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## **Student Presentation**

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# **Countering Boko Haram Insurgency: interrogating culture destruction attempts and culture conservation efforts in north-eastern Nigeria**

### **Abstract**

A number of studies have emerged on the Boko Haram insurgency in North-Eastern Nigeria. However, most of the studies have concentrated on the human and material losses and neglect the aspects of culture. There is a focus on Boko Haram's frontal attacks on monuments, heritage and artefacts that constitute essential parts of humanity, and on the brave and concerted rescue efforts by the people. This paper argues that an inherent part of the war declared by Boko Haram elements on the Nigerian people was the eradication of history as represented in the culture and heritage of the people. The paper further asserts that the pursuance of that ignoble objective manifested not only in the forcible conversion of the people to its strange creed and ways of life but also in the systematic destruction of belief system, artefacts, heritages and monuments that are reminiscent of the past. However, in spite of the maximum use of violence by the sect, the culture destruction/replacement objective remains largely unattainable, due to strategic steps and actions taken by some people and forces in the area. What are these steps? What are the forces at play? Who are the people behind these? What methods did they employ to prevent the total eradication of their culture and history? Using a combination of data derived from both primary and secondary sources, this paper investigates these questions.

### **Introduction**

The appearance of Boko Haram on the Nigerian political landscape in 2005 set in motion a chain of events that continue to adversely affect the Nigerian state and its citizens (Olaniyan, 2015). One major area of these unpalatable events is the cultural war waged on the people inhabiting the north-eastern segment of the country. The story of Boko Haram's violent activities continues to be told on a daily basis by scholars and commentators, locally and globally. Images of conquering Boko Haram

militants killing people, sacking villages and engaging in wanton destruction of properties are rife. Little is told of the brave responses of the people living in the area. One such instance of bravery is the bold attempt to prevent the total eradication of history by Boko Haram insurgents. Boko Haram built its ideology on the denigration of all other cultures, claiming that they are pagan and must be replaced by their own (Chukwurah, Eme and Ogbeje, 2015). This they demonstrated by not only engaging in forcible conversion of people to their creed but also in the total destruction (through bombings, killings and maximum violence) of relics of culture and history such as artefacts, monuments and historical sites.

The name Boko Haram (interpreted as western education is forbidden) derives from a deep aversion to westernization which they regard as against their own interpretation of Islam, yet research findings show clearly that the contention of Boko Haram is not solely on western ways of life; it also goes against any aspect of human life that is perceived by them as non-Islamic (Zakariya, 2012). These include the management and sustenance of traditional monuments, artefacts, traditional medicine, and tourism to historical sites; they believe that these activities encourage some acts of idolatry, and social vices like fornication, adultery and corruption (Mathew and Fada, 2014). It is on this basis that frontal attempts were made by Boko Haram elements to destroy monuments, artefacts serving as sources of tourist attractions in the region as well as other forms of culture different from their own.

Specifically, attacks were made on places like the Sukur Landscape in Adamawa State, classified a World Heritage Site by UNESCO and regarded as one of the seven wonders of Nigeria (Lau, 2015). The invasion of Sambisa Forest Reserve in Borno state, and conversion of the place to their operational base, was also an attempt to destroy the huge forest inhabited by rare birds and wildlife. In addition, there were frantic attempts to discourage tourism in Yankari Game Reserves through attempted killing, abduction and kidnapping of tourists. However, the people did not sit idly by. They made several successful attempts to prevent their culture and history from being erased. These attempts will be discussed in the following sections.

### **Emergence of Local Traditional Hunters**

The first in the series of attempts by the people was the rise of the local traditional hunters against the Boko Haram insurgents. Indeed, the local hunters emerged at a critical time and helped in the

anti-Boko Haram war, particularly when the military forces proved inadequate. A respondent who is a hunter from Sukur community states that;

The insurgents took over our wives, children and houses. They looted our food and other properties. They destroyed our heritages most of which will never be recovered. Several generations of our parents were buried in those communities and we found it difficult to leave the place simply because of Boko Haram insurgency. You see, the Sukur heritage in this community is a major link between the people and history. The people decided to take up their destiny when the state was failing to protect us. We have no choice than to act fast (Personal interview, 2016).

