



COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER

at West Point



Boko Haram Beyond the Headlines:

Analyses of Africa's Enduring Insurgency

Editor:
Jacob Zenn

CHAPTER 3: Abubakr Shekau: Boko Haram's Underestimated Corporatist-Strategic Leader

By Atta Barkindo

Introduction

A common characteristic across terrorist organizations is that they have leaders who are charismatic and bend people to their will.³⁰³ Abubakr Shekau, the leader of Boko Haram³⁰⁴ after 2009, Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP) from March 2015 to August 2016, and Boko Haram again since August 2016, is one such leader.

Shekau captivates his followers by combining his salafi religious interpretation with the victimhood that some Muslims perceive around the world and especially in northern Nigeria, where there is a distinct narrative about the relationship between Islam and Western cultural and political influences.³⁰⁵ Locally, Shekau exploits the cultural environment of the fallen Kanem-Borno Empire in present-day Nigeria's Borno State and that region's Kanuri language. In the international arena, jihadis have seen Shekau as a leader who vexes his enemies with charisma and bravado, while depicting the West and its allies, including Nigeria, as lands of infidels.³⁰⁶ Shekau's persona and narrative have proven to have an alluring and radicalizing influence on the weakest nodes of northern Nigerian society, especially in rural areas and among marginalized young people of the Lake Chad region.

Despite Shekau's influence and long reign as leader of Boko Haram, he has, however, been dismissed as crazy and a rabble-rouser both in Nigeria and abroad.³⁰⁷ In Nigeria, policymakers, political analysts, security officials, and scholars have considered Boko Haram a rag-tag group of deranged criminals, led by a mad-man, Shekau, whose ambitions would simply fizzle away.³⁰⁸ In 2014, Nigeria's former Chief of Defence Staff called Boko Haram members "idiots" who would soon be eliminated and described them as "ignorants who are the antithesis of contemporary values."³⁰⁹ Former Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan confirmed that "we underrated Boko Haram and thought that we were dealing with some local elements who are disorganized and led by a brutal psychopath." In fact, despite well-publicized efforts to negotiate with Boko Haram, President Jonathan refuted all claims of negotiations in a televised interview on November 18, 2012. He then described Boko Haram's members as "ghosts and

303 Deborah Schurman-Kauflin, *Disturbed: Terrorist Behavioral Profiles* (Sun City, AZ: Violent Crimes Institute, 2008), p. 364.

304 Shekau is the leader of *Jamaa'atu Ahlis-Sunnah lid Da'awati wal Jihaad* (JAS), ('people committed to the propagation of the Prophet's teachings and jihad'), nicknamed "Boko Haram" by a journalist in Bauchi because of the group's constant emphasis on the non-compatibility of Western civilization with Islamic values. In 2015, the group changed its name to Islamic State West Africa Province after Shekau pledged allegiance to Islamic State 'caliph' Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, although in August 2016, Shekau left West Africa Province and returned to leading Boko Haram in its second iteration.

305 For background reading on the concept and nature of jihadi-salafi ideology and the original sources of philosophy of Boko Haram's ideology, see Kassim Abdulbasit, "Defining and Understanding the Religious Philosophy of Jihadi-Salafism and the Ideology of Boko Haram," *Politics, Religion and Ideology* 16:2-3 (2015): pp. 173-200.

306 Author translation, Abubakr Shekau's Tafsir "Western civilization is atheism," dated February 17, 2004.

307 "Insane, Boko Haram leader, Abubakr Shekau uses brutality," *News*, May 15, 2014; Atta Barkindo, "The Vanishing Nigerian Amnesty," unpublished article, August 2012; "No negotiations with Boko Haram – Jonathan," *Vanguard*, November 19, 2012; "I and My Team Underestimated Boko Haram – President Jonathan," *African Leadership*, February 23, 2015; "Shekau is mentally ill, says Nigerian Army," *Guardian*, September 26, 2016; "Boko Haram'll soon run out of bombers – CDS," *Punch*, January 24, 2012, p. 12; Simon Kolawole, "Boko Haram and Those Conspiracy Theories," *ThisDay*, November 9, 2014; Colin Freeman, "Boko Haram's Abubakar Shekau: The 'craziest commander of all,'" *Telegraph*, May 12, 2014.

308 Kolawole.

309 "Boko Haram'll soon run out of bombers – CDS," Kolawole.

faceless masquerades,” including Shekau.³¹⁰

As a result of these perceptions, the Nigerian government underrated Boko Haram’s capacity under Shekau’s leadership, including his ability to establish cross-border networks.³¹¹ The Galtimari Presidential Committee that was set up to investigate the Boko Haram conflict in 2011 suggests that “Security officials grew careless in dealing with an ignorant and deranged leader, heading a local group. Internal wrangling, conspiracies and deceptions erupted as senior officers became victims of constant sack and replacement.³¹² Intelligence gathering also became weak and lacked diligence and details. For instance, during a top-secret meeting with the exiled Emir of Gwoza, former President Jonathan was alleged to have asked, “Where is Gwoza sef?” (Where is Gwoza located?).³¹³ He failed to recognize where Gwoza, the headquarters of Shekau’s declared caliphate in 2014, was located.

Existing literature presents Shekau as a bloodthirsty lunatic. Others, such as Emilie Oftedal, in her overview of Boko Haram, describes Shekau as “dreaded and feared.”³¹⁴ Muhammad Mann Shaaba describes Shekau as mad, ruthless, and vicious.³¹⁵ Sabina Brakoniecka assesses Shekau as “temperamental” and “insane.”³¹⁶ Most of these claims are based on secondary sources that rely on media reports. Furthermore, such claims do not take into consideration the cultural and linguistic context in which Shekau operates. Importantly, they ignore how much the mannerisms and symbols deployed by Shekau are well understood by his followers.

The thesis of this article contends that Boko Haram is not simply a poverty-stricken, rag-tag group of delinquents. Shekau is not ignorant and mentally deranged as some analysts would believe. Additionally, if the above perceptions of Shekau and Boko Haram are to be taken at face value, it is important to ask: how is it possible for an allegedly crazy man to organize and oversee the transformation of Boko Haram from a relatively non-violent socio-religious movement before 2009 into a terrorist organization that in 2014–2015 conquered parts of three Nigerian states? How did Shekau, the “mad-man,” achieve Boko Haram’s transition to a sophisticated jihadi group able to mount anti-aircraft attacks? How can Boko Haram’s sudden capacity under Shekau’s leadership to create film videos and establish a Twitter presence to advertise its overrunning of military barracks and ammunitions depots, its control of territories, and its eventual pledge of allegiance to the Islamic State be understood? How has Shekau stayed updated with the political commentaries of the Nigerian government, been able to reply to any official claims when he so desires—no matter how much pressure is placed on Boko Haram or how many times the Nigerian government claims he is dead—and been able to negotiate the release of more than 100 of the Chibok schoolgirls after having kept them captive—and relatively well-fed—for more than three years from April 2014 to May 2017?

This article seeks to better understand the phenomenon of Shekau’s leadership of Boko Haram. It contends that Shekau, although ruthless and fearless, is a smart and strategic leader with vision and objectives. The article demonstrates this at two levels, offering some analysis on why Shekau is often dismissed as mentally deranged, and the security implications for such mindset.

It first discusses the corporate model of terrorist group leadership and explains three reasons why

310 Chioma Gabriel, “Boko Haram: Finally, Amnesty comes to Ghosts,” *Vanguard*, April 13, 2013; “I and My Team Underestimated Boko Haram – President Jonathan.”

311 Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, “Nigeria’s Interminable Insurgency? Addressing the Boko Haram Crisis,” Chatham House, Royal Institute of International Affairs, September 2014.

312 Galtimari Presidential Committee Report, 2011, p. 58.

313 “Where is Gwoza Sef?” Jonathan Asks at Meeting with Emir,” *Sahara Reporters*, September 1, 2014.

314 Emilie Oftedal, “Boko Haram: An Overview,” Norwegian Defence Research Establishment, May 31, 2013, p. 33.

315 Muhammad Mann Shaaba, “Absolutism in Religion and Global Peace: Boko-Haram Factor in Nigeria and Its Educational Imperatives,” *World Journal of Education* 7:2 (2017): pp. 11–18.

316 Sabina Brakoniecka, “The Beginnings of the Boko Haram Rebellion from a Micro-level Perspective,” *Hemispheres: Studies on Cultures and Societies* 30:3 (2015): pp. 77–92, 89.

Shekau is a corporatist leader: first, he articulates a central philosophy as a guiding principle for Boko Haram that most organizations require; second, he establishes alliances with rival factions within the broader Boko Haram movement and external jihadi groups as a strategy for sustainability, just like organizations build partnerships and networks; and, third, he delegates core responsibilities to other commanders who operate on Shekau's behalf but remain anonymous so as to preserve Shekau as the lone face of Boko Haram, a reflection of the division of roles evident in every organization.

Second, the article underscores Shekau's strategic ability in leveraging the context of the conflict. It explains non-managerial skills that Shekau exploits to his advantage to assert his leadership, including language, symbols, understanding of the Nigerian political context, and Kanuri socio-cultural narratives.

The article offers several reasons why Shekau is often dismissed as only a symbolic or mentally deficient leader instead of an organized corporatist leader who uses varied skillsets to survive in his specific socio-cultural environment and confront the Nigerian State and its allies. At a time when Nigeria is again claiming that the war against Boko Haram will soon be over, it is more important than ever to understand Shekau's leadership qualities and not write him - or Boko Haram - off until he and his group are eliminated.³¹⁷

Shekau as a Corporatist Leader

One of the predominant theoretical perspectives on terrorism in contemporary literature compares terrorist groups to business organizations, which are fraught with risk and market uncertainty.³¹⁸ Heckscher and others argue that terrorist organizations now follow the example of contemporary business organizations and are becoming network based. According to Drucker and Arquilla, terrorist organizations use the internet among dispersed units and adopt organizational strategies that are less hierarchical. Using the models of some corporate organizations with branches across the globe, Hanlon contends that terrorist organisations decentralize decision-making organs, permitting local autonomy and initiative where units and members rely on networking via mobile phones or the internet. This means that they require strong central leadership with vision, innovation, and initiative. For example, in the 1900s, Henry Ford was an exceptional leader because he had the vision to mass produce automobiles and to make them widely available for communities, unlike other hundreds of founded automobile companies who simply made automobiles a toy for the rich.

These same leadership characteristics of vision, daring, innovation, and initiative are evident in the individuals who have excelled in the development and application of terrorism as an art and trade-craft.³¹⁹ Applying these corporate principles to terrorist organizations, the terrorist leader will initiate the motivation, create the opportunity, and establish capability for the group to carry out its activities. Motivation demonstrates how the terrorist leader constructs and combines central ideology with expected goals to inspire members to embrace group activities. Opportunity, on the other hand, reflects the strategic creativity of the terrorist leader, regarding when, where, and how to initiate changes for effective group transformation and conduct the terrorist activities. Capability is based on the leader's ability to initiate the process of acquiring the necessary skills and resources, and to develop the routines

317 Abdulkareem Haruna, "Boko Haram has been defeated, Nigeria's Army Chief insists," *Premium Times*, November 21, 2016.

