

The Effects of Boko Haram on the Church in Nigeria: The Case of Michika Local Government Area, Adamawa State

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Abstract

Boko Haram's insurgence wreaked havoc in some Nigerian societies. The Michika Local Government Area of Adamawa State was specifically affected from September 2014 to February 2015, when the insurgents laid siege to the city. The insurgents left many people homeless, sick, or dead, and many properties were also destroyed. The Church of the Brethren, known in Hausa as *Ekkliyyar Yan'uwa a Nigeria*, (EYN), was at the center of this destruction. This article discusses the effects of Boko Haram, focusing on its impact on the church in the Michika Local Government Area of Adamawa State. The article looks at how the church struggles after the impact of Boko Haram. These struggles include economic, theological, and pastoral care challenges. The study adopts a critical phenomenological research method

because the subject demands that the experiences of the victims be documented and interpreted. The study found that many people in the Michika Local Government Area sustained injuries, and lost property, loved ones, or even their own lives. Some women were also raped. Because of the people's predicament, the church has been drastically affected. Despite these divesting effects, the government has not yet done enough to help the victims. The church also struggles to provide theological responses to the problem. This article recommends that religious leaders have a more significant role than anyone else in providing comfort, rehabilitation, empowerment, and seeking justice for the residents.

Keywords

Boko Haram, church, pacifism, theological challenges, socio-economic challenges, pastoral-care challenges

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1. Introduction

Much like the time of the early church, where the followers of Jesus Christ were severely persecuted (Ukeachusim 2022, 1), the churches in the Michika Local Government Area of Adamawa State in Nigeria today are passing through what feels like their worst challenges in recent times. Nigerian Christians have been subjected to systemic persecution for many years due to the pluralistic nature of the country. However, the emergence of Boko Haram has aggravated the level of persecution to more than it has ever been in the history of Nigeria. The insurgence of Boko Haram severely affected the church in Michika Local Government Area in Northeastern Nigeria. Many lost their lives, with many members becoming refugees in neighboring countries and states across Nigeria. This article focuses on the effects of terrorism on the church in Michika Local Government Area, from September 2014 to February 2015, when the insurgents laid siege to the city.

Boko Haram came into the limelight in 2009 after the death of its leader and founder, Mohammed Yusuf. On September 7, 2014, the Christian community of Michika had its share of the attack by the Boko Haram insurgents. This attack drew global attention because of the intensity of the destruction caused by the insurgents. The aftermath was devastating, and the loss irreparable (Bintube 2015, 13). Many people lost their lives, properties were looted, and church buildings and houses were destroyed. Many women were left as widows and, together with their daughters, were raped and forcefully given in marriage to insurgents as the bounties of war. Many children are now orphans. Thousands of people were displaced and now live in camps for Internally Displaced People (henceforth IDPs). They experience various forms of abuse: physical, social, economic, educational, spiritual, and psychological (Bloom and Matfess 2016, 106).

This paper is a critical phenomenological study examining the effects of the insurgency on the church in the Michika Local Government Area of Adamawa State, Nigeria. Neubauer, Witkop, and Varpio (2019, 92) assert that “phenomenology can be defined as an approach to research that seeks to describe the essence of a phenomenon by exploring it from the perspective of those who have experienced it. The goal of phenomenology is to describe the meaning of this experience—both in terms of what was experienced and how it was experienced.” Phenomenological research is an approach to qualitative research that focuses on the commonality of a lived experience within a particular group. The fundamental goal of this approach is to arrive at a description of the nature of people’s experiences. Due to the limitation of time and space, this study made greater use of literary sources than of field-based data gathered from interviews.

