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Islamism and Power Dynamics: The Islamic Movement, Maitatsine Uprising, Boko Haram, and the Reaction of the Nigerian Security Forces

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Islamism and Power Dynamics: The Islamic Movement, Maitatsine Uprising, Boko Haram, and the Reaction of the Nigerian Security Forces



Sanusi Abdulkadir leads the funeral prayers for the victims of clashes that broke out in 2015 between police and members of the Islamic Movement in Nigeria. Source: AMINU ABUBAKAR/AFP/Getty Images



Members of Islamic Movement of Nigeria demand the release of the group's leader, Sheik Ibrahim Zakzaky. Source: AP Photo/Muhammed Giginyu

Introduction

Between December 12 and 14, 2015, the Nigerian Army attacked members of the Islamic movement in Nigeria, IMN (the Nigerian largest Shia movement¹) in the city of Zaria in north-western Nigeria, killing over 300 people, including women and children.² Most of those killed were hurriedly buried at night in a mass grave by the Kaduna State Government.³ The violence began when the passage of the Nigerian Chief of Army Staff, Lieutenant-General Tukur Burutai (now retired), coincided with the Shia's annual ritual of changing a flag, symbolizing the coming of Rabi'ul Awwal, the birth month of Prophet Muhammad and the third in the Islamic calendar. During this ritual, the Shia in Zaria allegedly blocked the major roads and disallowed the passage of Nigeria's Chief of Army Staff's entourage on its way to a neighboring military school.⁴ Force was used to secure passage. On the following day, a full-scale military operation was launched against members of the Islamic Movement and their major buildings in Zaria. By the end of the operation, hundreds of Shia were killed.⁵

The above incident attracted the attention of both local and international media. Most scholarly articles written about the carnage did not provide a proper context to the evolution and rationale behind the frequent clashes between the IMN and security forces.⁶

Works which focus on peacebuilding thematic priorities often fail to provide an interpretative framework that effectively connects the past and the present; instead, these works restrict their attention to ongoing events that are read in the light of immediate security concerns of specific state actors.⁷ The activities of the IMN have many implications for Nigeria's security, due to the view that Shia's Islamist ideology parallels that of Boko Haram. There is an urgent need to document the role of Islamism not only in animating the Shia-security clashes, but also in the conflict involving Boko Haram, using an appropriate framework of analysis. To effectively achieve this objective, this study adopts the power dynamics paradigm as an interpretative framework for understanding religious fragmentation and confrontation(s) between Islamist organisations and Nigerian security forces.

Using the power dynamics paradigm, this working paper documents religious conflict involving three Islamic movements and security forces in northern Nigeria from 1980 to 2015, focusing primarily on two Islamist organisations whose discourses were dominant within the period, namely Shia and Boko Haram. The article also contrasts the ideological underpinnings of the two movements with those of Maitatsine in the early 1980s. The rationale behind the focus on the three is their prominence when one explores the activities of security forces within the period of study, and because the evolution of each one of them fits our framework of analysis. In other words, despite their differences and individual trajectories, the conflicts involving the two movements could be explained by our interpretative framework. The article also demonstrates that the use of force in addressing Islamism has not been very effective, prompting the need for alternative approaches in addressing the menace of the movements.

Conceptual Framework

Secondary literature abounds on each of the three movements. However, there has not been much attempt to analyse each movement's ideological commitments, thus, the main drivers of conflicts involving the three uses a single framework of analysis in light of a combination of primary and secondary sources. This study draws on the power dynamics paradigm. In developing this theoretical tool, I have been influenced by the Field Theory of Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault's conceptualisation of power. Pierre Bourdieu conceptualizes the field as a space where the struggle for the ownership of resources (what Bourdieu calls capital) takes place. The capital is of diverse types: economic, social, symbolic and cultural.⁸ I conceptualize the confrontation between the different Islamic movements and the Nigerian security forces as a reaction to the contestations for political, economic and symbolic capital among key religious figures, which sometimes leads to conflict. To attain varieties of capital, the key religious agents use different strategies, ranging from preaching (Salafis and Boko Haram), processions and demonstrations (Shia) and discourses (all). The discourses are not strictly modelled after Foucauldian usage, as even Foucault himself admitted "the fluctuating meaning of the word."⁹ Instead, the discourses are understood in this research as an established practice of speaking and writing deployed by a particular Islamic movement, normally employed as a strategy for acquiring symbolic capital, social capital, or both.

Using the power dynamics paradigm, this working paper documents religious conflict involving three Islamic movements and security forces in northern Nigeria from 1980 to 2015.

To maintain law and order, security forces are deployed to intervene in conflicts resulting from activities of religious entrepreneurs to gain symbolic capital. But the state officials and the security forces have their own biases and prejudices that influence their decisions on the scale and mode of intervention. As the cases of Islamists movements indicate, part of their strategy is promoting discourses that question the legitimacy of the Nigerian government and promotes subversive activities against the security forces. In this sense, the Islamists directly contest for authority with the modern state. This has made them more prone to state repression.

Literature Review

The literature related to this study is of four different categories. The first is comprised of works on Shia in Nigeria, mainly focusing on its history and relationship with Sunni Muslims. Muslims are broadly divided into Sunni (the majority) and the Shia (the minority). The word Shia is a shortened form of the Arabic phrase Shiat Ali (the party or supporters of Ali). Ali ibn Abi Talib was a cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, who is considered by the Shias as the first Imam (a leader of the Muslim community). The origin of Shia is traced back to the succession dispute following the death of the Prophet in 632 AD. The majority, which later came to be known as the Sunni Muslims, supported the candidature of Abubakar, a friend and father-in-law of the Prophet. The minority who supported the candidature of Ali constituted the Shia. What began as a support group gradually became a well-established sect with its own dogmas and doctrines. Its major distinguishing feature is the claim that only Ali's progeny can produce imams that possess the legitimacy to guide the Muslims both temporally and spiritually.

The misunderstanding regarding the number of Imams from Ali's descendants resulted in the division of Shia into three major branches. The Twelvers (Ithna Ashariyya) – who are the majority and dominant in Iran, Bahrain, Lebanon, India, Pakistan, Ghana and Nigeria – believe in Twelve Imams concluded by Muhammad al-Mahdi from the late 9th century, who was believed to have entered a kind of occultation (ghayba); yet he was still guiding the Muslim community. The fivers (Zaydiyya) believe in five Imams. Most of the Zaydis are found in Yemen and Najran in Saudi Arabia. The Seveners (Isma'iliyya) are the third group who believe in seven Imams. The Isma'ilis are scattered in small communities in Pakistan, India, Central Asia, Syria, and East Africa.¹⁰ The Shias are the minority among the over 1 billion Muslim population. They constitute 10 to 15 percent.¹¹ Within the Nigerian context, the main inspiration for acceptance of Shia was the success of the 1979 revolution by Ayatollah Khomeini.¹²

The historical literature on Shia includes Sulaiman,¹³ who sees the rise of the IMN as a response to the deepening economic crisis in Nigeria and the failure of post-independent regimes to concretely address the issue of social justice. In his work on religious conflict, Falola¹⁴ analyses religious violence and conflicts prevalent in Nigeria from the 1970s to the 1990s. His focus is general; therefore, only one incident of confrontation between the Shia and security forces (the 1991 Shia-police clash in Katsina) was discussed.

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Adam and Isa,¹⁵ in their two separate articles, explore the activities of a variety of Shia actors in Nigeria (Iranian officials, Lebanese migrants and competing networks of Nigerian Shias), arguing that the diversification of Shia actors can be attributed to the complexities of social and religious space in Kano and the changing Iranian policies. Using a case-study of Jos in north-central Nigeria, Ibrahim¹⁶ examines Shia-Sunni competition through the Ashura processions whose visibility, according to him, threatens what the Sunni consider to be the normal spatial order of northern Nigeria's urban centers. On his part, Thurston¹⁷ explores how IMN engages other Shias and Sunni Muslims, arguing that if the state repression against the Shias continues, it may lead to more violence in the form of riots. Ibrahim¹⁸ explores Shia's growth and social relations between its members and the Sunni majority. He analyses how the IMN uses its structure, networks, and reform programs to spread Shia at the grassroots level despite theological and political opposition from the Sunni majority.