318 Heckscher Harles and Donnelon Anne eds., *The Post-Bureaucratic Organization* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1995); Drucker Peter, *The Coming of the New Organization: Harvard Business Review on Knowledge Management* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 1998), p. 3; John Arquilla, David Ronfeldt, and Michele Zanini, "Networks, Netwar, and Information-Age Terrorism" in Russell Howard and Reid Sawyer eds., *Terrorism and Counterterrorism: Understanding the New Security Environment: Readings and Interpretations* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2006), pp. 39-41; Hanlon Querine, "Globalization and the Transformation of Armed Groups," in Norwitz Jeffrey ed., *Armed Groups: Studies in National Security, Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency* (Newport, RI: US Naval War College Press, 2008), p. 119.

319 Stewart Scott, "Terrorism and the Exception Individual," *Security Weekly*, May 17, 2012.

for ensuring transformation. Another element is that the vision and innovation of the leader indicate the ability to develop a central philosophy for strategic progress. A leader's initiative demonstrates the ability to enter into partnerships and to establish regional-international alliances with other corporate groups that will ensure success.³²⁰

Central leadership does not, however, suggest lack of power delegation; rather it encompasses the allocation of authority to deputies and provincial managers who exercise power on behalf of the central corporate leader.³²¹ The leaders of terrorist organizations do not simply serve as managers, but retain the capacity to motivate and inspire their subordinates to overcome psychological obstacles associated with confronting and waging war.³²² Emerging evidence suggests that through creative leadership, terrorist organizations now also adopt the strategies of business groups to become flexible, more networked, and less hierarchical.³²³

For example, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the Jordanian who formed the terror group Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (JtJ), exemplifies the modern "terrorist CEO." After the U.S. invasion of Iraq in March 2003, various insurgent groups emerged in opposition. These insurgent groups comprised largely of Iraqis from the former Baathist regime, nationalists, tribal elements, and Islamist fighters, some of whom, like al-Zarqawi, had fought in Afghanistan under Usama bin Ladin. Al-Zarqawi demonstrated wit, vision, and initiative in welding together the various types of insurgents into JtJ. After ultimately forging an alliance with al-Qa`ida, JtJ became al-Qa`i da in Iraq (AQI) until al-Zarqawi's tactics led to a break-up with al-Qa`ida around 2007 (after which AQI evolved through several phases until it became the Islamic State). Al-Zarqawi introduced the use of the internet to promote his message, recruit personnel, and terrorize his enemies, orchestrating the first beheading of an American wearing an orange Guantanamo-style jumpsuit in 2003—a visual that the Islamic State would further popularize more than a decade later in its own videos.

Al-Zarqawi also instructed his fighters to post messages from him and other videos on multiple servers to avoid delays in downloading and to ensure they reached as many audiences as possible, (and would still be available after some were blocked on the internet). In terms of semiotics, he initiated a specific way of dressing and style and of shooting guns that embellished his jihadi identity and motivated participation. In this regard, he served as a 'role model' not only for Iraqi jihadis in the mid-2000s, but also for Shekau, who imitated al-Zarqawi in his own videos in the 2010s. It is perhaps, therefore, no surprise that Shekau would pledge allegiance to al-Zarqawi's successor, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, in 2015.

Applying these corporate principles to Shekau's leadership, it is important to ask how Shekau might behave if he was indeed ignorant and deranged. In other words, Shekau would be expected to make significant mistakes and missteps. He would likely succumb to paranoia about internal group dynamics, leadership challenges, and member loyalty and betrayals and ultimately be killed or permanently deposed. What is notable is that Shekau does not appear to have fallen into such traps. Rather, Shekau's

320 These corporate principles demonstrate that the terrorist leader has the competence to organize and sustain members' inspiration in unstable conflict circumstances. For instance, Usama bin Ladin, realizing the changing nature of the Afghan conflict, used satellite phones from the remote mountains of Afghanistan to coordinate the activities of his dispersed operatives. Henrich Greve, "Performance, Aspiration, and Risky Organizational Change," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 43:1 (1998): pp. 58-59; Michele Zanini and Sean Edward, "The Networking of Terror in the Information Age," in *Networks and Netwars: The Future of Terror, Crime, and Militancy* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2001), p. 36.

321 Ahmed S. Hashim, "From the Al-Qaida Affiliate to the Rise of the Islamic Caliphate: The Evolution of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria," *Policy Report*, Military Studies Programme, Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, 2014, p. 4; Robert Rabil, "The ISIS Chronicles: A History," *National Interest*, July 17, 2014.

322 Bryan Price, "Targeting Top Terrorists: How Leadership Decapitation Contributes to Counterterrorism," *Quarterly Journal of International Security* 36:4 (2012): pp. 9-46.

323 Heckscher Harles and Donnelon Anne eds., *The Post-Bureaucratic Organization* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1995); Peter, p. 3; Arquilla, Ronfeldt, and Zanini, p. 39.

corporatist skills can thus be seen in three different ways throughout the course of his leadership of Boko Haram since 2010: his central philosophy, his establishment of alliances, and his delegation of authority—an ability that would be difficult for any ‘ignorant’ and ‘deranged’ man to achieve.

Central Philosophy

Shekau portrays Boko Haram’s struggle as a jihad against Nigeria, Christianity, and the West, which provides a central philosophy, or *raison d’être*, for the struggle for his followers. Shekau has consistently framed this struggle on the basis of salafi-jihadi ideology in his sermons in mosques before he declared a jihad in 2010, and in over 50 videos that he has released since he went into hiding. Shekau bases his understanding of Islamic history and theology on the tenets initially constructed by Boko Haram founder Muhammed Yusuf and defined in Yusuf’s book *Hadhihi Aqidatuna wa Minhaj Da’awatuna* (This is our Creed and the Methodology of our Preaching).³²⁴ Yusuf’s book clearly states that “our religion is Islam, Our Creed is the Creed of the Prophet and his Companions and our *manhaj* (methodology) is jihad.” In accordance with Saudi-inspired trends of salafism, Yusuf reinforces the significance of *tawhid* (monotheism) as well as the Qur’an, Sunna, and ahadiths as the foundation for all religious and political authority in Islam. In his book, Yusuf reaffirms the fact that Islam is the religion of Boko Haram. The creed of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions is the group’s creed, and the group’s methodology is jihad. Sharia remains the only truth, while the secular constitution and democracy are all *kufir* (unbelief).

Yusuf advocated Islamic law and the gradual establishment of an Islamic state. He strongly opposed the corruption and abuses carried out by security forces, condemning democracy, constitutional governance, and the Muslims working under secular government. In following Yusuf’s ideology, Shekau went even further to strongly oppose Western civilization, which he equates with atheism. He suggests that the edifice of Western civilization is constructed on three fundamental pillars: Western education, Judeo-Christian tradition, and democracy. The collaboration between the three has led to what he calls “globalization and modern world order.”³²⁵ He believes these three elements of Western civilization are intended to destroy Islam; thus, he contends, Muslims must stand up to fight Westerners or Christians anywhere, anytime, and by whatever means.³²⁶

For example, Shekau accuses Judeo-Christian tradition of attributing to God (a son, Jesus Christ) when God himself has not declared that he has a son. According to Shekau, such Christian theology has encouraged liberal interpretation of sacred texts, divine mandates and religious issues. It has allowed institutions and secular systems such as governments to relax Allah’s law and allow human liberty and freedom to become the norm. As a result, Shekau completely rejects the use of the Judeo-Christian calendar and holidays that have been recognized and adopted by governments all over the world. He calls Christians *mushrikoon* (associationists) and infidels and says true Muslims should

324 Salafism emphasizes that temporal proximity to the Prophet and his companions reflects the truest form of Islam. However, the process of ensuring this temporal proximity in contemporary times has given rise to all forms of salafism, including the salafi-jihadis who believe in the use of violence to achieve their aims; this is the school to which JAS belongs. Bernard Haykel, “On the Nature of Salafi Thought and Action,” in Meijer Roel ed., *Global Salafism: Islam’s New Religious Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 34; Gilles Kepel, “Coming to Terms: Fundamentalists or Islamists?” *Middle East Quarterly* 10:2 (2003): pp. 65-77. The uploaded audiotapes can be accessed at “Littafin Haazihi Aqeedatuna_010a.wmv,” YouTube, December 7, 2011 and “Littafin Haazihi Aqeedatuna_010b.wmv,” YouTube, December 7, 2011.

325 Author translation, Abubakr Shekau, “Western civilization is Atheism and anti-Islam,” YouTube, October 28, 2011.

326 Ibid. Specifically, Shekau argues that the West uses Western education to infiltrate Muslim minds and destroy Islam. Western Education for him is the foundation of immorality and all that is evil in the world. Such a system of education must not only be rejected but must be replaced by religious education where Allah is the means and the goal.

have nothing to with them.³²⁷ Shekau also endorses the concept of *al-wala' wa al-bara* (loyalty and disavowal), legalizing the killing of infidels and group members that betray his code. He also capitalizes on eschatological narratives to attract the support of followers.³²⁸ Such narratives outline the nature of life after death, explaining that all living things will be raised to life again and called in front of God for final judgment. On that day, people will be divided; some will enter *Jannah* (paradise, the garden, or a place of physical and spiritual pleasure with delicious food and drink, virgin companions, and lofty mansions). Others will enter *Jahannam* (hellfire), which is reserved for the vilest of all creatures and where the pagans shall burn forever in the fire of hell.

