preconceptions about Boko Haram, then it will show how these preconceptions affected the way in which the kidnapping had accrued two different responses. This essay will argue that Western media has used this catastrophe to make Boko Haram synonymous with Islam while African media portrays the complexities of granting Boko Haram a united identity. Following this broad evaluation of Boko Haram, this study will then evaluate articles pertaining exclusively to the Chibok kidnapping crisis. In conclusion, the evaluation of the covering of the Chibok kidnapping will portray a Western “media packaging” that implicitly “sends the message that there can be no peace when Arabs and Africans live within the same borders”.6

This evaluation will begin by showing how African media, as it regards Nigeria in recent years, has to some extent emerged as a reaction to the Western “Islamization” of Boko Haram. In an article concerning an Amnesty International Report, Tobi Soniyi, a writer for the Nigerian national newspaper This Day, questions the motivation behind Boko Haram’s actions by rejecting the commonplace Arab terrorist versus Christian civilian’s simplification.7 Tobi, in reference to the AI report asserted that women, boys, girls, Christians and Muslims, have all been victims of Boko Haram insurgents, of which has ultimately affected millions of people.8 Tom Odhiambo, writing for Daily Nation, a Kenyan independent newspaper, refashions Tobi’s claims by saying that Boko Haram “claims to be fighting for the interests of Muslims in Nigeria but it murders Muslims and Christians alike.”9 Similarly, Simon Allison, a journalist for the South African

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6Mahmood Mamdani, Saviors and survivors: Darfur, politics, and the war on terror (Wandegeya, Kampala, Uganda: Makerere Institute of Social Research (MISR), 2013), 65.
8Ibid.
newspaper *The Mercury* makes the peculiar claim that much of what Shekau – the leader of Boko Haram – does is “at odds with his self-proclaimed beliefs.” An example of this contradiction is prevalent in The Association of Muslim Brotherhood of Nigeria who have argued that there is no prohibition of Western education in Islam. This is an important claim for a group whose name means, "Western education is sacrilege.

The fact of the matter, as portrayed predominantly though not exclusively by African sources, is that Boko Haram diverges from its proposed Islamic beliefs once it violates basic Islamic tenets. For instance, Abdul-Hameed Olawale, a writer for the *Daily Trust*, a newspaper out of Abuja, explicates this very issue. In his newspaper article entitled *Boko Haram Negates the Tenets of Islam - Professor*, Olawale reports on the Vice Chancellor of Fountain University, Professor Bashiru Ademola Raji. Professor Rajil, as pronounced by Olawale, “has described the activities of Boko Haram sect as anti-Islam”. Professor Rajil supports his claim by showing that Islam cannot be traced to Boko Haram because Islam forbids the “shedding of blood of innocent people” while Boko Haram has so clearly violated this fundamental tenet. Rehashing this claim, a South African newspaper states that there are “numerous verses in the Qur'an that may be mentioned which point to the contradiction of Boko Haram's behavior.” To further complicate the matter, Mr. Okey Wali, the president of the Nigerian Bar Association, as revealed in an article

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14 Ibid.
by the Lagos newspaper *This Day*, noted “there existed three Boko Haram's - the political Boko Haram, the religious Boko Haram and the criminal Boko Haram.”

In sum, a common theme in African media’s coverage of Boko Haram is that there is skepticism about the presence of Islam in Boko Haram. Such skepticism threatens the belief that Boko Haram's aim is to instill a Caliphate but leads one to wonder if *Al Jazeera* is correct in implying that the ideology of Boko Haram, beginning with Mohammed Yusuf, is still based on the gap between the rich and the poor.

In stark contradistinction, we gain a different account of Boko Haram from Western newspapers. As we shall see, the Western account of Boko Haram does not allow for the surfacing of vital questions such as: what is Islam? What should be considered a terrorist organization? Why has the Western world failed to discern Islam from terrorism? And, has Nigeria become a site where the language of terrorism has been “turned into an instrument”? These are all questions that are marginalized in Western coverage of Boko Haram. And so, in preventing these questions from being asked, Western media outlets like *US Official* have been able make radical declarations such as “urge[ing] the international community, the UN, ICC, EU and US to recognize Boko Haram’s actions as a genocide” while African sources largely refer to Boko Haram and its actions as the result of an ongoing insurgency. Ergo, we will now further examine the relationship between ISIS and Boko Haram as portrayed by Western and African media.