On his part, Adeyemi¹⁹ examines the spread of Shia in north-central Nigeria. He argues that unlike in the north-western and north-eastern Nigeria where El-Zakzaky was the dominant leader of Shias, in north-central areas such as Kogi State, the members of the sect did not pay allegiance to him "based on political reasons." The article also briefly described how Shia Islam spread to different areas of north-central Nigeria such as Plateau State and Kwara State. Ibrahim²⁰ explores the repercussions of the geopolitics of religion between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Islamic Republic of Iran on the Nigerian context using a case-study of Anguwan Rogo neighborhood of Jos in north-central Nigeria. He argues that religious identity in Africa is a dynamic interplay between global trends and local contexts.

All the historical literature mentioned above provide useful background information and are relevant to the thematic concern of this paper because of their discussion of the Shia-Sunni relations, which I also underline in my conceptual framework. I consider the atmosphere of competition between the Islamic groups as the precursor to discourses and confrontations which elicits the reaction of security forces.

The 2015 Zaria Massacre inspired a body of literature on Shia. In their separate studies, Anjide and Okoli,²¹ Onapajo,²² Uche,²³ and Nasidi²⁴ have considered continuous attacks on Shias and the detention of their leader as a recipe for disaster and further violence; Hayatu,²⁵ meanwhile, proposes a soft approach in tackling conflict emanating from Shia religious activism. Etido-Inyang and Nweke,² express their concern over violation of human rights of the IMN members and incarceration of El-Zakzaky, while Ezegwu, Chime-Nganya and Udooy,²⁷ analyze Nigerian newspapers' framing of clashes between the IMN and the Nigerian security forces using content analysis as their research design. Adeniji and Egielewa,²⁸ have examined the implication of the state repression against Shias on security and the diplomatic relations between Nigeria and Iran. Gray and Adeakin,²⁹ maintain that contextual and ideological factors, local and global, are responsible for the radicalization of the IMN and if these factors are not checked, the IMN could experience a more violent phase of radicalization.

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The second category of related literature focuses on the Maitatsine uprising. Perhaps the most comprehensive treatment of the subject is by Anwar,³⁰ who documents the history of the senior students of Qur'anic schools (Gardawa) and Maitatsine riots tracing their roots to the pre-colonial period. Lubeck³¹ frames the Maitatsine uprising within the economic deprivation theory. Hiskett,³² conceives the Maitatsine uprising as an ethnic and cultural reaction of non-Hausa people who penetrated Hausa Muslim society, but were never integrated into it. According to Hickey,³³ the uprising was a product of a split between the conservative establishment comprising emirs and the newer, more fanatical groups who preferred to use violence as a means of establishing an Islamic state. Isichei,³⁴ considers the followers of Maitatsine as "disinherited," constituted by the homeless and the jobless.

These works, and many others with their own different approaches, inform debates on the phenomenon. Contrary to the submissions of the extant scholarship on the subject, this paper locates the riots within a religious environment characterized by competition between established Islamic scholars (Ulama) and the Gardawa. The uprising can be seen as a reaction to the restrictions imposed on the Gardawa to curtail their public preaching and nuisance in the 1970s and the imprisonment of the defaulters. More importantly, the paper contrasts the Maitatsine uprising with those of Shia and Boko Haram.

The third category is comprised of works on Boko Haram, which have attracted a large number of literature on its different aspects. The debates on Boko Haram are mostly centered on its origin, ideology, and the causes of the insurgency. Kassim³⁵ and Thurston³⁶ conceive Boko Haram as a product of antagonism between two strands of Salafi Islam: the "quietists" (those who promote non-violent method of propagation) and Jihadi-Salafis (those who advocate for Jihad).

According to Kassim,³⁷ the local factors (police brutality, poverty, deprivation) were not the main drivers of the insurgency while Thurston³⁸ attributes Boko Haram insurgency to a combination of structural factors and the Jihadi-Salafi indoctrination. In other words, he frames Boko Haram as the product of "interaction between religion and politics" and rejects a single causation.³⁹

Brigaglia⁴⁰ frames the history of Boko Haram within the context of Global War on Terror. He argues that the Global War on Terror (GWOT), spear-headed by the United States and supported by Saudi Arabia, promoted the political theology of quietist scholars who issued legal opinions (fatwas) that favored the Saudi monarchy, but also created a context in which "more extreme generation of jihadists like Yusuf has been empowered."⁴¹ Along the same line, there is a body of literature focusing on counterterrorism and counterinsurgency initiatives.⁴² There was also a lively debate on structure versus agency as the motivating factors of Boko Haram. Zenn,⁴³ connects Boko Haram with al-Qaeda right from inception, thus emphasizing the agency of the key actors. Conversely, Adam Higazi et. al.,⁴⁴ argue that the Boko Haram phenomenon cannot be well understood when it is treated as an extension of global jihad while local political factors, security abuses, and other important variables are ignored.

On the other hand, Obafemi and Orhero⁴⁵ examine the role of the Nigerian military in fighting Boko Haram, maintaining that, their response has been dynamic and comprised of different approaches including direct military engagements, institutional reforms, regional partnerships, and community-based strategies. However, systemic bottlenecks such as inadequate logistics and outdated military hardware have impeded progress in their counter-insurgency operations.

The article concludes that overcoming the menace of Boko Haram requires strong political commitment, operational transparency, increased regional cooperation, and a citizen-focused strategy that emphasizes security, justice, and inclusive development.

The above body of scholarship have enriched our understanding of Boko Haram. My interest is in line with the extant scholarship on ideology and indoctrination. However, the emphasis is on the connection between articulation of power and indoctrination. The importance of this approach lies in locating the religious conflicts — among Muslims and between radical Islamic movements and security forces — within a long history of contestations since colonial time.

An important intervention echoing the power paradigm dynamics is a highly influential article published anonymously in the *Journal of Religion in Africa* in 2012, which frames Yusuf's will to power as the motivating factor of his movement within the Salafi strand of Islam. While agreeing with this position, my research maintains that the power dynamics and contestations has been a defining feature across sectarian divide, and the emergence of Yusuf can be seen as a product of inter rather than intra-sectarian struggle as his main arguments target the entire Muslims, not the Salafis alone. Moreover, the anonymous article was published not long after the 2009 incident. While its author benefited from rare primary sources then readily available – which are difficult or impossible to find after a few years — its discussion of discourses is restricted to 2012.

The above body of scholarship have enriched our understanding of Boko Haram.

This paper extends the discussion up to 2015, a period within which many internal sources became available to shed more light on the power dynamics within the ranks of Boko Haram fighters.

The last category of related literature is focussed on the connection between the Maitatsine uprising and Boko Haram. Adesoji⁴⁶ compares the structural conditions which resulted in the emergence of both Maitatsine and Boko Haram. Sani⁴⁷ examines areas of similarities and differences between Maitatsine and Boko Haram, concluding that the two groups lack proper understanding of Islam. Aghedo⁴⁸ argues that the Maitatsine uprising and Boko Haram insurgency are outcomes of governance and development deficits in northern Nigeria. For Babayo,⁴⁹ “the ideology, method of operation and effects of Maitatsine and Boko Haram insurgencies are similar.” According to him, their only difference lies in the magnitude of devastation linked to their activities. Babayo's claim of similarity between Maitatsine and Boko Haram is not entirely accurate. Ideologically, the two movements are different. While Maitatsine's followers were Qur'anists (those believing in the Qur'an as the exclusive source of guidance to Muslims while rejecting the Hadith of the traditions of the Prophet), Boko Haram followers subscribed to Jihadi-Salafism and Islamism.