Shekau also describes democracy as the rejection of Allah's supreme leadership over his creation (humanity), which in Nigeria is reflected in its multi-party democracy and the constitutional affirmation of its secular identity. Shekau's contention that Nigeria rejects Allah's law is further cemented by his belief that national symbols like the national anthem, the national pledge, and the national flag receive praise that should be reserved only for Allah. The concept of the nation-state is a human construct that denigrates the place of Allah and completely excludes Allah from the public domain. Shekau also rejects the doctrinal principle of inter-religious dialogue between Muslims and non-Muslims and considers Islamic religious leaders, such as the Sultan of Sokoto, who engage in dialogue with Christians as conspirators against Islam and deserving of nothing but death.³²⁹ Shekau, like Yusuf, also calls for the full implementation of sharia law, meaning that the entire government structure should be based on Islamic law in moral, civil, and criminal issues.³³⁰

However, Shekau's main contribution to Boko Haram's ideology beyond Yusuf's teachings is his introduction of the ideological concept of takfirism.³³¹ There is a general agreement in the salafi creed (*aqidah*) on a principle 'man lam yukaffir al-kafir fahuwa kafir' meaning that 'whosoever does not make takfir of an infidel (*kafir*), he is also an infidel.' Shekau, and ultimately Boko Haram, assumed the authority to declare Muslim non-members as apostates and infidels. Shekau said, "Any Muslim who does not convert an atheist to Islam and does not try to convert *mushrikun* to Islam but approves their way of life betrays Islam and is automatically expelled from Islam."³³² Shekau also used this concept to declare Abu Musab al-Barnawi, the leader of ISWAP who deposed Shekau from that position in August 2016, of being a kafir on grounds that al-Barnawi did not believe it was acceptable to kill ordinary Muslims who did not join the jihad. Shekau responded to al-Barnawi's accusation that he engaged in excessive *takfir* with the following:

"We do not engage in takfir against anybody except those branded as kuffar by Allah and His Messenger. Some people accuse [Boko Haram] of killing common Muslims and of engaging in *takfir* against all the people. But can any sane Muslim say that the *kuffar* who advocate democracy and the *taghuts* fighting the *mujahidin* are common Muslims?"³³³

327 This is in accordance with the *diktats* of jihadi-salafi ideology that calls for return to the pristine age of Islam, even if it means using violence. It emphasizes *tawhid*, rejects innovation, permits the expulsion of infidels including Muslims who betray Islamic injunctions, promotes the literal and strict adherence to the Qur'an and the Sunna, and accepts the use of violence as means to establishing an Islamic state. Kassim Abdulbasit, "Defining and Understanding the Religious Philosophy of Jihadi-Salafism and the Ideology of Boko Haram," *Politics, Religion and Ideology* 16:2-3 (2015), pp. 176-187.

328 Arosoaie Aida, "Doctrinal Differences between ISIS and Al Qaeda: An Account of Ideologies," *A Journal of the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research* 7:7 (2015): p. 31.

329 "Islam, Christianity Not at War – Sultan," *Vanguard*, December 27, 2011; author translation of Shekau's video message, "Sako Zuwa Ga Duniya (A Message to the World)," YouTube, September 30, 2012.

330 Author translation of Shekau's lecture, "Islam and Secularism in Nigeria," YouTube, October 28, 2011.

331 *Takfir* is the process of declaring those who do not live according to the rudiments of Islamic values as infidels and unbelievers. This is a jihadi-salafi theological principle, which is regarded as an outright obligation to provide a strict and clear distinction between true believers and infidels, and to declare the infidels as such.

332 Author translation of Shekau's lecture, "Islam and Secularism in Nigeria," YouTube, October 28, 2011.

333 Abubakr Shekau, "New Video Message from Jama'at Ahl Al-Sunnah Li-I-Da'wah Wa-I-Jihad: A Message to the World," *Jihadology*, September 25, 2016.

Similarly, Shekau justified suicide bomb attacks at the University of Maiduguri in January 2017 under the same concept where he said:

“They regard their Constitutions and their books as more sacred than the Qur’an. The proof is that their rules are given precedence over Allah’s rules. So the masses in the religion of democracy do not accept Allah’s ruling. This is an explicit renunciation of faith.”³³⁴

Shekau is also influenced by some of the most influential salafi theological thinkers in the history of Islam, and his theological polemics have similar lines to earlier books written by Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi and Abu Basir al-Tartusi. Shekau has on several occasions spoken about the need to reject secular rulers. Shekau, rightly or wrongly, made reference to Ibn Taymiyya as the source for his justification of takfirism.³³⁵ In a January 2015 video called “Doctrinal Principles,” Shekau denounces those who subscribe to democracy and accept man-made laws and says Ibn Taymiyah al-Harrani said that one does not engage in *takfir* against any Muslim unless he has committed major sins. Shekau added that “Imam Muahmmad bin Abd al-Wahhab [founder of the Wahhabi salafi sect] said that worshipping deities other than God is worse than the cardinal sins and that claiming ignorance is not accepted as an excuse.” As a result, Shekau concluded, “all those who subscribe to democracy are infidels and those who accept judgment according to man-made laws are infidels. All those who get education in foreign schools are infidels. This is my faith, my brethren. If you did not know me, here I am.” Notably, Shekau has also condemned one of the most renowned Islamic philosophers, Ibn Arabi, for exhibiting and teaching secular philosophy and for contradicting the teachings of Ibn Taymiyah and al-Wahhab.³³⁶

Alliances

Shekau’s stance on alliances is also based on his salafi-jihadi ideology. Under Shekau, Boko Haram began as an independent jihadi group with “start-up” funding from al-Qa`ida, then evolved into an “unofficial affiliate” of al-Qa`ida, and then pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi and became ISWAP in March 2015; Shekau then left the Islamic State in August 2016 to lead Boko Haram once again.³³⁷ Shekau’s operating principle, as stated in a November 2016 audio, is “*tawalli* through alliance (*tahalluf*),” which means he shows allegiance to other jihadi leaders and groups without regard for factionalism or rivalry.³³⁸ This is in contrast to Nigeria, which allies with other “un-Islamic” states and leaders.

Recent anti-Shekau narratives in the international jihadi community might be linked to his personality, which is arrogant, unbending, dominating, and controlling, and his lack of consultation. Shekau appears to be rejected for these qualities rather than most of the extremist ideologies he supports. The arrogance of Shekau is further accompanied by his strategic manipulation of Islamist groups, taking advantage of them when necessary and dumping them when possible.

For example, Shekau’s relationship with al-Qa`ida faltered when al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb

334 “UNIMAID Attack: Shekau claims responsibility in new audio” *Vanguard*, January 17, 2017.

335 In particular, Ibn Taymiyya fought to ensure that legitimate political authority in Islam is based on the Qur’an and sharia law. Shekau also made references to Imam Ibn al-Qayyim, a well-known salafi Imam born in Damascus in 1292AD. Among Ibn al-Qayyim’s goals was the purging of the religion from the innovations and returning it to its pure and original fountains. Ibn Taymiyya is also one of the profound Islamic religious reformers (*muslahun*). He lived in 1258AD, when the Abbasid Empire was defeated by the Mongol armies and Bagdad was captured, and insisted on the practice of Islam in its original form as practiced by the Prophet and his companions. Omar A. Farrukh (trans.), *Ibn Taymiyya on Public and Private Law in Islam or Public Policy in Islamic Jurisprudence* (Beirut: Khayats, 1966), p. 1.

336 Author translation, Shekau, “Western civilization is Atheism and anti-Islam.”

337 Dabiq Issue 5, “Remaining and Expanding,” 2015, p. 12-33; Jacob Zenn, “Spot Report #3, Al-Urhwa Al-Wutqha Phase II: Insights, European Union Technical Assistance to Nigeria’s Evolving Security Challenges, Abuja,” 2015, p.1; “Dozens of Boko Haram Help Mali’s Rebels Seize Gao,” *Vanguard*, April 9, 2012; Dabiq Issue 8, “Sharia alone will Rule Africa,” 2015a, p. 14-16.

338 For more on Tawalli, see Millat Ibrahim, “The Difference Between Muwaalaat and Tawalli,” October 9, 2008.

(AQIM) sided with the Ansaru faction comprised of Boko Haram defectors who opposed Shekau's excessive takfirism and acceptance of Muslim casualties. In early 2015, Shekau nonetheless reintegrated some of those same defectors into Boko Haram after Ansaru went into dormancy (in part because of Boko Haram killing off Ansaru members), and they helped connect Shekau to al-Baghdadi and secure al-Baghdadi's acceptance of Shekau's pledge, with Boko Haram thus becoming ISWAP. In terms of external alliances, Shekau also received support from AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdel, who in 2010 offered his "salafist brothers in Nigeria, men, weapons, and ammunition to gain revenge on Nigeria's ruling Christian minority, and for killing the martyr Shaykh Muhammad Yusuf, and the deaths of Muslims in clashes with Christians in the Middle Belt."³³⁹

Shekau also managed alliances internally within Boko Haram.³⁴⁰ When Shekau came out from hiding in 2010 after the Nigerian military killed Muhammed Yusuf and mistakenly also declared Shekau dead, Shekau coordinated attacks with rival factions opposed to his leadership. The bombing of the U.N. headquarters in Abuja in August 2011, for example, which Shekau claimed in the name of Boko Haram, was masterminded by Mamman Nur. Nur had initially attempted to become the leader of Boko Haram until Shekau wrested control of the movement from him by 2010. Even when Nur and Khalid al-Barnawi, the latter whom Shekau had delegated to manage relations with AQIM in 2009, formed Ansaru in 2012 and spoke out against Shekau for killing Muslim civilians, including Ansaru members themselves, Shekau was still willing to renegotiate with them. In 2013, a number of key former Ansaru militants—including Nur and the former Ansaru commander of suicide operations, Abu Fatima, who was originally a Boko Haram member—joined with Boko Haram before Shekau's pledge to al-Baghdadi. Nur and Abu Fatima—along with al-Barnawi—had facilitated the correspondence that enabled Shekau's pledge.

Similarly, Boko Haram, during the Shekau period, was able to raise funds through kidnappings in Borno State and northern Cameroon with the support of former Ansaru members as early as February 2013 with the kidnapping of a seven-member French family, for which the ransom money netted Boko Haram several million dollars. Shekau thus showed pragmatism and a willingness to negotiate with enemies and coordinate with his ideological rivals who overcame disagreements on operations.³⁴¹

Delegating Authority

The third way Shekau is a "corporatist" leader is the way authority was exercised on the basis of delegation to subordinates.³⁴² For example, it was Khalid al-Barnawi, Adam Kamar, and Mamman Nur who facilitated Boko Haram's relationship with AQIM and al-Shabaab and coordinated most of the financing for the training of Nigerian militants with AQIM in Mali between 2010 and 2012 before they set up Ansaru, a militant group separate from Shekau's leadership. Neither al-Barnawi, Nur, Kamar, nor any other militant under Shekau (with few exceptions), however, ever showed their faces or revealed their names, both for security and strategic reasons under Shekau's leadership. Furthermore, Habibu Bama and Kabiru Sokoto planned and executed the Christmas Day 2011 bombing of St. Theresa's Church in Madalla, Niger State, near Abuja, but neither of them showed their faces and

339 Jacob Zenn, Atta Barkindo, and Nicholas Heras, "The Ideological Evolution of Boko Haram in Nigeria: Merging Local Salafism and International Jihadism," *RUSI Journal* 158:4 (2013): pp. 50-51.

