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This special issue of *Afrique Contemporaine* aims to increase our understanding of Boko Haram, an armed political socio-religious movement. But is Boko Haram the group's true name? Its members do not use this term to respectively refer to themselves.[1] Rather, they prefer *Jama'atu Ahlis-Sunnah Lidda'awati Wal Jihad* ("People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad"), Boko Haram, or the Islamic State West Africa, given the group's affiliation (at least formally) with the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). These successive names refer to the group's origins, commonly used names, and variations that reflect shifting alliances and affiliations.

The complexity of Boko Haram poses challenges for Africa scholars. *Afrique Contemporaine* has therefore opted to give free rein to five who have studied this armed group, which originated in northeastern Nigeria. Boko Haram—in actuality, comprising a multitude of groups—spreads Salafist Islam by terrorizing Kanuri and Hausa areas. Understanding Boko Haram requires a multidisciplinary approach. Each author in this issue has adopted an individual lens and methodology, contributing numerous insights to academic debates on this subject while decoding the group's history, nature, sociology, and discursive and operational strategies. The authors urge us to look beyond the media's sensationalist, short-term perspective to examine Boko Haram's inner workings.

Without ignoring other levels of analysis that may apply to these armed groups, this issue focuses on the regional and local levels; these alone can render the complexity of indigenous situations while incorporating universal modern technological influences. A locally-focused analysis counterbalances distortions that may result from an internationalist vision of Boko Haram's Salafism. Local-level analysis avoids overstating Boko Haram's operational role in regional and international jihadist spheres; instead, it allows an objective examination of the economic, social, and political realities underpinning the group's extremism.

This introduction does not purport to paint a comprehensive critical historiographic picture of Boko Haram,[2] nor does it aim to construct a specific

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field of study around the group. Rather, this issue tries to define Boko Haram as an "object" of analysis; with "original" as their leitmotif, these articles compile new primary sources and present original research that analyzes and critically reviews third-party findings.

Toward a Renewed Methodology

This special issue arose from an observation currently challenging the scholarly community: how can humanities scholars research an extremely violent armed group? How can they investigate and analyze such a closed environment from the inside,[3]—these fighters apparently so far removed from the guerrillas of the Cold War era, who remained open to the secular world?

Boko Haram's historicity is well established. We now have the necessary hindsight—the grand finale of research on the present. Consequently, we can now comprehend Boko Haram, despite difficulties in accessing territories it controls or influences, and despite challenges in approaching its members and potential interview subjects.

Five contributors to this issue—Élodie Apard, Corentin Cohen, Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, Christian Seignobos, and Olivier Ray—overcame these challenges by rethinking their modes of analysis, especially their methodology and use of sources. Establishing Boko Haram as an object of critical study required innovative thinking and a reshaping of research methodology.

The contributors delve into Boko Haram as an object and a discourse, going beyond vague predictions and political, social, economic and security-oriented analyses. Digging deep, they uncover the archaeology of a functioning social movement. Boko Haram has created new norms for religious, social, political, and economic life in northeastern Nigeria and the Lake Chad basin, via an armed, violent affirmation of Salafist Islam and a fight against Nigeria's federal government and traditional local elites.

Building a Terrorism Narrative

By meticulously tracing the contemporary history of Islamic radicalism in northern Nigeria, political scientist Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos looks more closely at the construction of terrorization narratives (Crettiez, 2008), situating the current large-scale construction of sub-Saharan terrorism within a global "Sahelistan" (Laurent, 2012).

1. The most objective way of referring to this type of organization is to use the name its members use. However, for the sake of convenience, we will use the term "Boko Haram" in this issue.

2. Each author in this issue provides an up-to-date bibliography.

3. On this topic, see Laurent Gayer's (2010) review of Nichola Khan's 2010 work *Mohajir Militancy in Pakistan: Violence and Practices of Transformation in the Karachi Conflict*, Milton Park/New York, Routledge. Khan, in "an extremely rare occurrence in the history of the social sciences [. . .], shared the daily lives then gathered the testimonies of a group of 'professional' killers serving a Pakistani ethno-nationalist party based in Karachi, the Mohajir Qaumi Movement (MQM)."

From Mauritania to Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan, Chad, Niger, Nigeria, Mali, and Somalia, Pérouse de Montclos deploys a deep history to deconstruct the largely imaginary notion of an "arc of crisis." He shows that theories of internationalized Islamic contestation stem from a kind of myopia. He decodes conflated ideas, analytical errors, and self-fulfilling prophecies. He contextualizes threats hanging over the region—often presented as new insurrections under the banner of radical Islam—within a long-term historical context.

Pérouse de Montclos, while careful to affirm the importance of the global terrorist threat, finds that many international strategists and experts erase local and long-established conflicts. In the case of Boko Haram, theorists often ignore old rifts—for example, conflicts between the Borno Empire and Sokoto Caliphate. Such theories systematically contextualize contemporary jihads within a global perspective, one that ignores local insurgent conflicts. As a corrective, Pérouse de Montclos' essay deconstructs representations of (past) Mahdist and (current) terrorist perils.