Although some of these works have controversial arguments and factual errors, they nonetheless illuminate our understanding of the two movements. This paper has a broader and more ambitious interest. It not only compares Maitatsine and Boko Haram but also draws on the areas of intersection between Boko Haram and the Shia. Conceptually, I do not see the Boko Haram and Maitatsine as the same forms of religious organizations united by the structural conditions of their times.

Instead, I consider them as products of historical process in a northern Nigeria constituted by power dynamics among various categories of Ulama.

This paper is a departure from the extant literature in three major ways. First, it traces the cases of conflict involving the IMN and its predecessor, the Muslim Brothers (MB), from 1980 to 2015, paying careful attention to the origin of the conflict, as well as the patterns that kept it going during this 35-year period. Second, the study adopts a power dynamics framework in its analysis, drawing inspiration from the Field theory of Bourdieu and Foucault's conceptualization of the pervasive nature of power. The importance of this approach is its establishment of a historical link between the pre-1980 cases of conflicts and those which followed afterward. Power relations and contestations over the projection of "true and authentic Islam" have, since the pre-colonial period, been a central and recurrent drivers of violent religious conflict.

Sectarian Contestations Among Sufi Brotherhoods

The contestations over the control and projection of authentic Islam in northern Nigeria have involved four major constituencies: Sufi brotherhoods (the Qadiriyya and the Tijaniyya), the Gardawa, Reformist Organisations (the different strands of Salafi Islam), and Islamist movements (Shia and the Boko Haram).⁵⁰ Each of these constituencies promoted discourses to articulate their doctrines through sermons, lectures, preaching, demonstrations, processions, and other related activities. The purpose of these activities is to elicit support for a particular religious entrepreneur as a way of gaining symbolic capital (which in some cases can be converted into economic capital through patronage by politicians and wealthy men).⁵¹

While engaging in these activities, the followers of the various religious entrepreneurs — in a bid to maintain an edge over their competitors in the religious public sphere — clash, making conflict and confrontation inevitable. In their bid to maintain law and order, the security forces could use excessive force, thus creating the desire for retaliation that result in cycles of crises, as the trajectories of Boko Haram and the Gardawa demonstrate. In this section, I have mapped out a long history of contestations between the different Islamic groups in northern Nigeria since the colonial period. This background is necessary to provide a context for the rise of Islamism and its struggle for power with the secular state.

Since the advent of Islam in Hausaland in the 14th century there were two Sufi brotherhoods: the Qadiriyya and the Tijaniyya, introduced into Hausaland in the 14th and 19th centuries respectively.⁵² By the beginning of the 19th century, a Fulani Islamic scholar, Usman Dan Fodio, waged Jihad on the Hausa states, replacing the existing rulers with his disciples—and most of these disciples were his ethnic Fulani.⁵³ The main argument advanced by Dan Fodio for his Jihad was the problematic nature of Islamic practices among Muslims of Hausaland and the need for reform.⁵⁴ He criticized syncretism (mixing of Islam and traditional beliefs) and also condemned the practice of collecting cattle tax (Jangali). This argument has been the rallying point of all the Muslim reform movements that emerged subsequently, each claiming to owe its inspiration from Dan Fodio. The main legacy of Usman Dan Fodio was the establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate, which was conquered in 1903 by the British.

In the greater part of the colonial period that followed, both intra and inter-Sufi polemics and struggles in the religious sphere for symbolic and social capital were frequent. The period between the 1920s and 1930s was dominated by polemics between two sections of the Tijaniyya, the Madabawa (scholars of Madabo, a neighbourhood famous for being the first settlement of the earliest Muslim preachers) and the Salgawa (the disciples of Malam Muhammadu Salga arguably the most famous Tijaniyya scholar in the first three decades of the colonial period) in northern Nigeria.⁵⁵

The polemics followed the authorship of a treatise by Malam Salga, *Risalah al-Su'al an al-Mayyit wal Salat Wal Dafni Wal Du'a* (A Message to Those who Ask Questions on Death, Funeral, Burial and Prayer for the Dead).⁵⁶ The work criticised the lack of authenticity in some ritual practices associated with the funeral rites sanctioned by the Madabawa.⁵⁷ According to him, "We reject several practices, some of which were introduced in our period, laying the dead on the right-hand side when performing the funeral prayer and the offering of addu'a (prayer) after the funeral prayer (Sallah)."⁵⁸ One Malam Chindo stood in defence of the Madabawa by addressing some of the arguments of Salga.⁵⁹ The debates continued until the 1950s. Sensing the tension in the air which could have resulted in conflict, the Emir of Kano, Abdullahi Bayero (1881–1953) intervened by calling on the two sides to end the debate and forge ahead.

In the 1950s and early 1960s, there were more virulent inter-Sufi encounters; this time around from Sokoto in north-western Nigeria. The followers of Tijaniyya in the 1940s paid allegiance to the Senegalese charismatic Sufi scholar, Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse, during his first visit to Kano in the late 1940s. His first public visit occurred in 1951, and he was seen holding hands while praying—a practice known as Qabd, which was contrary to the dominant practice of Sadl (praying with the hands by the side).

This also elicited debate with the Tijaniyya followers supporting Qabd and Qadiriyya supporting Sadl. The debate lasted for more than 10 years with scholars from two sides of the brotherhood defending their positions.⁶⁰

The atmosphere of tension resulted in violent confrontations between the Qadiris and Tijanis. The conflict was the product of the massive expansion of the Tijaniyya in the late 1940s, prompting the Sultan of Sokoto to order the demolition of the Tijaniyya centres in 1949.⁶¹ This violent reaction, according to Brigaglia, prompted the writing of invective poems by two Tijani scholars: Malam Muhammad Babba na-Birnin Magaji and Shaykh Abubakar Atiku.⁶² In 1965, there were two cases of confrontations between the two brotherhoods the first occurred in the Isa and Zurmi Districts, while the second in Argungu Division. The report of *Nigerian Citizen* Newspaper of May 16, 1965, indicated that about four people were killed in the Zurmi and Isa conflict.⁶³ By the end of the 1960s, the confrontations between the two brotherhoods subsided due to the emergence of Salafism in Nigeria, which subjected Sufi brotherhoods to constant criticism. Thus, the two orders united to confront the new threat.

Sufism, Islamism and Salafism: Contestations Over Social Capital 1965 – 1980

The 1965 clashes in Sokoto represented the last violent confrontations between Sufi brotherhoods. By the late 1960s, the pioneer of Salafism in Nigeria, Shaykh Mahmud Gumi, engaged in constant polemics against the brotherhoods during his Exegesis-of-the-Qur'an sessions (tafsir) in the Radio Kaduna, which was patronised throughout northern Nigeria.⁶⁴

The basis for Gumi's polemics was the criticism of Sufi brotherhoods for promoting religious innovation (bid'a). This discourse was promoted by Gumi and his followers in the following decades. The latter formed an organisation in 1978 known as Jama'at Izalatil Bid'ah wa Iqamat al-Sunnah (The Society for the Removal of Innovation and Re-Instatement of Tradition, henceforth Izala).⁶⁵

Gumi's attack on the brotherhoods was articulated in his book titled al-Aqidat al-Sahiha bi muwafaqat al-Shari'ah (The Right Belief is according to the Shari'ah), which became canon for members of Izala and reference material for attacking Sufi brotherhoods. The discourses expounded by Gumi became the cardinal point of reference of the Izala followers, who organised unprecedented preaching tours fortnightly throughout Nigeria. The principles laid down by Gumi in his works spread to the neighbouring countries through preaching of Salafi doctrines. "The influences of Izala were felt in Niger, Ghana, Chad, Cameroun, and Sudan."⁶⁵ The attempt of Izala to gain followers proved very difficult in the early stage of its history because of the predominance of Sufism, which was entrenched in the social fabric of the Muslim societies of northern Nigeria. The preaching tours of Izala elicited strong reactions, resulting in a series of confrontations throughout northern Nigeria as demonstrated in Table 1.