340 Dave Bohon, "Boko Haram Declares Islamic 'Islamic Caliphate' in Nigerian Town," *New American*, August 31, 2014.

341 Zenn, Barkindo, and Heras, pp. 46-53; "Boko Haram 'Holding' Kidnapped French Priest," *France24*, November 16, 2013.

342 Shekau set the agenda for Boko Haram by portraying its war as a 'jihad,' or struggle against the enemies of Islam and those who denigrate and undermine Islam. He not only redefined JAS's central ideology in a way that his followers could understand and that was consistent with the salafi-jihadi currents of al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State, but also pioneered the prolific use of the internet to release statements featuring al-Qa`ida's syntax and religious memes through jihadi websites and YouTube video statements, indicative of a wider intended audience than local recruits alone. Author translation, Shekau, "Western civilization is Atheism and anti-Islam."

allowed Shekau to claim their attacks.³⁴³ Similarly, the Cameroonian arms dealer, Alhaji Abdalla, was a vehicle smuggler and hostage negotiator during Boko Haram's kidnapping of the 22 foreign hostages in five operations in Cameroon, but he, too, answered to Shekau and kept a low-profile.³⁴⁴ Boko Haram's media office, food suppliers, and arms traffickers also operated under separate commanders, who were deferential to Shekau and kept their identities anonymous, leaving all of the spotlight on Shekau.³⁴⁵ Indeed, Shekau has at times had to share leadership with other figures so long as he was the only leader to have a public face. Rivals such as Mamman Nur or Khalid al-Barnawi, in contrast, could operate with Shekau so long as they were behind the scenes, but Shekau waged war against them when they tried to challenge or usurp Shekau's authority. This style of leadership appears to be strategic, keeping in line with the principles of delegation within the context of centralized leadership. It may seem that it is also intended to make Shekau's deputies more elusive and effective in a conflict environment that is constantly changing.

Shekau's Strategic Leveraging

Beyond his "corporatist" skill set, Shekau has also strategically leveraged language, symbolism, political context, and Kanuri social-cultural context to inspire his followers. Above all, Shekau utilizes this "non-managerial" skill set to connect with his target audience in the Lake Chad region and reveal the corrupt underbelly of the Nigerian state.

Shekau's Strategic Leveraging of Language

Shekau has leveraged his command of language to help him reach out to and control adherents, especially his fluency in his native Kanuri language. Shekau, however, also speaks Arabic and Hausa, and Fulani and adds "broken and disjointed English and French sentences" into his sermons often for the purpose of mockery.³⁴⁶ His ability to speak classical Arabic and to cite verses seamlessly from the Qur'an upgraded his status as an Islamic thinker among many of his followers for whom deep knowledge of Islamic literature and science remains as embryonic as it is deformed.

This is evident in most of Shekau's YouTube videos, particularly his sermon on Islam and secularism

343 To the media, analysts, and policymakers, these less popular figures were therefore invisible, while all operations and attacks are attributed to Shekau as the lone face of a monolithic. Jacob Zenn, "Leadership Analysis of Boko Haram and Ansaru in Nigeria," *CTC Sentinel* 7:2 (2014): pp. 23-29; Jason Burke, "Bin Laden Files Show al-Qaida and Taliban Leaders in Close Contact," *Guardian*, April 29, 2012; "Ansaru Fighters Claim Nigeria Abductions," *Al Jazeera*, December 18, 2012; Baba Ahmed, "Leader of al-Qaida Unit in Mali Quits AQIM," *Associated Press*, December 2, 2012; Zenn, Barkindo, and Heras.

344 Shekau's leadership led to innovation in ways that for Boko Haram prioritized material advantage, including his introduction in 2011 of the first female suicide bombing in Nigeria. This surprised some scholars as there is no culture of suicide in Nigeria, and suicide terrorism was thought to be unlikely in the Nigerian cultural context (male suicide bombing continued, even with increasing reliance on female suicide attacks from June 2014 to April 2016).

345 The massive military offensive in July 2009 that killed founder Muhammed Yusuf and 1,000 other followers forced JAS to adopt a conflict strategy that made it necessary for Shekau to act symbolically as the "face" of JAS, even while other operatives took a leading role operationally. After July 2009, JAS went underground, and many of its key members migrated to North Africa and connected with other North Africa-based followers of the late Muhammed Yusuf, such as Adam Kambar, Khalid al-Barnawi, and Mamman Nur, with whom they coordinated a return to Nigeria and formed what became Ansaru. Shekau, who was in hiding in Borno State and Kano, accepted that Nur, who was an ideological rival to Shekau, could still direct major attacks so long as Shekau remained JAS's public leader in claiming attacks. Thus, although Nur masterminded the U.N. headquarters bombing in August 2011 with perhaps only the suicide bomber himself provided by JAS, Shekau—not Nur—claimed the attack for JAS. Nur was alleged to have fled to Somalia and is believed to have trained with al-Shabaab and AQIM militants before he returned to Nigeria and coordinated the bombing of the U.N. headquarters in Abuja in 2011. "JTF Claims 'Global Terrorist' Kambar Killed," *Vanguard*, June 7, 2013. Shekau permitted Sani Umar to act as a leader briefly. It was Sani who released a statement saying JAS "is an Islamic revolution ... and Yusuf has not died in vain, for he is a martyr. His ideas will live forever ... we shall make Nigeria ungovernable ... it is either you are for us or against us." Mallam Sani Umar, "Boko Haram Resurrects, Declares total Jihad," *Vanguard*, August 14, 2009.

346 This is seen in most of the YouTube videos released by Shekau. Author translation, Abubakr Shekau, "Only Allah Can take my Life," YouTube, October 5, 2014; author translation, Abubakr Shekau, "Tawhid: the Oneness of Allah," YouTube, October 28, 2004; author translation, Abubakr Shekau, "The Abduction of Chibok Girls," May 5, 2014.

from before 2009.³⁴⁷ In that sermon, he argues that international institutions are dominated by Western nations; they symbolize the rejection of Allah's authority and usurp his supremacy. Shekau argues that global institutions propagate political systems, create social conditions, and enact economic laws that exploit Muslim nations and completely negate the teachings of the Qur'an. Moreover, Shekau said he was aware that Borno and Yobe states and the Lake Chad border region all have high regard for Islamic culture and scholars but that they have lost their economic and political weight in the modern era. Shekau's constant use of Arabic language, Borno State College of Arabic and Islamic Studies, not only boosts his status as an Islamic scholar but allows his content to reach target audiences.

Even when using Arabic or northern Nigeria's *lingua franca* of Hausa, Shekau seems to have been fully aware of his advantage as a native Kanuri speaker unlike most of the Hausa-speaking Islamic elites in northern Nigeria. Thus, Shekau usually summarized his sermons and messages from Arabic or Hausa into Kanuri for local audiences, as Kanuri is the channel for communications around the Lake Chad region.³⁴⁸ Shekau, nonetheless, eschewed making Kanuri ethnicity a primary marker of Boko Haram ideology, even while maintaining a predominantly Kanuri inner circle; both tribalism and nationalism are contrary to salafi-jihadi ideology and the vision of a global Islamic caliphate.

Additionally, since the Hausa-Fulani ethnic group represents roughly 30% of the Nigerian population and the majority in the country's northern states, Shekau's use of Hausa in most of his sermons is aimed at reaching out to them. (English is the language of education and government in Nigeria, but it is mostly used only in the educated urban areas.) Shekau has, however, cleverly used English words and expressions in his statements. For instance, in a May 2014 video mocking the #Bringbackourgirls campaign Shekau recited the Nigerian national pledge in English but mocked its significance. Shekau also chanted in that video "Brink back our girls ... Oowowowwo ... Bring back our army!" referring to Boko Haram's raid of a military barracks days earlier.³⁴⁹ In another video, Shekau claimed that English

347 A Boko Haram member nicknamed 'the engineer' confirmed that "under Shekau, Boko Haram's media and publicity structure moved from analogue to digital. Shekau's media team was later led by one Atta Bashir, who operated closely with other jihadi groups around the Lake Chad region." Shekau extended the role of Boko Haram's media wing beyond delivering sermons to joining the political debate, responding to government statements and debunking claims made by government spokesmen against the group. Earlier versions of JAS videos were recorded by the Sautus-Sunnah video (voice of Sunna). They were distributed freely in northern Nigeria at venues like Darul Islam. Author interview, Boko Haram member 'the engineer,' Kuje prison, Abuja, June 2015; author translation, Boko Haram 2013-2014 YouTube videos. In this video, Boko Haram denies Shekau's death and any existing ceasefire agreements or negotiations. Muhammad Yusuf, 2008. "Preaching against security deployment to Maiduguri," YouTube, 2008; Cibiyar Yada Musulunci na Darul Islam, Dake Block A., No. 16, Laushi Shopping Complex, Wunti Market, Bauchi, Bauchi State. Author translation, Shekau lecture, "Islam and Secularism in Nigeria," YouTube, dated June 2008.

348 The Kanuri language dominated the Hausa language in the region due to its early contact with Arabic and the influence of trade. Many of the Arabic loanwords to Hausa seem to have passed through Kanuri. Greenberg indicates how some words like the Hausa *kasuwa* (meaning market) came from the Arabic word *suiq* through the Kanuri word *Kasugu*. Political titles ending in the Kanuri suffix - *ma*, which surely came from Kanuri words, have found themselves in Hausa, such as like *Yerima* or *Galadima*; both are royal titles that depict being counsellors to the king. The *Galadima* was normally in charge of the western province of the Kanem-Borno Empire while the *Yerima* in charge of the northern province. Richard Olaniyan ed., *Nigerian History and Culture* (London: Longman Group Limited, 1985), p. 61. Kanuri language, in particular, is the medium through which Shekau uniquely connects with people in the Lake Chad region, which including Nigeria's Borno and Yobe states and neighboring parts of Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. The 1991 population census showed that the region had a population of about 22 million people, with 11.7 million in Nigeria, 5 million in Chad, 2.5 million in Cameroon, and 193,000 in Niger, but the population of this region now is estimated at 37 million or more people. The Kanuris inhabit Borno and Yobe states, as well as Bauchi State in northeastern Nigeria. In the Republic of Niger, Kanuris inhabit mostly the Diffa and Zinder provinces while in Cameroon and Chad, they are found in the Southern Kanem Prefecture and Lac Prefecture. Nur Alkali, "Pilgrimage Tradition in Nigeria," *Annals of Borno Vol. II* (Maiduguri: University of Maiduguri, 1985), p. 127; Joseph Greenberg, "Linguistic Evidence for the Influence of the Kanuri on Hausa," *Journal of African History* 1:2 (1960): pp. 205-212; Freedom C. Onuoha, "Environmental Degradation, Livelihood and Conflicts the Implications of the Diminishing Water Resources of Lake Chad for North-Eastern Nigeria," *African Journal on Conflict Resolution* 8:2 (2008): pp. 35-62; Eric Odada, L. Oyebande, and J. Oguntola, "Lake Chad: Experience and Lessons Learned Brief," *Lake Chad Brief*, 2005; op. cit., p. 77.

349 Author translation of Abubakr Shekau's video mocking the #bringbackourgirlscampaign, YouTube, dated May 5, 2014.

“is the language of the dog, and I cherish Arabic more than English.”³⁵⁰ And in another video, Shekau read in nearly unintelligible French from a prepared script that a militant handed to him and said that he heard on the radio that France “insulted the Holy Prophet of Islam and a war against terrorism is the same as fighting Muslims.”³⁵¹ Shekau was using French to mock the French. Moreover, Shekau’s demonstrations of language faculty in English in addition to other local native languages, such as Fulani, is probably intended to build credibility and establish a legend status as a jihadi leader both locally and globally, despite his claimed antipathy to English.