Another key informant, who is a retired officer of the Nigerian army and who is an indigene of the area; argues that the hunters operated with their traditional hunting weapons, which include 'wuka' (knife), 'adda' (cutlass/sword), 'masi' (arrow); 'kwari da baka' (bow and arrow), 'gora' (bamboo stick) and 'asiri' (juju). He said they relied seriously on the cultural intelligence of the area and also the use of 'asiri' (juju) for what they referred to as 'tsari' (protection). In his response to why the hunters joined the battle, he corroborated the argument of the respondent from Sukur that they were protecting their heritage. He also added that they provided intelligence to the military on the activities of the insurgents. He concluded that some of the salvaged heritages would have been destroyed without the assistance of the hunters.

The success of the local hunters can be attributed to two factors. The first is that the local hunters resort to the use of charms and juju to confront the terrorists. The importance of this is that the traditional African metaphysical knowledge is still potent and relevant. The second factor is the knowledge of the terrain and the fact that they have been engaging in hunting in the area for a long time. The hunters were the first people to enter the Sambisa forest for the purpose of confronting the criminals. At a point in time, when the men of Nigerian Army were retreating, the local hunters stood up to the insurgents and helped in salvaging the situation.

**'Civilian JTF'** The history of war against the Boko Haram insurgents could never be complete without mentioning of 'Civilian JTF'. These are young men who emerged at a critical time to prevent total

eradication of their people and environment. The Civilian JTF became a major complement to the military. While the local hunters were the elderly ones with the knowledge of traditional warfare, the 'Civilian JTF' emerged as the young brave elements of the society who are saddened by the way Boko Haram insurgents kill and destroy their people and heritages. Interactions with some of them reveal a set of people who are seriously saddened by the activities of Boko Haram and thus set out to confront them, even though they were without serious weapons. According to one of them,

Boko Haram terrorists are murderers. They kill our parents. They destroy our heritages. They vandalise our cherished places. They messed up our mothers. They abducted our girls. They forcefully convert the boys to insurgents. They forcefully marry our girls. They violated our culture and tradition. They want to wipe away traces of our history. We have to rise up to them. If we don't, they will kill all of us and there won't be any trace that we ever lived here (Personal Interview, 2016).

Despite the 'Civilian JTF' not possessing the same types of local weapons as the traditional hunters, they have been vital to diminishing the Boko Haram insurgency. They know the Boko Haram boys and were able to point them out to the security forces. Most of the Boko Haram elements are radicalised young boys of the community. Therefore, it was easy for them to identify them. They know the hideouts of the criminals and were able to lead the security forces to them. Without the support of the 'Civilian JTF', it would have been difficult for the army to achieve the successes so far.

### **Reorganisation of the Nigerian Army and the adoption of cultural Intelligence**

Immediately after President Buhari assumed office, he reorganised the military by replacing the heads of the different units (Usman, 2015). The military was also better equipped and the soldiers were motivated sufficiently to change the tide of the counterinsurgency. This effort contributed immensely to the protection of the remaining heritage in the affected areas. This assisted the military to take back about fourteen local governments formerly taken by the insurgents. This was corroborated by a key informant who said the people applauded the efforts of the state towards rekindling their hopes for the conservation of their history. He also said it encouraged the people to support the counterinsurgency by providing necessary information to the military. He added that the people are rich in the cultural intelligence of the affected communities. Cultural intelligence is a

complex combination of analysis, religion, and knowledge of a society's history which is understood naturally by the inhabitants of the communities (Wilkening, 2013). The people provided the military with this intelligence for the sole purpose of protecting their heritages.

## **Conclusion**

This study focused on analysing the Boko Haram insurgency from the perspective of culture. It demonstrated how the creed of culture destruction imposed by Boko Haram has been matched by dogged opposition from people who are determined to preserve their culture. The study has demonstrated how the incorporation of local hunters and 'Civilian JTF' into the security architecture of the state played a strategic role in curtailing the momentum of the Boko Haram insurgents. Specifically, it has demonstrated how the role of African traditional method of warfare, the use of cultural intelligence and the resilience of a people could play a major role in heritage protection and conservation. This opens a new vista in the debate on the protection and conservation of heritage in Africa. The basic argument here is that the protection and sustenance of heritages and tourism centres cannot be solely undertaken by the state without the involvement of members of the local communities.

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