2. A Survey of the Emergence of Boko Haram

The name Boko Haram is a Hausa expression, meaning Western Education is forbidden. *Boko* means education, while *haram* means forbidden. The meaning of this deadly Islamic group’s name has also been understood to mean Western influence is sinful, unlawful, and sacrilegious to Islam (Dunn 2018, 1; Ojaide, Mohammed, and Othman 2019, xvii; Agbiboa 2013, 145). Boko Haram “officially calls itself ‘Jama’atul Alhul-Sunnah Lidda, Watiwal Jihad,’ which means the people committed to the Prophet’s teachings and Jihad” (Agbiboa 2013, 145). Some writers traced its roots to the founder of the Maitatsine Jihadist group, Mohammed Marwan. When Marwan was killed in 1980, his followers regrouped to form what is now known as Boko Haram. Nguvugher (2010, 105) believes that a closer look at the teaching, ideology, and practice of the Maitatsine and the Boko Haram groups confirms the assertion that Boko Haram might probably be an offshoot of Maitatsine (105). But in actual fact, knowing the origin of Boko

Haram is complicated, though they could have been the remnants of the Maitatsine movement.

Mambula (2016, 55) asserts that in 1995 the group was said to be operating under the name Shabaa'a Muslim Youth Organization with Abubakar Lawal as the leader. When Lawal left to continue his education, Mohammed Yusuf took over the group's leadership. Some reports link the insurgency with previous Islamic groups that opposed the Nigerian states but lacked the international notoriety of the current organization. These accounts associate Boko Haram with small resistant groups composed of young men that began congregating in the mid-1990s, led initially by Abubakar Lawal (55).

Mohammed Yusuf, who took over, was a charismatic Nigerian cleric. This divisive figure was born in 1970 at the start of a decade when the Nigerian Government undertook a quest to rebuild national unity. Yusuf gained prominence among local youths of Maiduguri, the Borno State capital (Thurston 2018, 37).

Foard Copeland (2013, 2) argues that "By 2003, Yusuf led a movement promoting a conservative theology that mimicked Saudi-style Salafism and opposed Nigeria's secular state, which was considered corrupt and un-Islamic." His popularity allegedly opened the group to political influence. Yusuf officially founded the group in 2002 in Maiduguri, intending to establish a government based on *Sharia* Law in Borno state under the then Governor Ali Modu Sheriff. He established a religious complex that included a mosque and a school, where many low-income families from across Nigeria and neighboring countries enrolled their children (4).

Boko Haram's primary concern is establishing an Islamic caliphate patterned and administered according to the Qur'an and its jurisprudence. It is based in Maiduguri, Yobe, and Adamawa States in Northeastern Nigeria. The group has been described as the world's deadliest and most

destructive terrorist organization in terms of brutality, heartlessness, and mindlessness. It has instilled fear in the mind of every Nigerian citizen (Familusi 2021, 213–214).

3. The Michika Local Government Area

The Higgi, or Kamwe, live in the Michika Local Government Area in Northeastern Nigeria. The population of the Kamwe people is estimated to be over one million people. About ninety-eight percent of Kamwe people are Christians, predominantly members of the Church of the Brethren. It is popularly known in Hausa as *Ekklisiyar Yan'uwa a Nigeria* (EYN). However, the second edition of the World Christian Encyclopedia lists a population of 327,538 people in the year 2000, and the 2006 census placed them at 155,302 (Debki 2009, 3).

Accounts of the historical origin of the Kamwe are many and varied. The Kamwe, like other ethnic groups in Nigeria, claim eastern origin. They are believed to be connected to the Marghi and Kilba people, tracing their roots to the Chad basin (Bazza and Kanu 2018, 83–84). However, Marguerite G. Kraft (1978, 42), who made an ethnographic study of the Higgi tribes, found out that all Kamwe (Higgi) people trace their origin to *Mcakli*, meaning hail or an icy place, which is believed to be in Cameroon, from where they moved to the Mandara Hills area of Northeastern Nigeria. Van Beek (1987, ix) argues that "the Kapsiki and Higgi people are one ethnic group ... [and] need to be seen as one ethnic group, which is called Kapsiki in Cameroon and Higgi in Nigeria." This conclusion agrees with the oral tradition, which states that the Kamwe people migrated from Nchokyili in the present-day Republic of Cameroon. Ultimately, the Kamwe people seem to have a Nubian origin but migrated southward to their present location.