Shekau also uses word choice cleverly. In the Giwa barracks video (Giwa translates as “elephant” in Hausa), for example, Shekau again taunted the Nigerian army by calling Giwa barracks, Alade barracks (pig’s barracks) in Hausa.³⁵² In another video about overrunning a barracks, Shekau accused the Nigerian soldiers of running away like “pigs” during confrontation.³⁵³ Shekau also mocked international leaders and agencies. For example, he referred to the United Nations as the “United Nations for Immorality,” and while paraphrasing the statement of former U.S. President George W. Bush, Shekau said, “Every region, in every nation has a decision to make. Either you are with us the jihadists, the salafists, or you are with Obama, George Bush, François Hollande, Clinton, Ban Ki-moon, and the democrats, the unbelievers and the secularists. Listen to me, you infidels, just like your love of money builds your desire to spend it, so also my love of Allah motivates my desire to work for him.”³⁵⁴ Shekau similarly has threatened Chadian president Idriss Déby for his offer to assist Cameroon, ridiculed Nigerien president Mahamadou Issoufou for commiserating with France regarding the Charlie Hebdo killings, and warned Paul Biya, who Shekau calls the “King of Cameroon,” that he would “taste what has befallen Nigeria.”

The former head of Nigeria’s countering violent extremism (CVE) program, psychologist Dr. Fatima Akilu, suggests that Shekau’s denouncements and mockery of other world leaders is a way of equating himself as being on their level. She notes that as a “poor guy from Maiduguri, Shekau never thought that a U.S. president would one day be calling him by name” (referring the U.S. designation of Shekau as a terrorist in 2012).³⁵⁵ This may be one reason why Shekau has referred to himself in third-person as “that small boy” in videos to mock the fact that the once nameless Shekau became a focus of the world’s attention. Looking at the progress of Boko Haram from a localized preaching group under Shekau, other small boys from northeastern Nigeria could want to emulate his power and may see Shekau as a ‘rags to riches’ type of a success story.

Shekau’s Strategic Employment of Symbols

Shekau’s strategic use of symbols suggests that he is in tune with his environment and fully aware of the significance of Boko Haram activities within the global war on terrorism. First, Shekau imitates and uses the same religious or conflict symbols used by prominent Islamists with whom he shares the same ideological belief. For example, Shekau has modeled some of his behavior on al-Zarqawi in the

350 Author translation, Shekau, “Only Allah Can take my Life.” Danjibo reported that by 2006, more than 280,000 people, both Kanuri and Hausa-Fulani Muslims, from northern Nigeria and parts of southern Niger, northern Cameroon, and Chad were familiar with the preaching of Boko Haram leaders. Nathaniel Danjibo, *Islamic Fundamentalism and Sectarian Violence: The “Maitatsine” and “Boko Haram” Crises in Northern Nigeria*, Peace and Conflict Studies Programme, Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, 2012, p. 7.

351 Ola’ Audu, “Boko Haram leader, Shekau, brands Nigerian soldiers cowards; says Baga weapons enough to win war,” *Premium Times*, January 21, 2015.

352 Author translation of Abubakr Shekau’s video claiming responsibility for attacks on Giwa Barracks in Maiduguri, YouTube, dated March 24, 2014.

353 Author translation of Boko Haram’s claim of victory over Nigerian Military forces, YouTube, dated May 29, 2013.

354 Author translation, Abubakr Shekau, “The Abduction of Chibok Girls,” YouTube, 2014; author translation of Shekau’s YouTube video on the “abducted Chibok Girls,” YouTube, dated May 5, 2014.

355 “Insane, Boko Haram leader, Abubakr Shekau uses brutality,” *News*, May 15, 2014.

way he frequently shoots a gun wildly in the air, wears a camouflage uniform, and raises the single finger symbolizing *tawhid* (oneness of Allah) when preaching. This was one of the reasons why Islamic State media activists were impressed by Shekau and had confidence in him to lead ISWAP.³⁵⁶ In Shekau's earlier videos from 2010 to 2012, Shekau typically had a Kalashnikov rifle in his right hand with a strap around his neck or placed against a wall and wore a red *kaffiyeh*. This practice appeared to be in emulation of the leaders of international jihadi groups, such as bin Ladin who displayed his weapons in similar fashion.³⁵⁷

In terms of his appearance, Shekau often maintained a moustache and beard in the salafi style to portray piety and religiosity. His dresses have alternated between a traditional tunic and military camouflage uniform to represent himself as both an imam a jihadi militant leader. In most of his videos, he is also shown holding an oversized *miswak* (twig) in his right hand and cleaning his teeth as a point of emphasis.³⁵⁸ This is likely intended to highlight Shekau's adherence to the common traditional practice of the Prophet Muhammad and to demonstrate his rejection of Western items such as toothbrush.³⁵⁹

Locally, too, it is meant to attract the modern-day remnants of the Maitatsine Islamic Movement known today as Kala Kato.³⁶⁰ This group is dominant in northeastern Nigeria, particularly Bauchi State. It continues to reject affluence, Western materialism, and technology. It bans its members from listening to the radio; wearing wrist watches; and riding bicycles, motorcycles and cars. It demands that members refuse sending their children to secular schools. The use of traditional and symbolic gestures by Shekau will appeal to extremist Islamic sects across northern Nigeria.

Before pledging his allegiance to al-Baghdadi in 2015, Shekau also delivered a video-taped sermon in a mosque and wore a similar dress and made similar gestures as al-Baghdadi as a way of demonstrating that Shekau was the local version of the Caliph. At times, Shekau can appear disciplined, while at other times his mannerisms are truncated by a large smile and grunts that amplify a sense of unpredictability. This is Shekau as a "righteous tormentor" who is able to contest power with the Nigerian state and the leading world powers and is understandably feared for his brutality.³⁶¹

Finally, Shekau exploits Hausa *nasheeds* as a way of revealing his followers' fanaticism about him. This is very prominent in the video when Shekau claimed responsibility for attack on Giwa barracks in March 2014 and said in Kanuri that:

"You don't know my madness. Today, you will see my madness. By Allah, I will slaughter you. If I don't slaughter you, I will not feel contented. By Allah, I will slaughter ... Brothers! Wherever you are, may Allah make this cassette to reach you; I have given you the permission to rise, take arms, and start killing them even if you are three. Kill! Kill!! Kill!!! Today, our religion is

356 If there was any doubt about whether Shekau was really imitating al-Zarqawi or whether any jihadis noticed, it was dispelled in 2015 when the pro-Islamic State, North Africa-based media agency Africa Media wrote an explanation of why it had confidence in Shekau as the leader of the Islamic State's West Africa Province, a role that Shekau held from March 2015 to August 2016. The Africa Media authors said Shekau reminded them of al-Zarqawi with his shooting of a gun, that Shekau's repetition of the chant "Shekau ka ka kau kau kauuuuu" in his videos could "vex" enemies; and that Shekau's taking credit for "enslaving" the Chibok schoolgirls showed confidence, unlike other jihadis in al-Qa`ida who failed to show enthusiasm for that operations. The chant is intended to reassure his followers that Shekau is courageous and that they have nothing to fear.

357 Author translation of Boko Haram's claim of victory over Nigerian military forces, YouTube, dated May 29, 2013.

358 The *miswak* is a wooden twig, common in northern Nigeria and among Muslims, for teeth cleaning. Author translation of Abubakr Shekau's video claiming he is alive, YouTube, dated October 5, 2014.

359 Author translation of Abubakr Shekau's video claiming he is alive, YouTube, dated October 5, 2014.

360 The Maitatsine movement was started by Muhammad Marwa (a Cameroonian who lived in Kano). He lived in Kano in the Yan Awaki area with a history of dissident preaching. In 1962, he was deported but later returned to Nigeria. Maitatsine is a Hausa concept taken from the regular cursing in Hausa – Allah Ya Tsine. Maitatsine, therefore, means one who invokes Allah's condemnation upon infidels and those who disagree with his teachings.

361 Yan St-Pierre, "Re-enforcing Radicalisation with bad PR? The Nigerian Army's Handling of Boko Haram," *Journal of De-Radicalisation* 4:44-70 (2015): p. 56.

nothing but killing.”³⁶²

The *nasheed* that corresponded with the above speech opened with the verse:

“We would do our jihad to bring back the sharia; we will defeat you enemies of sharia ... we will kill you ... we will not leave you! ... We will follow your churches and demolish them all ... you should not listen to this poem like a joke ... it is the truth and is what we are doing.”

Other *nasheeds* specifically focus on Shekau. For example, Boko Haram’s first public *nasheed* about Shekau after he assumed leadership of Boko Haram in 2010 portrayed his cult-like following. The lyrics sung in Hausa folk style said:

“Greetings to you Abubakr Shekau, the hero, the masquerade (fearful figure) to the Jews. Shekau the hater of Jews, masquerade for the infidels and a big problem to the white race (Western nations). Oh people, our name is al-Qa`ida, if you are looking for terrorists, we are here and we are telling you, we hate the Americans.”

Another *nasheed* about Shekau in 2011 just after he assumed leadership was also sung in Hausa folk style and said:

“You are also a lion, Scholar Shekau, may God assist you. Lead us to follow the system of God, we do not oppose you. Everyone who wants to fight jihad should follow you. This is the representative of [Abu Musab] al-Zarqawi and Usama [bin Ladin] in Nigeria ... These scholars of Izala, who say that politics is better than prayers, you have heard. You said to us that we are Khawarij, and they know that we do not follow the Khawarij. Borno and Bauchi, Kano and Yobe, you [the Nigerian government] have killed our brothers.”³⁶³

The appeal of Shekau among his followers was such that the expectation that Shekau would release a media statement, a YouTube message, or a video message became a sensation in northern Nigeria—and not only among Boko Haram members. Shekau particularly timed many of these videos to counter reports of his death or address current events, such as his designation as a terrorist by the United States, the Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris, and the election of Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton. A state official in Maiduguri highlighted the relevance of Shekau’s videos when said that, “sometimes to get the exact number of casualties, we wait for what [Shekau] will say rather than what the government or security forces announce.”³⁶⁴ Indeed, becoming a “bogeyman” further elevated Shekau’s ability to instill fear, or at least mock and show the incompetence of the Nigerian authorities in the wake of Boko Haram’s attacks and conquests.

Shekau’s Strategic Leveraging of Political Context

Shekau’s appeal can also be placed in the context of the relationship between Islamic political activism and the Nigerian government. The two main issues that Shekau—and Yusuf before him—capitalized on were, first, the relationship between Islamic parties and the Nigerian state and, second, the massive failure of the Nigerian political leadership in meeting the demands of its citizenry.