Table 3: The Cases of Conflict between Members of Izala and Members of Sufi Brotherhoods (1978 – 1980)

S/N	Key Actors	Location	Date	Casualties/damage
1.	Izala under Ismaila Idris and Tijaniyya	Gombe (North-Eastern Nigeria)	June 19 – June 20, 1978	One person was killed; three vehicles damaged.
2.	Izala and Tijaniyya followers	Mangu, Plateau (North-Central Nigeria)	April 21, 1978	One person injured.
3.	Izala and Tijaniyya followers	Kurgi, Plateau (North-Central Nigeria)	August 18, 1978	Many people were wounded.
4.	Izala followers and people of Lamisula Ward	Lamisula, Maiduguri, (North-Eastern Nigeria)	March 9, 1979	One policeman killed.
5.	Izala and Sufi Brotherhood followers	Danja, Katsina (North-Western Nigeria)	November 13, 1979	A mosque and alcoholic drinks were destroyed; many houses and shops were burnt.
6.	Izala and Sufi Brotherhood followers	Makurdi, Benue (North-Central Nigeria)	March 5, 1980	Some policemen and preachers injured/
7.	Izala under Ismaila Idris and members of Sufi Brotherhoods	Kurgwi, Plateau (North-Central Nigeria)	March 30, 1980	Six persons were injured.
8.	Darika and Izala followers	Kano (North-western Nigeria)	May 27, 1980	One person was killed.
9.	Izala followers and the Police	Wukari, Central Mosque (North-Eastern Nigeria)	July 13, 1980	One Izala preacher was arrested.
10.	Izala and Tijaniyya followers	Anchaui, Kaduna (North-Central Nigeria)	September 24, 1980	Many houses were burnt; eight policemen were injured; twenty-six rounds of ammunition and two rifles missing.
11.	Izala and Sufi preachers	Gusau (North-Western Nigeria)	October 6, 1980	No information on the casualty figures
12.	Tijaniyya followers and Izala	Gusau (North-Western Nigeria)	October 21, 1980	Ten persons were injured.
13.	Izala and members of Sufi Brotherhoods	Yelwa, Plateau, (North-Central Nigeria)	November 2, 1980	One Izala adherent was Killed; two police officers were injured.

Source: Federal Republic of Nigeria (FGN), (1981). "Report of Tribunal of Inquiry on Kano Disturbances" Lagos: Federal Government Press

Table 1 shows that within two years of the establishment (1978 – 1980), Izala was engulfed in violent confrontations with the Sufi Brotherhoods throughout northern Nigeria. Most of these clashes were reported to the police, who intervened to maintain law and order. The history of the struggle for power and influence in the religious field continued to characterize relations in the following decades.

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Most of these clashes were reported to the police, who intervened to maintain law and order. The history of the struggle for power and influence in the religious field continued to characterize relations in the following decades. It was under this atmosphere of intense competition that the Shia sect emerged in the early 1980s, adding another layer to the intricacies that complicated intra-faith relations in northern Nigeria. The stiff sectarian competition and struggle for power, which defined Nigerian Islam, created a context in which new religious entrepreneurs had to promote new interpretations for them to be relevant and have their share of followers. Unfortunately, some newcomers into the field promoted extreme ideologies that bred religious extremism and terrorism, making inroads into the Nigerian Islam by the beginning of the 21st century.

Islamism Versus Nigerian Security Forces: Contestation for Power and Authority

Islamism, also known as radical Islam or political Islam, is an ideology that calls for the change of government in line with Islamic law. Islamists hold the view that society will be Islamized only through social and political action. Therefore, the Islamists intervene directly in political life.⁶⁷

The origin of Islamism can be traced back to two roots that were widely apart geographically: the Society of the Muslim Brotherhood (founded in Egypt by Hassan al-Banna in 1928) and the Jamaat-i Islami (founded by Abu Ala al-Maududi in Pakistan in 1941).⁶⁸

However, the main theoretical basis of Islamist thought only evolved in the 1960s through three ideologues: Maududi (mentioned above), Sayyid Qutb (an influential figure of the Muslim Brotherhood), and Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran.⁶⁹ In the 1970s, Islamist ideology became widespread in the Muslim world and it emerged as a political force that galvanised support for Islamic activism.

The developments of the 1970s in the Muslim world following the Arab-Israeli conflict of 1973 inspired Islamic activism on the campuses of northern Nigerian universities, particularly Ahmadu Bello University Zaria (ABU), the first university in northern Nigeria. It was also a period when the ideological debates between the capitalists and socialists were prevalent on the campuses of Nigerian universities. The Islamists advocated for an Islamic ideology as an alternative to the two.⁷⁰ At ABU, Ibrahim El-Zakzaky, then the Vice President of Muslim Students' Society of Nigeria (MSSN), was dealing with international affairs when he was inspired by the activities of the Society for the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt and its Islamist ideology. He formed an organisation modelled after it, which he called Muslim Brothers (MB).

The developments of the 1970s in the Muslim world following the Arab-Israeli conflict of 1973 inspired Islamic activism on the campuses of northern Nigerian universities, particularly Ahmadu Bello University Zaria (ABU), the first university in northern Nigeria.

El-Zakzaky capitalized on the general sentiments of a large number of Muslims who were calling for an Islamic government in Nigeria in the 1970s and 1980s. In 1980, a year after the Iranian Revolution, he visited Iran for the first time and continued to frequent the country in the subsequent years.⁷¹ The majority of the MB who were still committed to their sectarian identity of Sunni Islam began to criticize El-Zakzaky and, eventually, many of them withdrew their membership and formed the Society for the Revival of Islam (Jama'at Tajdid al Islam or JTI) in 1994.⁷² Nura Adam Galadanchi mentioned the circumstances leading to the formation of the JTI:

We were disciples of El-Zakzaky up to the period when he became Shia in 1994 when it became apparent to us that he was Shia. It was then that we became convinced that we would give up on him (lokacin ne muka tabbatar lallai zamu hakura da shi), because Shia was dominating the direction of the movement and that was not our goal (for joining the movement). In July 1994, we formed the Tajdid. Since 1994, I have been a member of the Tajdid.⁷³

El-Zakzaky was considered more of a Western-educated elite than Islamic scholar by the traditional ulama. His aspiration to create a space in the religious public sphere for his Islamist ideological commitment to Islam received antagonism from the established ulama.⁷⁴ To survive within the competitive religious field, he introduced innovative activities that encouraged public display of religiosity and defiant discourses that were premised on three principles. One, the supremacy of the constitution and other symbols of secular authority are rejected.⁷⁵ Two, the Shari'ah could not exist under a secular system of government. Instead, it is an Islamic government that implements Shari'ah.⁷⁶ Three, there is the need for the revival of the 19th century caliphate, which was usurped by the modern state starting from the period of colonialism. However, over the years, El-Zakzaky has become more pragmatic in pursuing the goals of his movement.