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17 “Boko Haram”, *Al Jazeera*.
A newspaper article by *US Official News*, entitled “ISIS and Boko Haram”, attempts to relay the similarities between the global terrorist organization ISIS and Nigeria's Boko Haram.\(^1\) This article refers to a recent post by Graeme Wood in the March *Atlantic*, in which analyzed ISIS. In the *Atlantic*, ISIS was deemed a “religious group with carefully considered beliefs, among them that it is a key agent of the coming apocalypse.”\(^2\) Though what is interesting is that the *US Official News* article claims that this definition, of which was created for ISIS, also fits Boko Haram.\(^3\) The article then goes on to explain that both ISIS and Boko Haram have “expressed mutual admiration”.\(^4\)

To understand Western media in the context of Nigeria’s fight against Boko Haram, one must first evaluate Western coverage of Abubakar Shekau’s “sworn allegiance to Islamic state” via an Arabic audio message posted to Twitter on March 7, 2015.\(^5\) On the one hand, African sources have argued that Boko Haram’s professed allegiance was an act of attention seeking\(^6\) and “superficially impressive propaganda”.\(^7\) While in juxtaposition, Western sources interpreted the Shekau pledge to be a sign that Boko Haram is parting from its traditional focus of the obliteration of the Nigerian state and pursuing a more international status.\(^8\) This Western narrative espouses

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\(^2\)Ibid.
\(^3\)Ibid.
\(^4\)Ibid.
Boko Haram’s pledge to Islam as “potentially damaging to American interests”.

This narrative is achieved by making Nigeria appear ahistorical.

While the aforementioned “ISIS and Boko Haram” article admits there are “significant differences beyond their differing geographies and circumstances”, it barely goes into any historical or political contextual evaluation of ISIS in relation to Boko Haram. Despite the implications and weight of some of these claims surfaced in *US Official*, this article does not exceed 650 words. Terror organizations, as portrayed through Western media, are built in historical vacuums where terrorism arises exclusively from its innate wickedness. In contrast, the *Chronicle*, a Ghanaian Newspaper, relates Nigeria's historical context to its current instability and hence the rise of Boko Haram. In an article entitled, “The Boko Haram Menace (3) - Clear and Present Danger”, I.K. Gyasis reminds us of the chaos that Britain had instilled in Nigeria by ruling it as three distinct countries. According to Gyasis, “the North [was] dominated by the Hausa-Fulani people, the West [was] controlled by the Yoruba, and the East with the Ibos in power”. He then goes on to explain how the British left Nigeria in a weakened state by referring to Nigeria like a house of cards ready to collapse.

A historical context in this sense exposes British involvement in the creating of instability via grave economic disparity. Such exposure—of which places a heavy burden of blame on Britain—is masked through Western accentuation with terrorism. As implied by a *BBC* article that attempts to place Nigeria’s conflict with Boko Haram in a historical context *beginning* with the year 2002, Western media is concerned with something other than truth. Ergo,

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29 Ibid.


31 Ibid.

it is the imminent threat of terrorism that is used as a shock doctrine\textsuperscript{33} to turn our attention away from a convoluted past.

In short, while African sources reveal the Nigerian concern for a stable and secure Nigerian state, Western media conveys a tedious and futile update over what terrorist organizations Boko Haram has communicated with and whether Boko Haram will one day hinder the autonomy of the United States to engage in free trade with Africa’s leading oil producer.\textsuperscript{34}