362 Among other lines, the *nasheed* says, “We will follow your churches and demolish them. You should not take this poem as a joke. It is the truth and what we are doing. You will see us do it. We will fight with law-making infidels; those infidels that are making obnoxious laws. There is no law except that of Islam. O you *taghut*, all of you should come and follow Allah. You should follow the sharia and establish your prayers. If you refuse, you will be faced with war.” Author translation of Abubakr Shekau’s video claiming responsibility for attacks on Giwa Barracks in Maiduguri, YouTube, dated March 24, 2014.

363 Video was formerly available online.

364 Author interview, Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) Officials, Maiduguri, June 2014.

The relationship between Islamic parties and the Nigerian state began with Nigeria's independence in 1960. One of the two northern political parties - The Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU) - was considered a party of commoners (*talakawa*) and was linked to the Tijaniyya sect.³⁶⁵ The other main political party - Northern People's Congress (NPC) - was a conservative aristocratic party led by the northern premier, Ahmadu Bello, and was linked to Qadiriyya sect.³⁶⁶ Bello not only promoted the Qadiriyya sect, but portrayed himself heir to Usman Dan Fodio, the founder of the Sokoto Caliphate. He supported Islamic causes more broadly,³⁶⁷ and promotion of the Islamic identity in northern Nigeria helped him get elected vice president of the Saudi-funded World Muslim League in 1964.³⁶⁸ Bello also established the Jama'atu Nasir Islam (JNI) in 1962 with the help of Shaykh Abubakar Gumi, his Religious Affairs adviser, to unite Islamic sects and serve as the mouthpiece for all Muslims in all aspects.³⁶⁹

In addition to NEPU and NPC, in 1979, the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) had strong links to the salafi and largely Saudi-funded Izala Islamic movement, whose support helped ensure the victory of NPN's Shehu Shagari during the 1979 presidential elections.³⁷⁰ Similarly, the Maitatsine movement, which instigated the 1980 Kano riots, was alleged to have had a strong relationship with the Peoples' Redemption Party (PRP) in Kano state.³⁷¹ Alhaji Abubakar Rimi (PRP), the governor of Kano accused of eating and praying with Maitatsine sect members, rejected the outcome of the federal government's commission of inquiry that indicted the group.³⁷² In contrast, he set up a commission that indicted the federal government and security forces.³⁷³

The entrenched role of religion in politics and the unique advantage Islamic parties offer in political calculations has meant that politicians have constantly donated, collaborated with, and even participated in the activities of different religious sects, most often in return for political support. In this way, they curry favors from religious leaders in return for mobilization. Thus, Yusuf, and largely Shekau, appealed to their followers because they represented emerging religious leaders who resisted (at least publicly) the chance to extract favors from Muslim politicians consistent with typical political-religious dynamics in northern Nigeria. Importantly, Shekau is seen by his followers as one of the few voices that has challenged the hypocrisy and fraud that lies at the core of Nigeria's exploitative Muslim elite.³⁷⁴

365 Abdul Rauf Mustapha and Mukhtar U. Bunza, "Contemporary Islamic Sects in Northern Nigeria," in Mustapha Abdul Rauf ed., *Sects and Social Disorder, Muslim Identities and Conflict in Northern Nigeria* (New York: James Currey, 2014), p. 54.

366 Ibid.

367 Liss Rasmussen, *Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa: The Cases of Northern Nigeria and Tanzania Compared* (New York: British Academic Press, 1993), p. 55; Loimeier Roman, *Islamic Reform and Political Change in Northern Nigeria* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997), pp. 135-148. Ahmadu Bello established a new Islamic sect, Usmaniyya, as a tribute to Uthman Dan Fodio. The sect slowly became inactive and disappeared after Ahmadu Bello's death in 1966. However, three months before his death, Ahmadu Bello publicly stated at the dedication of a hospital in Jalingo, capital of present day Taraba State, on October 16, 1965, Uthman Dan Fodio was the father of enlightenment and good. That Dan Fodio undertook the work of Salvation for all people and now that work has been handed over to him (Ahmadu Bello), and he dedicates himself totally to its completion. E. P. T. Crampton, *Christianity in Northern Nigeria* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1979) p. 215f.

368 Marinus Iwuchukwu, *Muslim-Christian Dialogue in Post-Colonial Northern Nigeria: The Challenges of Inclusive Cultural and Religious Pluralism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 43.

369 Roman Loimeier, *Islamic Reform and Political Change in Northern Nigeria* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997), pp. 135-148. He established a new Islamic sect, Usmaniyya, as a tribute to Uthman Dan Fodio, but the sect slowly became inactive and disappeared after Ahmadu Bello's death in 1966.

370 Eva Evers Rosander and David Westerlund, *African Islam and Islam in Africa: Encounters between Sufis and Islamists* (London: C Hurst and Co. Publishers, 1997), pp. 292-294.

371 Matthew Hassan Kukah, *Religion, Politics and Power in Northern Nigeria* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Ltd, 1993), p. 155.

372 Ibid. To understand Islamic sects as vote banks for political patronage, see D.C. O'Brien, *The Mourides of Senegal: The Political and Economic Organization of an Islamic Brotherhood* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), pp. 262-285.

373 Nasir Zahradeen, *The Maitatsine Saga* (Zaria, Nigeria: Zaria Publishing Co., 1988), p.113.

374 Marc-Antoine Prouse De Montclos ed., "Boko Haram: Islamism, Politics, Security and the State in Nigeria," *West African Politics and Society Series*, Vol. 2, African Studies Centre and Institut Francais de Recherche Afrique, 2015, p. 155.

The Muslim elites exploit religion with what Yusuf called “false sharia” and have rode on the back of Islam to become governors and senators, only to turn around to denigrate and undermine Islam by implementing only partial sharia, while promoting democracy and Western values. This sort of image resonates with Boko Haram’s regional audience and has made Shekau a sort of folk hero.

Second, the appeal of Shekau and Yusuf before 2009 is also linked to the massive failure of the Nigerian political leadership in meeting the demands of its citizenry. With Nigeria’s return to multi-party democracy in 1999, Yusuf and Shekau promoted a message that contested Western values and the secularity of the Nigerian state and condemned the corruption at the underbelly of Nigeria’s predatory elite in a way that other religious leaders, such as the sultan of Sokoto, who were closer to the state did not. This message resonated with Boko Haram’s followers and provided fresh moral guidance in a socio-economic and political context infested by corruption.³⁷⁵

It is fair to suggest that in northern Nigeria, this initial appeal of the messages and sermons of Shekau were backed by natural support given to religious organizations (both Islam and Christianity). In particular, the appeal of Shekau and his message is driven by the socio-economic conditions of the region, a result of the destructive effects of corruption, bad governance, and total lack of security and welfare for many in the region.³⁷⁶ This situation is reflected in the low level of education in the region, widespread poverty, illiteracy, and unemployment. In most parts of Nigeria, many people turned to God for all their answers, creating the proliferation of religious groups.³⁷⁷ In the north, old Islamic sects fragmented, and new ones emerged, encouraging Muslims to return to the original source of Islam for strength. This produced an environment where preachers practicing intolerance—as Shekau and Yusuf did—was a viable means of amassing support and followership.

In reality however, Shekau also places himself in the class of the Islamizing, anti-pagan, anti-colonial insurgents who opposed pagan worship as well as colonial legacies and Western influence in Muslim territories. Among such insurgents are Askia Muhammad I (1492-1528),³⁷⁸ Ahmad Grant (the left handed),³⁷⁹ Karamoko Alfa,³⁸⁰ Sulayman Bal,³⁸¹ Shaykh Muhammad al-Amin al-Kanimi,³⁸² Al-Hajj Umar,³⁸³ and Usman Dan Fodio.³⁸⁴ Others are the jihad of Abd al-Qadir in Algeria from 1808-1883; the jihad of the Mahdi in Sudan from 1844-1885;³⁸⁵ the Egyptian resistance led by Ahmad Urabi against British occupation, the Sanusi resistance against Italian colonialism in Libya,³⁸⁶ and the role played by the Fulani slave raider Hamman Yaji in the late 19th/early 20th century.

375 Ibid.

376 Simon Alozieuwa, “Contending Theories on Nigeria’s Security Challenge in the Era of Boko Haram Insurgency,” *Peace and Conflict Review* 7:1 (2012): p. 46; Nasir el-Rufai Nasir, “Bauchi’s Hopeless Budget,” *ThisDay*, April 12, 2012.

377 Moses Aluaigba, “Circumventing or Superimposing Poverty on the African Child? The Almajiri Syndrome in Northern Nigeria,” *Childhood in Africa* 1:1 (2009): pp. 19-24.

378 Askia is a prominent pre-colonial radical Islamist who led the jihad that captured Timbuktu in Mali and other territories along the River Niger and extended his radical jihad to the Mossi Empire, present-day Burkina Faso. Nehemia Levtzion, *Muslims and Chiefs in West Africa. A Study of Islam in the Middle Volta basin in the pre-colonial Period* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), p. 164; P. M. Holt, Ann K. S. Lambton, and Bernard Lewis, *The Cambridge History of Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. ii, 359.

379 Ahmad Gran (“the left handed”) is of Somali origin, and secured the control of Adal in Somalia, converted it to an Ottoman satellite state, and led a crushing jihad against Ethiopia (Abbyssinia) in 1529.

380 Karamoko initiated the jihad of Futa Jalon in 1725 and created the first Islamic state in present-day Guinea. Holt, Lambton, and Lewis, pp. 366-367.

381 Sulayman led the jihad of Futo Toro in 1775 to purify Islam and to Islamize Fulani pagans. Ibid.

382 Al-Kanemi quelled the Fulani rebellion against the Sayfawa dynasty in the 17th Century Kanem-Borno Empire and established the Al-Kanemi dynasty. Mukhtar Yakubu, *Trade, Merchants and the State in Borno, c. 1893-1939* (Koln, Germany: Rudiger Koppe Verlag, 2000); Ronald Cohen, *The Kanuri of Bornu* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967).

383 David Robinson, *The Holy War of Umar Tal: The Western Sudan in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

384 Ibraheem Sulaiman, *A Revolutionary in History: The Jihad of Usman Dan Fodio* (New York: Mansell, 1986), especially pp. 122-148.

385 Richard Bonney, *Jihad: From Qur’an to Bin Laden* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 186-194.

386 Rudolph Peters, “Islam and Colonialism. The Doctrine of Jihad in Modern History,” *De Gruyter Mouton*, p. 39-94.

Shekau's Strategic Leveraging of Kanuri Socio-Cultural Context

The ethnic context exploited by Shekau is defined by three elements: geographic region, Kanuri language, and Islamic Kanuri identity.