This movement has gradually transformed into an more ecumenical platform, where even Christians are encouraged to join and fight injustice in Nigeria. To entrench itself in the religious field of northern Nigeria, the IMN contested for the control of the public space. This struggle for power and authority elicited hostile reactions from the public and the state security forces. The extant literature pays disproportionate attention to the confrontation of 2015, which has attracted the attention of the local and international media while ignoring the background that warranted said conflict. Even when IMN's early history was mentioned, it is mostly in passing; with its starting point as 1990. The possible exceptions here are Falola,⁷⁷ Sulaiman,⁷⁸ and Adam and Isa.⁷⁹ Over the years of his Islamic activism, El-Zakzaky was repeatedly arrested and imprisoned by security agencies. According to him: "Between 1981 and 1989, out of those nine years, I spent about seven years in prison."⁸⁰

Table 3: Clashes Between Security Forces and MB in the 1980s

S/N	Nature of the Clash	Key Actors	Location	Date	Effect
1	MB procession with the slogan "Islam Only"	MB	Zaria, Kaduna State	May 1980	Ended peacefully.
2	Demonstration	MB and the Police	Sokoto State	1981	Arrest and imprisonment of El-Zakzaky.
3.	Demonstration	MB and Police	Bauchi States (North-eastern Nigeria)	1982	One person was killed, and many were arrested.
4.	Demonstration over the arrest of El-Zakzaky	MB and Police	Zaria North-western Nigeria	1987	Release of El-Zakzaky.

Source: Author's Fieldwork

From Table 2, the clashes had the same pattern: demonstrations by the MB and police reaction leading to the arrest of El-Zakzaky, which attracted more protests. The security forces always used the same strategy: they deployed their personnel to stop religious processions and in the process, people were wounded; lives, at times, were lost; leaders and followers were arrested. Nonetheless, more rounds of protests would be organized again. The strategies of the police in their reaction to the IMN members over the decades have not yielded any positive results.

The Maitatsine Uprising

The 1980s was also a period of the Gardawa uprising, otherwise known as the Maitatsine crisis, in some states of northern Nigeria—which until then was the deadliest religious uprising in Nigeria. The word Gardawa is the plural of gardi. The status of gardi may be thought of as an intermediate one between that of almajiri, the beginner in elementary Qur'an studies, and that of a fully-fledged Qur'anic teacher (malam).⁸¹

Unlike the MB and its successor the IMN, the Maitatsine followers promoted a doctrine relying on the belief that the Qur'an was the only source of Islamic law, contrary to the general understanding that apart from the Qur'an, there are other sources of Shari'ah, such as the tradition of the Prophet (Hadith), consensus of ulama (Ijma'a) and analogical reasoning (Qiyas). This interpretation implies that the Maitatsine followers rejected some basic rituals agreed upon by the generality of the Muslims. They opposed the calling of the Prophet's name in the mosque relying on Qur'an 72:18: "And the places of worship are for Allah alone so invoke not anyone along with him."⁸² Also contrary to the consensus of the Muslims, who believe that annual compulsory almsgiving by the wealthy (one-fortieth of one's wealth) is one of the five pillars of Islam, the Maitatsine followers maintain almsgiving has to be practical daily. More importantly, they promoted an exclusionist discourse by considering those who did not share their doctrines unbelievers and, therefore, legitimate targets of attack.

El-Zakzaky was considered more of a Western-educated elite than Islamic scholar by the traditional ulama.

The Gardawa uprising can also fit into the power dynamics paradigm. The struggle of the Gardawa to be recognised as full-fledged consecrated agents in the competitive religious field of northern Nigeria can be traced back to the pre-colonial period.⁸³ However, they only emerged as a strong united entity capable of promoting their agenda collectively in the 1960s and 1970s. Within this period, one Muhammad Marwa Maitatsine stood out to be the most popular among them. His ordeal in the city of Kano perfectly exemplified a case of competition over power and public space among religious agents. Born in Marwa, Cameroun, Muhammad Marwa came to Kano in 1945. He was nicknamed Maitatsine (the one who anathemizes or curses) because of his favourite statement during his public preaching campaign in a poor Hausa "Allah ta sine" instead of "Allah ya tsine," meaning "may God curse" (him/her). He was known for his militant followers who condemned anything modern and considered other Muslims as infidels.⁸⁴ His sermons condemned Sufi brotherhoods. He was deported in 1962 but returned to Kano afterwards.

The street preaching of Gardawa in the 1960s irked the ulama, who considered the Gardawa as not having enough Islamic knowledge to preach the word of God. Based on their advice to the military government, a committee was set up to certify those who were competent to preach. Maitatsine appeared before the committee; he failed its test and was therefore disqualified from preaching. However, leveraging the competition between the Sufi scholars of Kano and Shaykh Mahmud Gumi, based in Kaduna, the patron of Izala, Maitatsine got clearance from Gumi.⁸⁵

Alarmed by the refusal of the Gardawa to comply with the sanction imposed on street preaching, the ulama submitted the names of 38 recalcitrant Gardawa preachers to the military government, including Maitatsine. They were arrested and imprisoned in 1973. Most of them were jailed in Port Harcourt. In July 1975, there was a change of government through a military coup led by General Murtala Ramat Muhammad. The new military administration released Maitatsine and other imprisoned preachers. Upon his return, he realized that his home at Yan Awaki Quarters within the walled city of Kano had been a base of his followers.

In the following years, Maitatsine transformed the neighbourhood of Yan Awaki into his headquarters. He antagonized his neighbours, many of whom vacated the area because of the intimidation of his followers. During his preaching sessions in the neighbourhood, fierce-looking men, armed with bows and arrows and other deadly weapons, served as his bodyguards.⁸⁶ Following his release, the articulation of his doctrines was pursued aggressively from 1975 to 1980. Maitatsine declared that any Muslim who read any book besides the Qur'an was an infidel.⁸⁷ Similarly, he criticized anyone wearing a watch, riding a bicycle, driving a car, or sending his children to formal school. Sensing the potential danger of Maitatsine's activities, the Kano State Commissioner of Police wrote a letter to the Inspector General of Police, noting that:

Religious fanatics numbering about 2000 have occupied Yan Awaki Quarters in Kano City... They do not obey any law. When any member is arrested and charged to court, they will not attend. The House of Assembly summoned the leader Muhammad Marwa four times for discussion but did not attend... They constitute their area into a private republic not accessible to other people.⁸⁸

It got to a point where the police were afraid of deploying their men to Yan Awaki Quarters without adequate preparation. The Governor of Kano State, Muhammad Abubakar Rimi, wrote a letter to Maitatsine demanding the demolition of all illegal structures built by his followers. The failure to comply triggered the uprising that occurred between December 18th and 29th, 1980; by the end, 1,147 people were killed according to official figures.⁸⁹

Two years after the Maitatsine uprising in Kano, his followers struck again in Bullum Kutum neighbourhood in Maiduguri between October 26th and 29th, 1982 under an obscure character Muhammadu Rufai (alias Gajere). At the end of the Maiduguri crisis, following the confrontation between the police and Maitatsine followers, a total number of 183 people were killed. In the same month, this time around in Kaduna State, another uprising erupted leading to the killing of 53 people including police officers.⁹⁰ In March 1984 there was yet another outbreak of violence involving Gardawa in Yola, the capital of the defunct Gongola State (present-day Adamawa and Taraba states), which left between 500 and 1000 dead. In April 1985, a similar uprising in Gombe (then in Bauchi State) resulted in the killing of a hundred people.⁹¹

The Islamic Movement and Boko Haram from the 1990s

In their bid to actualize their Islamist agenda and contest for the control of public space, the MB/IMN clashed with the security forces in the 1990s. Most of these clashes were caused by /demonstrations organised by the MB/IMN for public display of religiosity. This started with the encounter in the city of Katsina as a result of a publication of a cartoon in December 1990 by *Fun Time*, a comic magazine published by the Daily Times, ridiculing the Prophet and Jesus.⁹²

This provided an important opportunity for the Islamic Movement to project itself as a vanguard of Islam and a showcase its large following. El-Zakzaky organised a demonstration on March 5, 1991, at ABU; followed by a nation-wide protest on April 4, 1991, which ended peacefully in most of the states. However, in Katsina, the military governor of the state threatened to take drastic measures against the IMN leader in the state, Yakubu Yahaya, should protests be repeated.