From a religious viewpoint, the Kamwe people are very religious and even fanatic about their faith. They believe in one supreme God, called *Hyalatamwe*. They revere and fear him and believe that he resides in heaven. Direct communication with him is impossible in Kamwe culture. Thus, contact with him must be through intermediaries called *Da melie* or *Tchehye shwa*. The Kamwe People also believed in witchcraft and the existence of other spiritual beings, such as evil spirits and the spirits of dead ancestors, which could attack directly or be manipulated by others. They believe that disobeying the demands of any of the spiritual beings, such as the supreme God, an ancestral spirit, or an evil spirit, meant incurring the displeasure of the gods. This could result in problems such as crop failure, epidemic diseases, accidents, or death in a tribal war (Dada, Mangoro, and Williams 2005, 8).

Michika people generally are farmers and very enterprising as they find themselves in the big cities and towns in Nigeria engaging in all forms of trades such as baking, selling of provisions, shoe making, and driving. Michika is a cosmopolitan town with branches of many banks, a college of health technology, a technical college, and many secondary schools. The inhabitants are mostly Christians though there are a few traditionalists and Muslims. There are about 26 chiefdoms and 801 villages around the mountain. Other tribes also reside in the cities and towns, such as Bura, Kilba, and Margi (Dada, Mangoro, and Williams 2005, 8).

Boko Haram terrorists first entered Michika in 2012. They attacked banks and markets, killed 15 people, and left. After some months, they attacked the neighboring Madagali Local Government Area. On September 7, 2014, the insurgents attacked Michika again while people were at church, rendering service to their God. The Boko Haram fighters entered Michika in a convoy of vehicles. A military jet circled the town causing the militants to hide in the people's houses. There was confusion as people

ran helter-skelter, fleeing from gunshots. It was unclear who had attacked the people as the insurgents wore Nigerian army uniforms. About 650 persons were killed, others died because of heart attacks, and others were wounded since they ran around frantically (Olofinbiyi 2021, 2).

4. The Effects of Boko Haram Attacks on the Local Church

As stated in the introduction, the study examines the effect of the Boko Haram insurgency on the church in the Michika Local Government Area. This section looks at the socio-economic, theological, and pastoral care effects on the church and its members during the six months from September 2014 to February 2015, when Boko Haram laid siege to the city.

4.1 Socio-economic effects

Boko Haram destroyed farm crops, animals, and farmland, and also burnt down houses. People were left with nothing to feed their families. Food security became less and less stable due to the disruption in agricultural activities. As a result, most of the communities in the Northeast were becoming poor—the poorest beginning life from scratch. As Victoria Ojeme (2011, 1) reported, the North has the highest rate of poverty. The index highlights states in the northeast, consisting of Borno, Bauchi, Taraba, and Adamawa, as the states with the highest poverty incidence, ranging from 54.9% to 7.2%.

Today Nigeria has millions of people displaced from their homes to IDP camps. Such an event drastically affected economic productivity. Most displaced persons live in abject poverty and do not have access to any form of social welfare. Many are malnourished, and the farmers cannot return to their farms because they fear being attacked. Since the church depends on

the generous donations of its members, it also faces financial difficulties. The Church of the Brethren in Nigeria was attacked, and the terrorists captured its headquarters during the six-month siege. Many church workers faced financial crisis as the church was at the height of this trial (Familusi 2021, 213–214).

The massive destruction of homes and social amenities means that the communities of the Michika Local Government Area will be faced with rebuilding infrastructure while individual households grapple with rebuilding their communities, their shelter, and their broken relationships. These also will have obvious consequences for people's health. The mass emigration of Michika citizens from their homeland has posed a formidable economic threat. The rush to escape Boko Haram has affected the profitability of business establishments in the Michika Local Government Area.

Kidnapping has also contributed to insecurity, fear, mistrust, suspicion, and psychological stress and trauma in Michika. The monetary impact of abduction is devastating for the victims, their families, relatives, and society as they are forced to sell all they may have to pay the ransom for the kidnapped victims. One known event was the kidnapping of 276 Chibok schoolgirls in 2014. About 90% of these girls are members of EYN and members of the Kamwe tribe (Mambula 2016, 7).