Under Shekau's leadership, Boko Haram has carried out around 90% of its attacks in the Lake Chad region, which is defined as the territory of the former Kanem-Borno Empire—an historical heritage of the Kanuri people.³⁸⁷ The territory has vast forests, with unprotected borders and the high Mandara Mountains that can support the type of guerrilla warfare Boko Haram has waged and arms trafficking that has benefited the group.³⁸⁸ Moreover, the consequences of environmental degradation have destroyed the livelihood of millions of people who inhabit the territory.³⁸⁹ This has encouraged an informal economy rooted in crime and lawlessness. Since 2009, the region has seen an increase in cross-border smuggling (via motorbikes using hillside tracks), changing the landscape of northeastern Nigeria and northern Cameroon's recent economic history. Consequently, Boko Haram appears to have recruited from this pool of smugglers whose knowledge of the back country and military/police tactics is second to none.

More than 80% of the people in the region are illiterate, primarily those in agriculture, fishing, and pastoralism. Environmental degradation as a result of severe decline in rainfall, excessive desertification, and drought has led to a drop in food production and a rise in unemployment. Irrigation projects have been abandoned, while parks, dams, and game reserves are closed. The Tiga and Challawa Gorge dams (located between Niger and Nigeria) meant for irrigation and water supply on the Komandugu Yobe basin, are closed due to declining water levels. Furthermore, there are the Borno drainages, which are fed by the Yedseram, Ngadda, and Gubio rivers. This hosts one of the largest irrigation schemes, which is now abandoned due to the shrinkage of these rivers and Lake Chad.³⁹⁰ Although divided by artificial colonial boundaries, the inhabitants of this region are united by language and religion, and consider themselves common victims of environmental degradation and government neglect. Some of them have turned to poaching, organized crime, and terrorism.

As such, Shekau is able to target for recruitment the unemployed youths of the region who feel aggrieved by a neglectful government and can be swayed by Shekau's promise for a new "pure" Islamic government.³⁹¹ Across the border, in July 2014, Cameroon's Defense Ministry announced that Boko Haram was recruiting 15,000 to 20,000 members linked to poverty and joblessness.³⁹²

Furthermore, Kanuri identity and geography are also leveraged by Shekau. Shekau recruits most of his members from the Kanuri ethnic group, and most of his close advisors are Kanuri, even though Boko Haram features most propaganda in Hausa. Conservative estimates suggest about 75% of the attendees of Yusuf's and Shekau's lectures were Kanuris, while 20% were Hausa and 5% were converts to

387 Richard Olaniyan ed., *Nigerian History and Culture* (London: Longman Group Limited, 1985), p. 61. The Kanuri ethnic identity permeated the empire while Kanuri chiefs enjoyed local support and authority over vast territories around Lake Chad, including parts of Chad, Niger, Cameroon, and Sudan; Cohen, pp. 22-23; Odada, Oyebande, and Joguntola, p. 77. Historically, both the Sayfawa and el-Kanemi dynasties ensured the Kanurization of the socio-political, religious, and economic life of the empire, subjugating other ethnic groups to the Kanuri identity. The region, with a population estimated to be 37 million, is still dominated by the Kanuris, who are mostly found in Bornu, Yobe, and Bauchi states, Nigeria; Diffa and Zinder provinces, Niger; as well as Chad and northern Cameroon.

388 M. Kwaru, "Boko Haram: Senior Customs Personnel arrested over arms importation in Borno," *Peoples Daily*, May 29, 2013.

389 Author interview, Labaran Maku, former Minister of Information, Abuja, June 2014.

390 Haruna Bdiya Hassan and Martin Bloxom, "Transboundary Diagnostic Analysis of the Lake Chad Basin," prepared for The L.C.B.C. and G.E.F Project on the Reversal of Land and Water Resources Degradation," 2010, pp. 5, 43-44.

391 Author interview, Labaran Maku, former Minister of Information, Abuja, June 13, 2014.

392 "Cameroon Furious and Fearful over Boko Haram Infiltration," *Gulf Times*, July 12, 2014.

Islam from other ethnic groups.³⁹³ Moreover, the Kanuri heartland provides the space, cells, and local networks for mobilization. With the help of Kanuri language across the borders, infiltration becomes easier, the movement of arms is made more accessible while secrecy is maintained. The Kanuri heartland provides the space and the local networks, such as fishing unions, market groups, and farming communities, for mobilization and recruitment. Using the Kanuri language and the local knowledge of the area, Boko Haram members ensured the movement of arms, training of new recruits, and setting up of camps. Thus, the language, religion, and region became channels for communications, indoctrination, infiltration, and operations.³⁹⁴

In leveraging the ethnic context, the use of the Kanuri language is also made easier by the religious identity of the region. During the reign of the Sayfawa and el-Kanemi dynasties, Kanuri identity was entwined with Islamic identity, established on Qur'anic values and Islamic jurisprudence, so much so that to be Kanuri has become synonymous with being Muslim.³⁹⁵ To defend Islam is to defend the cultural heritage of the Kanuris. With this historical sentiment, before 2009, Shekau indirectly presented Islam as a Kanuri property or heritage that must be defended from Western contamination. In this way, language, religion, and region also became Shekau's channels of communication, infiltration, indoctrination, and operations.

To delegitimize contemporary traditional and religious institutions of Nigeria while also appealing to a Kanuri audience, Shekau praised the Sayfawa dynasty (pre-colonial Kanuri rulers of Borno) and indicted the al-Kanemi dynasty (current Kanuri religious rulers of Borno) for betraying Islam.³⁹⁶ Shekau conveniently excluded the pagan origin of the Sayfawa dynasty.³⁹⁷ He also neglected to mention the Tuareg and Fulani rebellion within the Kanem-Borno Empire. The former rebelled against the Sayfawa rulers in 1751 over the control of Bilma salt mines and the Komandugu Yobe River.³⁹⁸ The latter organized a civil resistance for being treated as second-class citizens within the Kanem-Borno Empire.³⁹⁹ Shekau also avoided any reference to Rabeh Fadallah, a conservative Muslim who initiated the decline of the Kanem-Borno Empire. He was a warrior and Muslim slave trader from Sudan. According to Cohen, "This man, Rabeh, is still remembered today in Borno for the tyrannical hold he attempted to establish and for the plundering and sacking of many Borno villages which he carried out while subduing the state."⁴⁰⁰ He invaded Borno and conquered the el-Kanemi dynasty in May 1893,⁴⁰¹ and he moved the capital from Kukawa to Dikwa, another ancient town attacked several times by Boko Haram.⁴⁰² Additionally, Shekau completely disregarded the fact that the Sayfawa dynasty, a Muslim dynasty constructed by the Mais, was overthrown by the el-Kanemi dynasty, another Muslim dynasty.⁴⁰³ It was the el-Kanemi dynasty that transferred the capital of the Kanem-Borno Empire from Birnin Gazargamo to Kukawa in 1814, a city repeatedly attacked by Boko Haram.⁴⁰⁴

393 Author anonymous interviews, individuals in Maiduguri. See also James J. F. Forest, "Confronting the Terrorism of Boko Haram in Nigeria," Joint Special Operations University, May 5, 2012, p. 1.

394 Kwaru.

395 Cohen, pp. 22-23.

396 Author translation, Shekau, "Western civilization is Atheism and anti-Islam."

397 Alkali Nur Muhammad, *Kanem-Borno Under the Sayfawa: A Study of the Origin, Growth, and Collapse of a Dynasty (891-1846)* (Maiduguri: Borno Sahara and Sudan Series, 2013), pp. 23-35; Mukhtar, p. 29; Cohen, p. 12.

398 Louis Brenner, *The Shehus of Kukawa: A History of the Al-Kanemi Dynasty of Bornu* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), pp. 6-99.

399 Adeleye Rowland, "Hausaland and Borno 1600-1800," in Jacob Festus Ade Ajayi and Michael Crowder eds., *History of West Africa*, 2nd edition, vol. 1 (1971), p. 37.

400 Cohen, p. 18.

401 Adeleye Rowland, "Rabih B. Fadlallah and the Diplomacy of European Imperial Invasion in the Central Sudan, 1893-1902," *Journal of Historical Society of Nigeria* 5:3 (1970): pp. 399-418; Cohen, p. 18.

402 William Hallam, *The Life and Times of Rabih Fadl Allah* (London: Arthur H. Stockwell, 1977), p. 279.

403 Mukhtar, p. 29.

404 Brenner, pp. 48-66.

Shekau presented the Kanem-Borno Empire as a perfect Islamic state, governed on the principles of sharia, equity, and justice. He emphasized the socio-economic and political dominance of the empire. He constantly referred to the influence of Kanem-Borno Islam outside the empire. He therefore mourned the remains of the empire and rejected Western influence over the territories of the Kanem-Borno Empire. Shekau revisited the historical rivalry between the Kanem-Borno Empire and northwestern Nigeria's Sokoto caliphate and Kano emirates, and he accused the sultan of Sokoto of undermining the legacies of Usman Dan Fodio, the founder of the Sokoto caliphate, and the Emir of Kano for betraying Islam. Shekau thus called for the title of the sultan (sarki) to be reduced to the tribal and non-religious title of chief (*serki*) and the emir's title to be reduced to the secular title of "King," since neither follow the Islamic system of government.⁴⁰⁵

The demise of the Kanem-Borno Empire and the rise of the Nigerian nation as a perceived Western construct constitute the historical narrative that has effectively been exploited by Boko Haram. While mourning the loss of the Kanem-Borno Empire, Shekau bemoaned the new Nigerian state as a Western construct that largely functioned on corruption.⁴⁰⁶ Shekau has been very strategic in the use of the historical narrative presented above. He chose that part of history best suited to his agenda, embellishing the narrative so as to please listeners, stimulate interest, and engineer motivation. Above all, Shekau's interpretation of history expressed a will for political power contestation with the Nigerian state.

Why Shekau is Misunderstood

The perception that Shekau is crazy, mentally imbalanced, or mad is a narrative without any credible substantive or medical evidence. It is a product of lack of deep research, and it is overly simplistic. One reason why Shekau is misunderstood is that since Nigeria's return to multi-party democracy, military offensives have been deployed against resistance and insurgent movements without accurate intelligence gathering but rather to "crush" the enemy. For example, in response to the November 1999 civil unrest in Odi, Bayelsa State, President Obasanjo sent troops with "27 five ton vehicles loaded with over 2000 troops, 4 armoured personnel carriers ... three 81mm mortar guns and 2 pieces of 105mm Howitzer Artillery guns, and they killed a total of 2,483 people."⁴⁰⁷ This happened without any prior investigations by the government to understand the key actors, their motivations, or the environmental factors that serve as the basis of their agitations.

Furthermore, analysts have failed to listen to the coherence, logic, and clarity of Shekau's ideology. This is because Shekau expresses himself mostly in Arabic, Hausa, and Kanuri and, to a lesser extent, Fulani. These are four languages, which many researchers, including in Nigeria, do not speak and have not translated well into English. Indeed, it is ironic that Shekau's use of languages and gestures that are rarely understood in the West or in many parts of Nigeria are a cause of the perception that Shekau is crazy. Shekau has openly lamented that scholars who do not use English are automatically labeled as "ignorants" by English-speaking intellectuals. In contrast, those who, like Shekau, speak Arabic, which was the language of scholarship in the pre-colonial era in northern Nigeria, are not given the same esteem as English speakers.