El-Zakzaky responded to the threat by calling his followers all over the country to assemble in Katsina for a grand protest on April 19, 1991 (IMN 2020). The *New Nigerian* Newspaper reported that offices of Katsina State Commissioner for Information and the Director-General for Information were burnt.⁹³ About 124 protesters were arrested, 10 women, and 6 police officers were injured.⁹⁴ This was followed by manhunt for Yahaya and arrests of more members.⁹⁵ He eventually surrendered to the police on April 22, 1991, bringing an end to the Katsina crisis.⁹⁶ He served prison terms, alongside other followers, for their protests. Yahaya has mentioned how the crisis unfolded:

A magazine known as *Fun Times* published by *Daily Times* which was a fun magazine that published cartoons made negative remarks against the Messenger of Allah (suka yi mummunar magana akan Manzon Allah)... That had caused uproar especially among Muslim students at that time, particularly at ABU... the federal government was asked to take punitive measures against them, but they did nothing. It was decided that, the option left was to protest on the streets. Protests were held in Sokoto, Kano, Zaria, Katsina and many other cities. They all ended peacefully. We also organised our own. Our own turned out to be different. You know it was during military era. Colonel John Madaki was then the Governor of Katsina. He attacked us... tear gas was used against us.... At last we were arrested and taken to court though I surrendered myself. I turned myself in because they made the whole town unbearable, using sirens day and night; they were disturbing people and I was declared wanted dead or alive. Since I was the cause of the trouble, I decided to surrender myself. That had caused relief to the people.⁹⁷

The end of the decade was also characterized by Free Zakzaky demonstrations in different cities of northern Nigeria following his arrest by the military administration of General Sani Abacha in September 1996. Termed the Abacha Crisis (Waki'ar Abacha) by his followers, the crackdown on the IMN was the most fatal and extensive in its history at that time. Within the three years of the crisis, hundreds of members were killed and imprisoned. Their buildings, including schools and centres in cities (such as Zaria, Jalingo, Katsina and Funtua) were demolished. El-Zakzaky remained in prison until after the death of Abacha in 1998. In December 1998, the Kaduna State Government dropped all charges against him, and he was released from prison.⁹⁸

By the first decade of the new millennium, a new Islamist movement emerged in the north-eastern city of Maiduguri, thus adding a new layer to the struggle for the control of the Muslim public. I argue that the emergence of Boko Haram is a continuation of contestation over power in northern Nigeria. The phenomenon should not be seen in isolation of a long tradition of competition over the meaning of true Islam. The power dynamics that evolved within Nigerian Salafism in the 1990s provide a context for the emergence of the first Jihadi-Salafi movement, Jama'at Ahl al-Sunna li'l-Da'wati wa'l-Jihad 'ala Minhaj al-Salaf (Association of the People of the Sunna for Preaching and Jihad According to the Salafi Method), otherwise known as Boko Haram founded by Muhammad Yusuf. The article published anonymously by Journal of Religion in Africa excellently illustrated the competitive context within which Boko Haram emerged.

By the first decade of the new millennium, a new Islamist movement emerged in the north-eastern city of Maiduguri, thus adding a new layer to the struggle for the control of the Muslim public.

The Salafism in Nigeria evolved through the teachings of Shaykh Mahmud Gumi in the 1960s and 1970s. As noted above, the Salafis engaged in fierce competition with the Sufi brotherhoods for decades. Yet, over the years, Salafism in Nigeria itself became polarized and it witnessed internal competition and antagonism. The Izala, founded by Gumi's followers, was divided with headquarters of its two factions, located in Jos, and the other one in Kaduna (Ben Amara 2020).⁹⁹ In the 1990s, some of its young preachers who graduated from the University of Madina (Saudi Arabia), such as Ja'afar Mahmud Adam, began to build a following independent of Izala.¹⁰⁰ Deprived of opportunities and imbued by new cultural and symbolic capital of immersing themselves in the global Salafi community, and by operating outside any formal organizational structure, the graduates of Madina carved out a new space for themselves by building a huge network of followers in northern Nigeria and neighbouring countries.

The young graduates articulated discourses that freely drew directly from the famous global Salafi scholars, such as Muhammad Nasir al-Din Albani (d. 1999), Ben Baz (d. 1999) and Muhammad Ibn Salih al-Uthaymin (d. 2001); but at times from Jihadi ideologues, such as the Egyptian Sayyid Qutb. Adam was the most successful Madina graduate in accumulating symbolic capital through the circulation of his audio lectures and his sessions of Qur'anic tafsir. He was based in Kano but chaired the tafsir session in the Indimie Mosque in Maiduguri (north-eastern Nigeria) where he met Muhammad Yusuf, who became one of his disciples. Young protégés such as Yusuf were ambitious. Leveraging the liberal nature of the Salafi canon, he began to align himself with legal opinions that were considered extreme by the mainstream Salafis including his mentor, Adam.¹⁰¹

Yusuf had a prior history of Islamic activism within the ranks of the MB. He was among El-Zakzaky's followers that, in 1994 left him to form the JTI.¹⁰² As in the case of many members of JTI, Yusuf embraced Salafism. Adam became his new teacher. His determination to acquire an independent social base and prerequisite symbolic capital as a respected cleric made him promote a militant ideology that caused a rift with his teacher. In his interview with the BBC Hausa Service in 2009, Yusuf maintained his position that Western Education was forbidden since some of the ideas taught in formal schools contradicted the teachings of Islam, including a mixed class setting of both male and female students.¹⁰³

The initial measures taken by some of Yusuf's followers, comprised of 200 fighters, was to establish a camp in Kannama in Yobe State. However, Yusuf disassociated himself from them. The Kannama Camp was destroyed by the Nigerian security forces in 2004. Afraid of being arrested, Yusuf fled to Saudi Arabia. Through the intervention of the Borno State Government and some Salafi scholars including Adam, he came back to Nigeria the following year. While addressing his followers in a 2006 audio, Adam shared what transpired in Saudi Arabia when he met Yusuf during his voluntary exile:

Surprisingly, about two years ago, this same person (Yusuf) travelled for lesser Hajj at the time when this strife first broke out (referring to Kannama confrontations) when we lost many youths. By God, I am among those who met him while I was performing Hajj (in Saudi Arabia). He swore that all the allegations against him with regard to his connection with these people (Kannama fighters) were lies. I asked him to inform the Borno State government officials that all the allegations were untrue. I insisted that they listen to him. He said (to them) all the allegations were not true. They asked him to put his testimony in writing and audio recording.¹⁰⁴

Unlike El-Zakazaky, whose inspiration was from the Egyptian Brotherhood and Iranian Revolution, Yusuf's emergence within the Salafi network of scholars made him subscribe to Jihadi-Salafism in his discourses. His Islamism was profoundly influenced by Islamist Jordanian-Palestinian writer and a Salafi Jihadi ideologue, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi. Yusuf's magnum opus, *Hadhihi Aqidatuna* (This is our creed) is modelled after al-Maqdisi's writing.¹⁰⁵

Although on a different pattern, Yusuf promoted exclusionist discourse just like Maitatsine. He considered Muslims who did not subscribe to the doctrines of his movement as unbelievers. He claimed that anyone who worked or studied for worldly benefits was an unbeliever, basing his argument on Qur'an 18: 110: "Let him who hopes to meet his Lord do what is good and associate none in the worship of his lord."¹⁰⁶ He applied this legal opinion (fatwa) to most of the Muslims in Nigeria who attended Western schools. By implication, Yusuf excluded Nigerian Muslims who studied or worked under the formal structure of the state from the fold of Islam.