The Words of Boko Haram

For the first time ever (and in sharp contrast to current research practice), historian Élodie Apard has collected, listened to, translated, and transcribed all of Boko Haram's publicly-accessible "words."[4] She has examined primary sources and studied the group "in the original language" (Kepel and Minelli, 2008).[5] International experts and the media rarely report the exact words and statements of Boko Haram leaders. In order to understand what they say and how they say it, Apard has collected and studied the words and speeches of Mohammed Yusuf, the movement's founder, killed in 2009, and Abubakar Shekau, his second-in-command and the current face of Boko Haram.

Audiovisual documents serve as her primary sources, organized into two categories: Abubakar Shekau's video messages, sent to international media and posted on the Internet, and Mohammed Yusuf's sermons, filmed and reproduced on cassettes, CDs, and MP3 files, available in all regional markets from Zinder to Maiduguri.

Apard had to meticulously translate and decode their discourse, delivered in Hausa and Kanuri (sprinkled with some Arabic), in order to put the words back into their original cultural and social context. However, this work on the source material, from collecting sermons and video messages to translating and analyzing their discourse, required additional field interviews in order to be comprehensive and to fulfil research standards.[6]

Studying Boko Haram's discourse and imagery provides insights into previously unknown aspects of the group. Development-focused political, security-oriented, and/or economic analyses do not include, for example, the movement's social and cultural dimensions, nor do they examine the local reception (and perception) of these messages.

Direct knowledge and understanding of Boko Haram's words allow Apard to add nuance to traditional economic explanations (such as poverty) for youth engagement in armed extremist groups; she explains that the myths and promises of jihad can also entice the young. The promise of an adventurous war in the name of Islam gives Boko Haram a cause to bundle with the other sources of youth disaffection—injustice, exclusion, and social isolation.

Advocating a Geographic and Anthropological Approach to the Lake Chad Basin

Geographer Christian Seignobos continues his thinking about cross-border insecurity and armed violence in Cameroon's far northern reaches (Seignobos, 2014; Chauvin and Seignobos, 2013; Seignobos, 2011a; Seignobos, 2011b). His work—often featured in the pages of *Afrique Contemporaine,* and grounded in decades of fieldwork in northern Cameroon and the Lake Chad basin—draws on eyewitnesses and sources developed and maintained through periodic trips to the region. Without having recently traveled through areas under Boko Haram's influence, and yet without doing away with the culture of field research, Seignobos' remote oral surveys situate Boko Haram's recent presence in the Lake Chad area within an anthropological perspective.

Seignobos vividly describes the landscape recently besieged by Boko Haram's forces. Through detailed drawings, maps, and descriptions of lakeside worlds, he calls for a reconsideration of the fundamentals of geographical research. He captures Lake Chad's physical and human features to understand its advantages for Boko Haram. Seignobos deploys a multidisciplinary approach to interrogate the problem, probing the group's extension and/or refuge in the Lake Chad basin.

Lake Chad, a fitting refuge, has always served as a safe haven for populations resisting pre-, post- and colonial-era political conquerors. First, a refuge to escape contact with French and British authorities (military, administrative, and tax-collecting),[7] then a place to (re)create a type of colonial no-contact zone (Courtin, 2012), and, more recently, a haven for armed rebels opposed to N'Djamena authorities and still loyal to Hissène Habré; to this day (2015) and who still hold the islands in the Chadian part of the southern basin (see map, p. 109).

These "societies of rejection" have developed over time in the labyrinth of islands, islets, and mud banks colonized by lakeside camps of local populations, notably the Buduma. Today, groups of people who work and participate in society, in spite of their exclusion from Chadian, Nigerian or Cameroonian

4. This work supplements Umar (2012).
5. In relation to this work by Élodie Apard, also see Flagg Miller's recent work (2015).
6. Begun in February 2012, this work was combined with research trips conducted between 2012 and 2014 in Northern Nigeria, in 2012 in Zaria, Kano, and Sokoto, and in Niger in 2013, and 2014 in Zinder, Maradi, Agadez, Arlit, and Niamey.
7. During the colonial period—due to taxes, mandatory dues, and forced resettlement and regrouping of the population—groups of men, women, and children refused contact with the new (French and British) arrivals and the inevitably one-sided power relationship they hoped to impose.

postcolonial politics, may join Boko Haram as a means of resisting their central governments. These groups include the Buduma, involuntarily sidelined by Chad's national policies, and the Kanuri, marginalized by the Nigerian Federation. From "societies of rejection" to "counter-societies" of bandits, traffickers, and jihadists, these "collectives of rejection" seek salvation in Boko Haram. Through contact with the latter, for example, the Islamization of the Buduma—initiated in 1900–1930 under the influence of Kanembu heirs to the Kanem Empire—has taken on the tinge of "bush Salafism," one full of liberating, millenarian, and international hopes.