This Western emphasis on terrorism is lucid in the first line of a \textit{New York Times} article by Eric Schmitt. Schmitt says, “An oath of allegiance from Boko Haram...to the Islamic State on Saturday reinforces Western fears that the terrorist group is growing beyond its base in Iraq and Syria.”\textsuperscript{35} This Western obsession with the term “Islam” rather than with the stability of the country of Nigeria implies that Western concerns with Boko Haram are based off of self-interest. Such comparing and contrasting of Boko Haram with other self-proclaimed Islamic organizations does nothing to assist in Nigeria’s hope for security. Schmitt goes on to explain how Western militarization became an option only as a result of a pervasive terrorist ideology that might threaten Western nations directly. He says that, “These worries have prompted American and allied commandos to rush to train African counterterrorism troops to fight extremists on the continent.”\textsuperscript{36} By “these worries” Schmitt is not talking about the thousands of innocent civilians who have been killed and displaced in Nigeria as a result of Boko Haram’s presence, but rather, the possibility of


\textsuperscript{36}Ibid.
a growing Islamic presence in the world. Given these two distinct perspectives of Boko Haram, we will now evaluate how each conception has led to its peculiar coverage of the Chibok kidnapping in 2014.

If one wants to understand the Western perception of the Chibok kidnapping, they need not go to great lengths. In response to the Chibok kidnapping in 2014, the *New York Times* published an article shortly after the mass abduction, entitled “The Kidnapping of a Country”. It is this exaggeration of conflict in Nigeria that Bayo Oladeji, a writer for *Leadership*, believes is an exemplar of Western misrepresentation of the Chibok Kidnapping. Bayo Oladeji cites Nigeria's ambassador to the United States, Professor Adebowale Adefuye, in his claim that Western media was blowing the atrocities in Nigeria out of proportion. In the same article Professor Adefuye is cited saying that, Western media, hence the aforementioned *New York Times* article, has falsely implied that the “entire region of Nigeria is unsafe but I have to say it clearly that it is only three states out of the 36 in the entire federation that are experiencing Boko Haram's attacks.”

It is evident that “The Kidnapping of a Country” exaggerates Boko Haram’s presence and influence in the region, and thus unfairly treats the Nigerian government by first implying that they are incapable of dealing with their domestic problems and secondly, by deceiving one into thinking Boko Haram has assumed political and economic control over the nation. One may wonder if this exaggeration, by emphasizing Islam, is intended to motivate the Western world to provide military or economic assistance to the Nigerian government in their fight against Boko Haram.

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39 Ibid.
40 Oduah, “The Kidnapping of a Country”.
Now we must evaluate how this general ignorance present in Western media encourages an “Islamisation” of Boko Haram that emphasizes the horrors of terrorism over the security of Nigeria. Once again, such an emphasis rests upon the assumption that terrorism emerges ex nihilo. While Nigerians appear to be concerned with their welfare and future security, as reflected in their media, Western media reveals a desire to neatly integrate the Chibok kidnapping into the war on terror.41

“The Kidnapping of a Country” by Lauren Bohn and Chika Oduah, refers to Boko Haram as a “militant Islamist separatist” group.42 The extent to which this article confronted the question of Islam and Boko Haram consisted of a quick excerpt from a call in guest from a Nigerian radio station.43 Cited from 95. 1 FM, a Nigerian caller asked a vital question, of which was never addressed in the Times article.44 The caller was cited saying, in regard to Boko Haram, that “we just don't know who these people are or what exactly they want to do.”45 As suggested earlier, the answer to this question is not as straightforward as it may appear. Rather than considering the varying perspectives relevant to the identity and motivation of Boko Haram, this Times article moves on as if the answer to that question was a given: Boko Haram are “militant Islamist separatist”46 as noted in the opening sentence. Then, before further harping on the instability in Nigeria, the article cites a Nigerian “uniform man holding a half chewed mango” who wondered why Boko Haram wanted to impose Sharia law even though Nigeria is not an Islamic state.47 The question—despite the articles attempt to depreciate the worth of this inquiry by not giving this man

41Mamdani, Saviors And Survivors, pg 63.
42Oduah, “The Kidnapping of a Country”.
43Ibid.
44Ibid.
45Ibid.
46Ibid.
47Ibid.
a name or a specific occupation – is another important question to consider. But once again, rather than considering the vast array of possible answers to this question, the article moves on to underscore a “pornography of instability” to revise Mahmood Mamdani’s phrase.48