Unlike El-Zakazaky, one of the cardinal discourses of Yusuf was rejection of Western education, for contradicting the Islamic law. In particular, he condemned Charles Darwin's Theory of evolution; the Islamic view maintains that the origin of the universe was from earth and water.¹⁰⁷ This general rejection also finds resonance with Maitatsine, who condemned anything modern, including Western education. By advancing this argument, Yusuf had separated his group from the rest of the Muslims who recognised the utility of Western learning as an integral part of humanity's contribution of knowledge. In contrast, the majority of clerics promote a fatwa on the necessity of Western education for Muslims.¹⁰⁸

Yusuf established a community of followers united by their extreme interpretation of the Salafi canon. Eventually, his advocacy for violence was motivated by the excesses of the Nigerian security forces. His followers in Maiduguri were injured on June 11, 2009, by the Nigerian security forces under *Operation Flush* that was fighting robbery in Borno State. The police intercepted Yusuf's followers attending the burial of their colleagues who died in an accident. Accusation over non-wearing of crash helmets resulted in an argument that made some security officers open fire, injuring 17 people.¹⁰⁹ The eventual confrontation occurred at the end of July 2009 which resulted in the killing of Yusuf and hundreds of his followers.¹¹⁰

Just before he was killed in 2009, Yusuf wrote an open letter to the president complaining about the victimization of his followers and his readiness to sacrifice his life in his effort to defend Islam and his followers:

This is exactly how they will come to our (Ibn Taymiyya) Study Centre and shoot if we allow them. This is also precisely how they will abuse our women and terrorise them if we leave them. I hope it is understood. Instead of us to sit and keep quiet, while they humiliate our women or they come to our study centre and humiliate us, we would rather sacrifice our lives. It is better we do not live at all.¹¹¹

In this letter, Yusuf uses victimisation of his followers as an excuse for waging war on the Nigerian government. In this regard, the trajectory of Boko Haram insurgency parallels the Maitatsine uprising. In the case of Maitatsine, the immediate cause of the crisis was the killing of his son.¹¹² He therefore swore to retaliate on the people of Kano. Maitatsine in this sense also considered himself a victim. While the anger of Yusuf was targeted at the security forces over the killing of his followers, the followers of Maitatsine initially attacked civilian population. The security forces only became a target after their deployment to restore peace.

Although other factors are important, the truth remains: as in any social science, no phenomenon is informed by unilateral causation. It is clear from the audio recordings of Yusuf's former mentor, Adam, that the movement was already preparing for war in the early 2000s. The onslaught of his followers only served as a trigger for the insurgency. Even without the police aggression, they would have launched attacks against the Nigerian government, as Yusuf had found justification for hostilities against the modern state. However, such a confrontation could have been delayed for years without the provocation of the security forces.

Even after the killing of Yusuf, the struggle for power and projection of "authentic Islam" between his successors continued to shape Boko Haram's history. Yusuf's deputy, Abubakar Shekau, re-organized his colleagues a few years after his master's demise with the support of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghrib (AQIM). He began to launch attacks on the Nigerian security forces. Shekau's despotic leadership, including his promotion of a ruthless and extremely radical version of Islamism, caused a schism within the ranks of Boko Haram. Some disillusioned members sent a protest letter complaining of his extremism—even by their standard in 2011—to AQIM. The letter highlighted areas of Shekau's excesses as outlined below:

One of the accusations against him was "labelling (Muslims) unbelievers."¹¹³ He considered all those who participated in elections unbelievers relying on some extremist texts such as Ali al-Khudayr's al-Mutamimalikewise those who did not use takfir against those he considered "unbelievers." Using this logic, he considered Osama Bin Laden, the founder of al-Qaeda as unbeliever. Shekau also considered himself an imam of an exalted position and thus did not tolerate opposition from followers. He also disallowed his followers to travel and partake in "jihad" in such areas like Algeria or Somalia. Whoever violated this rule would get a death sentence.¹¹⁴

We may be sceptical in accepting the views of the authors of the letter, as they were Shekau's detractors. However, by analysing many of Shekau's videos—some which are available on YouTube—one can see these claims to be true. An example of Shekau's statement expressed in a video clip: "Whoever commits an act of unbelief is an unbeliever and he is not excused even for an instant (...) and if you think that I am being too strict in this, you are an unbeliever too. And whoever doubts your status as an unbeliever, is an unbeliever himself..."¹¹⁵ The consequence of Shekau's extremism was the creation of a splinter group within Boko Haram, known as Jama'at Ansar al-Muslimin fi Bilad al-Sudan, whose leader, Abu Usama al-Ansari, proclaimed its formation in a video released on June 2, 2012.

On March 7, 2015, Shekau declared allegiance to the Islamic State (ISIS). Thus, Jama'at Ahl al-Sunna li'l-Da'wati wa'l-Jihad 'ala Minhaj al-Salaf was renamed Islamic State West African Province (ISWAP) with Shekau as the Governor and Abu Mus'ab al-Barnawi as the spokesperson of the new province. Soon a bitter struggle ensued between Shekau and his deputy, with each of them trying to project their understanding of Islam as the most authentic. Al-Barnawi's discontent with Shekau's style of leadership caused a rift between the two, with the former being entrusted with the leadership of the movement by ISIS. In his interview, published by Islamic State al-Naba Magazine, Al-Barnawi mentioned that Shekau was removed and he (al-Barnawi) was made the Governor of ISWAP.¹¹⁶

We may be sceptical in accepting the views of the authors of the letter, as they were Shekau's detractors.

The 2015 Zaria Massacre

In the 2010s, the Nigerian security forces declared large-scale war on Boko Haram in north-eastern Nigeria. They were specifically grappling for territorial control in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa. Meanwhile, the Shias continued to engage in display of public religiosity through processions and protests. The IMN became a target of Boko Haram, which was notorious under Shekau for attacking Muslim clerics, as well as movements that publicly criticized its *modus operandi*.¹¹⁷ El-Zakzaky considered Boko Haram a Western creation meant to destabilize northern Nigeria so the West could have access to its natural resources.¹¹⁸ He consistently expressed this view for an extensive time at different fora.

It was not surprising, therefore, that a Boko Haram suicide bomber attacked the IMN Ashura procession in the north-eastern city of Yobe on November 3, 2014, leading to the killing of 22 people and the injuring of 82.¹¹⁹ The target of the attack seemed to be Mustapha Lawan Nasidi, the IMN leader in the town of Potiskum, one of the most dominant centres of Shia in the north-east.¹²⁰ The IMN was a target of another Boko Haram attack on November 27, 2015, when they were on procession from Kano to Zaria for the Arba'een Symbolic Trek.¹²¹ Arba'een is organised by the Shia in Iraq to commemorate the 40 days after the killing of the third Shia, Imam, Hussain Ibn Ali (grandson of the Prophet Muhammad), which occurred at Karbala (now in Iraq) on Muharram 10, 61 After Hijra (680 AD). The IMN organised its local version of the pilgrimage, in which members trek from different areas of northern Nigeria to converge at Zaria originally, but currently at Abuja due to the relocation of El-Zakzaky to the Nigerian capital.¹²²

Boko Haram represented a new threat to the IMN but its traditional co-contestant over the control of public space—the Nigerian security forces—continued to occasionally clash with the Shia. On July 25, 2014 (the last Friday of the Holy Month of Ramadan), the passage of a Nigerian army convoy was obstructed by the IMN members who were concluding their Quds Day procession in support of the Palestinian struggle. The ensuing clash resulted in the killing of many Shias, including three biological sons of El-Zakzaky.¹²³

The year 2015 represented the bloodiest and most disastrous in the history of the movement. On December 12, 2015, the most violent confrontation in the IMN's history occurred when a convoy of the Chief of Army Staff was allegedly denied access to the PZ-Samaru Road in Zaria city by the IMN members observing one of their annual ceremonies. The army used force to disperse Shias. The following day, a large-scale crackdown on the Shia ensued in which the army demolished IMN centres and massacred hundreds of Shias, including women and children. This prompted condemnation from within and outside Nigeria. The December 2015 massacre had attracted media coverage and scholarly articles, most of which were critical of the high-handedness of the army, while noting its implications for Nigerian security, as outlined in the Literature Review section.