The occasional or permanent association or affiliation between these "collectives of rejection" and Boko Haram embodies other elements—lifestyles, economies, sociability and religiosity. The continuous refashioning of this shifting, nebulous, and predatory popular government may obscure how these "societies against the State" actually work (Clastres, 1974). We cannot call them anarchies, given their opposition to the very notion of governance, yet they do govern through terror and extreme violence, precisely because they do not possess their own modes of governance, political economy, or sociological identity.

Within these societies, we should not underestimate the role played by traditional and administrative authorities in co-producing violence, nor that of the social body in village communities and nomadic groups. Violence is never unilateral and rarely appears one-sided, since governments also employ violence against their citizens. Violence runs through all social groups and manifests within each, as well as in relationships with others and the outside world.

This previously anticolonial "human plasma" in the Lake Chad Basin, situated along the imperial line of thrust between pre- and postcolonial British and French empires and bordered by four countries on Lake Chad, has become the epicenter of contemporary political, commercial, and religious concerns.

Boko Haram has transformed this refuge region, one historically characterized by retreat to the lake and wholesale flight from generally authoritarian outside forces, into an epicenter of armed violence, a space that reconfigures intracommunity power relationships. There are no more borders, no languages, at least not those of colonization—simply a complete break with the colonial era. Boko Haram's radicalism goes beyond the postcolonial paradigm and fully rejects it.

According to Seignobos, Boko Haram cannot win the war it has started, but neither can neighboring nations emerge victorious. He concludes that religious wars remain among the most unforgiving: in the 21st century, how is it possible to punish those seeking only to obey God?

Boko Haram: The Inadvertent Subject of Limited Surveys

Overcoming the difficulties of gaining access to the field, political scientist Corentin Cohen is one of the last European researchers to have recently traveled through areas bordering Boko Haram-controlled and influenced territories.

During several trips to the region in 2014 and 2015, Cohen assembled first-hand observations and analyses from an unprecedented series of interviews conducted in Nigeria, Chad, and Cameroon.

His findings draw on information, observations, and perceptions collected from approximately 70 interviews. His interviewees included displaced individuals, former hostages, and refugees—all victims of Boko Haram attacks, originally from Yobe, Gombe, Borno, Adamawa, Cameroon and the Chadian shores of Lake Chad.[8] To protect his sources, Cohen cannot cite, name, or show the individuals he interviewed, already victims of the conflict. Likewise, his study omits geographical details and other information that could reveal where these events occurred.[9] Protecting sources in this manner is standard practice in necessarily limited surveys done under the constraints of fragile border areas.

Researchers working on Boko Haram, distanced from social sciences debates over source confidentiality and informed by laws regulating intelligence operations and protection from government surveillance,[10] find themselves confronted with methodological dilemmas. How can they build and analyze compilations of oral sources without the ability to cite an interviewee's name, position, interview location or date? In such cases, we cannot question the integrity of the social scientist at work, since it serves to protect individuals who have agreed at some risk to provide information about armed groups.

Cohen, braving these difficulties, turns the spotlight on local histories, life stories, and oral sources that emphasize the political and social issues of the conflict, as well as Boko Haram's ability to connect with these issues. These accounts also allow Cohen to draw a distinction between the discourse and practices of Boko Haram and the reasons that individuals find for joining it.

New Perspectives

Village vigilante groups, along with the armed forces from the four riparian countries bordering Lake Chad, have carried out a traditional counterinsurgency with its share of reciprocal massacres, but without ending the movement, its violence or suicide attacks. Nor have drones and other high-tech devices succeeded. War, after all, is an art that even the poor and the weak can learn to master; whether a drone can see through a gourd of *merisa* is hardly relevant.[11]

In 2015, Boko Haram's search for maximum strategic depth found a new space for expansion or refuge in the Lake Chad basin; this could only lead to

8. These semi-structured interviews were conducted in English or French, or by local interpreters translating from Hausa to English or from Arabic to French. Unless otherwise specified, all facts reported in these interviews have undergone cross-checking.

9. To ensure the confidentiality of these sources, no socio-professional environments or locations are specified here.

10. See Marwan (2015), and Laurens and Neyrat (2010).

11. Regarding the art of war, see Clausewitz's book *On War*, by Emmanuel Mendes Sargo's blog "Ouvroir Académique." *Merisa* is a sorghum-based beer.

the destruction of lakeside societies and a regional insurrection, as happened in early 2016.

The aura of Boko Haram has not faded even as the counter-insurgency campaign is gaining ground gains in power. Intrinsic support for the movement makes itself felt throughout the region; the Salafism of cities, towns, and urbanized societies—the nonviolent counterpart to the Boko Haram ideology—has reached unprecedented levels, after decades in which both Wahhabism and Salafism have slowly incubated.

Thus, Boko Haram's future or demise—and especially the post–Boko Haram period—can only be envisioned and shaped within this regional Salafist sphere, one torn between antithetical ideas, customs, and imagery. Important divides separate these state-Salafist societies, characterized by violent jihad, from Salafist communities "within the state"; the latter are no less radical but do not resort to armed violence. In the search for a solution to the Boko Haram problem, the best approach—or that with the fewest poor outcomes—calls for improving our understanding of Salafism in the cities.

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