Yet, Shekau has been misunderstood because for so many years he has been simply defined in the context of Islamist ideology common to most terrorist groups without clearly understanding the nature and content of his theological creativity and independent interpretation. Importantly, many experts

405 Author translation of Abubakr Shekau's video threatening the Emir of Kano, YouTube, December 18, 2014.

406 Wale Adebawale, *Authority Stealing: Anti-Corruption War and Democratic Politics in Post-Military Nigeria* (Durham, North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press, 2012), p. xxviii.

407 Karl Maier, *This House Has Fallen: Nigeria in Crisis* (Great Britain: Penguin Books, 2001), p. 201; *A Blanket of Silence, Images of the Odi Genocide*, Environmental Rights Action of Nigeria, 2002, pp. 7-8.

and analysts have failed to appreciate Shekau's capacity in reinterpreting salafi-jihadi ideology to fit the local Kanuri context. In fact, Shekau's ability to exploit Islam's historical relationship with the West in order to radicalize and recruit young people lies at the heart of his organizational capacity.

Those who do not understand Shekau's words are likely to examine instead his mannerisms and odd grunts and chants. Indeed, since Shekau is virtually the only 'face' that Boko Haram has revealed publicly to the world throughout the insurgency, many observers have acquired their perceptions of Boko Haram largely based on conspiracy theories and mere observations of Shekau's mannerisms. There is a need to listen more attentively to what the leaders of Boko Haram have to say, and Shekau in particular, in order to understand clearly the ideological narratives of the group.⁴⁰⁸ However, much of what appears as 'crazy' in videos is very likely 'acting.' Before Shekau announced the jihad in 2010 but while he was already a public figure, there was nothing particularly eccentric about him. From 2010 until his pledge to al-Baghdadi, however, Shekau was boastful, noisy, and extremely unsettled in his video messages. Then, in the weeks before and after the pledge, he became withdrawn and less bombastic in his communications.⁴⁰⁹ However, his extreme mannerisms resurfaced when he was replaced as the leader of ISWAP by Abu Musab al-Barnawi and he then became Boko Haram leader again.⁴¹⁰ This shows that Shekau is strategic, calculative, and crafty.⁴¹¹ He deploys his acting skills when and where it suits his conflict strategy best.

Moreover, accounts of Shekau's youth do not reveal any common characteristic of a psychopath.⁴¹² There is also no medical report or psychological tests to validate the claim that Shekau is insane or psychopathic.⁴¹³ It is thus reasonable to suggest that Shekau's antics and taunts in most of his videos as Boko Haram's leader are a deliberate strategy consciously chosen to intimidate the enemy, captivate his followers, and instill a sense of fear and loyalty. For more than six years, Boko Haram has contested power with the Nigerian state under Shekau's leadership. Despite the deployment of security services, including mercenaries, local vigilantes, and hunters, Shekau has not been eliminated; in contrast, he was even named as one of the 100 most influential people in 2015 by *Time* magazine.⁴¹⁴

408 Atta Barkindo, "Listening to Boko Haram: How Boko Haram Exploits History and Memory," Africa Research Institute, 2016.

409 Frances Martel, "Alleged Boko Haram Leader Celebrates Charlie Hebdo Massacre," Breitbart, January 15, 2015.

410 Omar Mahmoud, "What led IS to announce a new Boko Haram leader? Here are two clues from its communications," African Arguments, August 5, 2016.

411 Author translation, "Shekau releases audio message after Isis names new leader," YouTube, accessed and translated August 7, 2016.

412 Shekau was born in a small village in Yobe State called Shekau on the Nigeria-Niger border reportedly in 1965, 1969, or as late as 1975. His teenage life was spent mostly in Damaturu, the capital of Yobe State. Shekau said in one of his sermons before he became JAS leader that "there is a primary school in Damaturu called Bindagari primary school. We were to be enrolled into the school when it was still constructed with zinc, but our grandparents staunchly opposed our enrollment and that was how we were saved from this godless Western imposition." Reports suggest that Shekau was later taken by his father to learn under a Qur'anic teacher in Maiduguri. The teacher's son remembers Shekau as being inquisitive, clever, smart, controversial, and "always arguing with the teacher." Shekau also helped out in the house of a retired civil servant, running errands and helping with domestic chores. Shekau left after 11 years of Qur'anic studies and embraced the street life, selling empty perfume bottles and hair gel (pomade) in Maiduguri's Monday Market, which is one of the largest in the Lake Chad region. At the market, Shekau made friends, including itinerant Islamic scholars and Qur'anic students from Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. Among this circle of scholars and students, Shekau came across a crop of enthusiastic Islamists who admired his Islamic scholarship and respected his courage but also feared his ruthlessness. It is thus notable that Shekau's historical background until his appearance in JAS does not reveal any of the elements normally associated with psychopathic or violent individuals. Adam Nossiter, "A Jihadist's Face Taunts Nigeria from the Shadows," *New York Times*, May 18, 2014; Iginla Ademola, "The Story Behind the Life of the Leader of Boko Haram, Abubakr Shekau," *Osun Defender*, May 8, 2014; author translation, Shekau, "Western civilization is Atheism and anti-Islam."

413 This included elements such as a violent or alcoholic father, sexual timidity and passivity, defective insight, emotional detachment from the consequences of one's actions, sexual role uncertainties, magical thinking, destructive attitudes, and adherence to violent subculture norms and weapons fetishes. D. G. Hubbard, *The skyjacker: His flights of fantasy* (New York: Macmillan, 1971); F. Ferracuti and F. Bruno, "Psychiatric aspects of terrorism in Italy," in Israel L. Barak-Glantz and C. R. Huff eds., *The mad, the bad and the different: Essays in honor of Simon Dinitz* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1981).

414 "TIME magazine names Buhari, Ezekwesili, Shekau among world's most influential people," *Premium Times*, April 16, 2015.

Conclusion

In the age of information technology, terrorist leaders are finding innovative ways of transforming their groups to confront modern states espousing liberal ideas. Emerging terrorism literature has identified the corporate, symbolic, and psychological models of such leadership. In the context of Boko Haram, Shekau has demonstrated clearly that he is a “terrorist CEO.” Using the corporatist principles of business organizations, Shekau reinforced Boko Haram’s group ideology, established a central command structure while delegating authority to cell commanders across the region. Equally, Shekau has taken advantage of the conflict environment, deploying Islamic symbols and manipulating religious ideology, historical memory, and linguistic sentiments to sustain his campaign. Consequently, as part of future counterterrorism policy in Nigeria and the Lake Chad border region, certain realities must be taken seriously. Importantly, Shekau established regional-international alliances and creatively introduced conflict strategies and tactics of using female suicide bombers, negotiating for ransom and creating the opportunity for Boko Haram to confront the Nigerian state for almost a decade.

Despite Shekau’s ingenuity in applying corporatist principles and leveraging different strategies in his leadership of Boko Haram, it is necessary to mention that the group has not always been homogenous. In the past, factions have emerged such as the Yusufiya Islamic Movement (YIM) and Ansaru. In August 2016, Boko Haram was further fragmented when the Islamic State announced a change of leadership in the *al-Naba* magazine.⁴¹⁵ Shekau was replaced in ISWAP by Abu Musab al-Barnawi. Although Shekau sent an audio message to dismiss his removal,⁴¹⁶ Muhammad Nur, a former deputy to both Yusuf and Shekau, stated in an audio message that Shekau was dismissed because of abuse of office, corruption, dictatorial tendencies, and the killing of innocent Muslims.⁴¹⁷ In addition, Nur accused Shekau of deviating from the injunctions of the Qur’an and the salafi principles to promote his individual opinions on matters of faith.

In the midst of these splits and fragmentation, Shekau remains an appealing figure to his followers. He retains more supporters because of his creativity, fearlessness, and ability to maneuver, outwit, and outsmart his adversaries. He has also (at various stages) leveraged a pillage-driven patronage system whereby he rewards his lieutenants and followers with cash, women, and access to a centralized form of Boko Haram authority. He connects strongly with his followers, deploying his ability to place extremist ideology within local context and to instrumentalize the grievances of his followers. Shekau has the common logic to align with other foreign jihadi groups and depend on the material and logistic benefits that will accrue from such relationships. Lack of clear understanding of the strategies and ideological principles employed by Shekau will have serious security implications both at the domestic, regional, and international levels.

At the domestic level, it is too early to say whether Boko Haram is defeated. Shekau is likely to continue with the strategy of suicide bombing using children. The socio-economic condition and the growing sense of social exclusion in the Lake Chad border region continue to make it fertile ground for Shekau to exploit in terms of mobilization and recruitment. Another concern will be that of reprisal attacks if isolated communities refuse to join Shekau. Furthermore, recent events indicate the infiltration of Boko Haram members in local communities, civilian populations, and public places. The military has issued warnings to young people for potential enticement by Boko Haram using cash and other incentives. This trend is likely to continue if the government does not engage local communities and involve the civilian population in this fight.

At the regional and international level, the growing competition between al-Qa`ida and the Islamic

415 Mahmoud.

416 Author translation, “Shekau releases audio message after Isis names new leader.”

417 Author translation, “Message from new Boko Haram leader, Abu Musab al-Barnawi,” YouTube, August 5, 2016.

State is likely to make Shekau look like the new bride in town. The military pressure on the Islamic State by the coalition of international forces in Iraq and Syria is likely to bolster Boko Haram territories. As Islamic State fighters are forced to relocate from Iraq and Syria, some parts of the Middle East, North Africa, and West Africa will be the likely destination. Thus, the Lake Chad border region—Boko Haram's base—could become a recruitment hub for the Islamic State, where some local Islamic sects share similar ideologies as the Islamic State. Shekau will likely leverage the situation, playing al-Qa`ida against the Islamic State, and rejoining forces with the highest bidder.

It is therefore important that the Nigerian government, regional authorities, scholars, and security analysts do not dismiss Shekau as ignorant or clueless. In particular, such a perception should not form the basis of a policy approach to confronting Boko Haram. It is this type of perception as well as a policy of neglect that has allowed Shekau to transform Boko Haram into an organized terrorist group.

Second, even though Boko Haram is considered vicious, ruthless, and sadistic, there is a need to carry out a comprehensive study of the group while engaging with it. This would provide security agencies with the knowledge platform to understand the strategies of the group and ascertain the nature of the group's ideology and its historical justification for attacks as well as the narratives it uses for mobilization and recruitment.

Third, looking at the corporatist and strategic nature of Shekau's leadership of Boko Haram, it means that confronting the group goes beyond military offensive. The Nigerian government must take seriously the soft approach, engaging religious scholars, journalists, traditional rulers, community stakeholders, and civil society organizations to help prevent young people from being drawn to the ideology and rhetoric of Boko Haram. Even if Shekau and every member of Boko Haram is killed, the environment that has produced Boko Haram and its extremist ideology is still fertile, and the government must contend with this reality.