Hundreds of Shia Muslims marched through the centre of Kaduna City. Source: BBC News

On a whole, all three movements have promoted varieties of discourses resonating with what Foucault described as “disciplinary power” which is produced in a discursive space whose main target is the human subject.¹²⁴ It controls human bodies and condition people to act in accordance with the discourses they subscribe to. These discourses were articulated in a highly competitive environment to gain what Bourdieu described as “social capital,” or a support base from the religious sphere.

On its part, the Nigerian state conceives the discourses and enormous social capital of dissident Islamic scholars antagonistic and inimical to political stability. A Nigerian president, Muhammadu Buhari (d. 2025), once described the activism of the IMN as a tendency to “form a state within a state.”¹²⁵ Both Boko Haram and Maitatsine also promoted discourses that promoted exclusionism leading to their attacks on fellow Muslims, as exemplified by Maitatsine’s antagonism of ‘Yan Awaki residents in 1980 and Boko Haram’s killing of the Muslim civilian population who refused to subscribe to their doctrines. This was especially the case when the movement was effectively under the control of Shekau. The government responded by sending security forces to douse the tension and maintain law and order.

Conclusion

The cases of the three movements examined show the same pattern. Their founders emerged from a highly competitive atmosphere dominated by well-established scholars. The three protagonists struggled to find space for their movements and in the process, two of them (Yusuf and Maitatsine) advocated for extreme doctrines that attracted violent reactions from their detractors and the Nigerian security forces.

The doctrines of the three were considered heretical by the mainstream Sunni scholars and their followers. As much as the three share some similarities in the backlash they received for their preaching, their doctrinal affiliations and their personal struggles to entrench their movements each have their own specificity. Although with a traditional Arabic background, El-Zakzaky emerged from among the Western educated elites having read for a B.Sc. in Economics. Therefore, he was not regarded as a full-fledged Islamic scholar by his detractors. To carve out a space within the public sphere, he engaged in Islamic activism that tilted towards Islamism during a period many Muslims yearned for an alternative to capitalism and socialism. The Muslim public at large considered Islamic government as a viable option. However, the discourses he promoted condemned and called for the destruction of the post-independence political structure. El-Zakzaky’s adoption of Shia Islam alienated some of his followers.

Around the same period, Muhammad Marwa emerged from among the class of Gardawa who lacked an in-depth knowledge of Islamic sciences but were devoted to the study of the Qur’an. As a way of carving out a space for his doctrines, he engaged in public preaching, which berated Sufi brotherhoods. His teaching resonated with a large number of students at Qur’anic schools, and he attracted following from northern Nigeria and neighbouring countries. Empowered by his large followers in ‘Yan Awaki neighbourhood in the city of Kano, Maitatsine began harassing local residents and members of the police forces. His excesses prompted the deployment of the military to crush his movement.

The cases of the three movements examined show the same pattern. Their founders emerged from a highly competitive atmosphere dominated by well-established scholars. The three protagonists struggled to find space for their movements.

On his part, Muhammad Yusuf also emerged within a context of competition between two factions of the Salafis, the members of Izala, and the new class of scholars who graduated from the University of Madina, who that operated independent of Izala. His fatwas on the illegality of Western Education were the first cause of disagreement that separated him from his teachers. Being among followers that always cheered him and followed him blindly, Yusuf promoted more extreme and controversial fatwas. The climax of his Islamist rhetoric was calling his followers to take up arms against the state in retaliation of his followers' deaths.

In all the three movements, the reaction of the Nigerian security forces to their agitation was the excessive use of force. This has undermined the possibility of attaining lasting and sustainable peace in Muslim-dominated areas of northern Nigeria. Starting with the Maitatsine uprising, the military was deployed to uproot him and his followers from their base at 'Yan Awaki. Nonetheless, it took five years to finally bring the uprising to an end in different states. The success of the kinetic approach in the early 1980s led the Nigerian security forces to use the same approach in future uprisings. In the 21st century, such strategy is doomed to fail because of the ease with which dissidents could foster connection and collaboration with groups in other neighboring countries, coupled with the porosity of Nigerian borders, which has made movement of fighters and weapons exceptionally easy.

Moreover, the subsequent religious insurgency of Boko Haram operated within a different context. On an ideological level, it is easy to convince Muslims to disregard Maitatsine, who many believed lacked in-depth Islamic knowledge.

His rejection of the traditions of the Prophet had inspired most Muslims to consider his doctrines heretical. Conversely, Boko Haram members not only accept the validity of Hadith, but quote copiously from the two primary sources of Islamic Law (Qur'an and Hadith) and also rely on the legal opinions of scholars well-respected by the Salafis. This has made their message more appealing, relative to Maitatsine's doctrines. At the strategic level, they easily forged connections with global terrorist organisations such as Al-Qaeda, AQIM, the Islamic State, Al-Shabab, and a host of others.

These pressing issues have made the predominance of kinetic methods counterproductive. As noted by many scholars¹²⁶ the underlying structural problems behind radicalization and militarism, such as poverty and unemployment (which eased recruitment of young people, particularly in the north-eastern Nigeria) need to be addressed. All levels of government need to work on counter-radicalization to ensure that former Boko Haram fighters are successfully de-radicalized. The counter-radicalization programs of the Nigerian government are deficient in the area of prevention.

On his part, Muhammad Yusuf also emerged within a context of competition between two factions of the Salafis, the members of Izala, and the new class of scholars who graduated from the University of Madina and that operated independent of Izala. His fatwas on the illegality of Western Education were the first cause of disagreement that separated him from his teachers.

Another critical area that needs to be prioritized is the role of the institution of Islamic scholars. The Ulama have been holding an exalted position in Muslim societies of northern Nigeria since pre-colonial times. They served as scribes and advisers to rulers, and they were relied upon for the spiritual protection of pre-colonial states.

Despite limited opportunities, they exercise considerable influence on their followers. Yet they engage in intense competition for the acquisition and projection of symbolic capital. A mechanism has to be put in place to encourage dialogue among them and provide platforms that will make them relevant in the decision-making process on matters of religious concern. The current platforms and institutions where ulama play prominent roles—such as Shari’ah commissions, Hisbah Boards and Zakat Commissions, and Shura Councils in some states—are not enough, as they are mostly include few scholars with connections with politicians, leaving out the majority of Islamic scholars with a broad base of support at the grassroots. Early warning signs of religious preaching that indicates extremism have to be checked through an interactive session between the preachers and more learned, experienced scholars.

The government policy of hostility against the IMN sect, since its proscription, is counterproductive and will only lead to more violence. Over the years, the IMN has become more pragmatic due to the guidance of its leader, who often checks the excesses of his followers. A disaster was averted in 2015 when he survived the bullet injuries he sustained during the Zaria Massacre. His extrajudicial killing could lead to the radicalization of his followers.

Although right from its inception, the goal of the movement has been to replace the secular government with an Islamic one, such a change, according to El-Zakzaky, may not necessarily happen during his lifetime. In the event of his elimination, his successor could jump the gun and hasten taking up arms against the government. The use of brutal force against the IMN members who believe their activities are part of their religious obligations can only lead to more radicalization.

Endnotes

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7. This is especially the case regarding works on the Islamic Movement in Nigeria. The 2015 Zaria Massacre prompted the production of works on the subject by scholars whose goal was to document the security concern of the period and nothing more. Some of these works have been reviewed in the literature review section. Collectively what the extant literature lack is locating the IMN crisis within a wider history of religious dissent and competition over symbolic and economic capital in northern Nigeria.
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