The final point of divergence between African and Western media has to do with the post-kidnapping coverage. More specifically, this part of the essay will reveal how Western media underlines the schoolgirls’s conversion and introduction to Islam at the expense of the broader implications of the kidnapping. An excerpt from a *Times* article, published six months after the kidnapping, expressed this concern in stating that, “Boko Haram singles out mostly Christians, threatening them with death if they do not convert to Islam, and forcing teenagers into "marriages" with Boko Haram fighters.”49 While this is an important concern—when taken as the only consequence of the kidnapping—it can only hinder Nigeria’s efforts of gaining an effective dialogue with Boko Haram. For example, the Nigerian paper *This Day* supported Mr. Okey Wali when he “urged the federal government to engage Boko Haram insurgents in dialogue to achieve meaningful peace and progress in Nigeria”.50 Many Western sources by underscoring the Christianity of the girls versus the radical Islamism of Boko Haram have put a wedge in the dialogue that is essential for reconciliation, and hence bringing the schoolgirls back home. Because Western media is intended for its own Western audience, it is not surprising that we find the following excerpt in a *Daily News* article: “A MAN claiming to be the leader of an Al Qaeda-trained terrorist group holding 223 girls” abducted them from an Nigerian school. 51 Given Al Qaeda’s history with the United States, the attention is drawn away from reconciliation dialogue

48Mamdani, *Saviors And Survivors*, pg. 66.
to bring back the girls and is meant to surface fear in its Western audience. To its Western audience, the name “Al Qaeda” is a red flag, and was thus a strategic maneuver to convey an African conflict in a way that Westerners can understand and sympathize with. The Western world, through its prejudices, has become numb to the vast array of atrocities that occur in the distant land called Africa. African conflict, in the eyes of the Westerner, has become normalized. Media outposts, to combat this normalization, have learned that to attain a Western audience they must present African conflicts in a way that is easily comprehensible, menacing, and most importantly, familiar. In a Western world that has recently witnessed the 9/11 attacks, as well as a plethora of widely broadcasted atrocities, it makes sense that Western media would employ a narrative that Americans and Europeans can relate too.

Still, Western media's infatuation with Islam has deeper consequences. This obsession with Islam has made it excruciatingly easier for Western media to scrutinize the actions of the Nigerian government for trying to negotiate with Boko Haram in hopes of returning the abducted girls. Evidence of Western hindrance to reconciliation is elucidated in Anne Gearen’s Washington Post article where Obama is cited condemning any negotiation with the “terrorist group Boko Haram”. 52 The question then arises: whose justice is being served? In other words, is it just for America to prevent an exchange between Boko Haram and the Nigerian government that would grant mothers to once again see their girls? It is clear that the demonization of Boko Haram is higher on Western media’s agenda then is the security and well-being of Nigerian people. The United States would prefer to have the kidnapped girls never returned home then to see Nigeria engage in negotiations that would grant the release of incarcerated Boko Haram members.

Yet, there is another more serious consequence of Western media’s portrayal and usage of Islam. Not only does this Western obsession with demonizing Islam divert our attention away from the past, or from negotiation and reconciliation, but it also has the effect of concealing other horrendous conflicts the merit attention. For example, in an article entitled, “The Nigerian War That’s Slaughtered More People Than Boko Haram,” Philip Obaji JR., sheds light on Nigerian massacres in the north-central region that have gained little coverage by Western news outlets because it “isn’t essentially a war about establishing a caliphate”.  

Despite the fact that conflict over land in the Middle Belt since 2001 has claimed 60,000 lives in juxtaposition to the 17,000 deaths Boko Haram has causes since 2009, the coverage between the two has been disproportionate. Obaji then goes on to explain that no one would “claim, to use a favorite phrase of President Barack Obama, that this range war presents an ‘existential threat’ to the United States. But it certainly threatens the existence of people in this country.”

Given the Western world’s fight against global terrorism, we must understand Western media’s selective broadcasting as a deliberate political maneuver that runs opposite to Nigeria’s hope, and sometimes even plans, for a safe and secure state.

Thus, amid reading Western media’s coverage of Africa we must take a step back and ask ourselves who it is directed towards and what response is it intended to elicit? By failing to ask such questions, “Western concerns about African crimes against humanity will fade to black”.

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54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

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