4.2 *Theological effects*

Although Christians from all the denominations in Michika were affected when Boko Haram attacked the community, the case of EYN is different. The terrorists took over the headquarters of the church, and the church was forced to relocate to Jos temporarily. The Church of the Brethren has a pacifist stance and does not believe in using the sword in religious encounters. However, the activities of Boko Haram have led to many

theological challenges. A few pastors preach that Christians should not take up arms against their persecutors, while others advocate that Christians should pick up arms in self-defense. Many Christian scholars, however, are neutral and would not want to discuss the issue. It seems theological responses to terrorism are also politicized. Since the Body of Christ in Nigeria, including its theologians, has no unified theological response to terrorism due to its diversity, individual pastors provide different answers to their members based on their contexts since the southern part of Nigeria does not have the same experience of terrorism as the church in the north.

The Church of the Brethren, because of its experience, is compelled to think theologically about the insurgency. For instance, Ephraim Kadala (2013, 91), a pastor in the EYN, noted that in his interview with church members, some responded, saying: "Jesus did not ask the disciples to buy swords for decoration, but Christ knew they will need it in the future. And at Gethsemane, Jesus did not tell Peter to throw away the sword, but to put it back for future use." Therefore, it was not yet time to use it. Others noted,

If Christ intended for us not to defend ourselves in all situations and at all times, should we not expect him to say, 'Peter, throw away your sword, for all who take the sword die by the sword?' But that is not true. He did not disarm Peter. He told him to put his weapon back in its scabbard after Peter drew it in anger, arrogance, and ignorance because he knew Peter would want it at the right time. (Kadala 2013, 91)

Since Jesus did not disarm Peter, the church should not disarm its members at this crucial stage in the life of the church. Others add that,

We have turned both cheeks and they have cut off our heads, and we have gone more than five miles, and they have led us out of our towns, we have given our cloaks as well, and they have stripped us naked. These Muslims have always taken us for a ride and for fools for much too long; we need to stand our ground. (Kadala 2013, 91)

From the foregoing, there is no doubt that the theologian is faced with numerous theological questions to answer.

The jihadists saw themselves as agents of God in this war. Members of Boko Haram see themselves as a chosen instrument of Allah to implement his fury against infidels, or unbelievers. Such violence committed in the name of Allah absolves the perpetrators of agency and responsibility. Thus, when killing people without mercy, they shout *Allahu akbar*, meaning God is great. This implies that God is happy with the destruction and the death of men, women, and children.

Their activities present a terrible image of God and portray God as wicked, partial, discriminatory, and unjust. This has challenged the faith of the Christians, who constitute about 95% to 98% of the population in the Michika Local Government Area. Many wonder if God really loves and cares about what is happening to human beings. Some saw the Boko Haram attacks as a failure of the God they believed in, so they resorted to seeking help from traditional religion by attempting to use charms. However, most Michika Christian communities interpreted the crisis as the fulfillment of Jesus's prediction in the Scripture; that the Boko Haram crisis was a sign of the end of the world and the nearness of the second coming of Jesus Christ. With such an apocalyptic interpretation, many took comfort, accepted, and endured their suffering throughout the crisis. This apocalyptic interpretation helped some Christians resist the temptation to

apostatize in light of the Boko Haram crisis. Many stood their ground in the face of the threat of death and refused to recant their faith in Jesus Christ.

4.3 Pastoral care effects

During the Boko Haram crisis, the EYN church lost over 8,000 of its members while 700,000 were displaced, and 43 out of 50 district church councils were destroyed or closed. One thousand six hundred seventy-four buildings, or worshipping centers, were completely burned down or closed. As a result, 1,390 EYN pastors, assistant pastors, and evangelists were left without work and income to care for their families. The pastors and their families were among the EYN members who lost their lives due to the Boko Haram attack. These created massive and unimaginable pastoral challenges in Michika, where almost all the congregations were displaced, and the church buildings burnt down (Billi 2015, 5).

During the Boko Haram crisis, both pastors and their church members needed pastoral care as they were all scattered in different directions like sheep without a shepherd. Both competed for relief materials that were distributed in IDP camps. Both focused on caring for themselves and their families. Some members were shocked to see their pastors in the queue, competing to be ahead of their members to receive relief materials instead of providing care to them. Some pastors left their pastoral responsibilities, moving from church to church to seek sympathy and assistance from other churches that were unaffected (Samuel Dali, interview by author, March 2, 2015).

However, a few tried to take advantage of the displacement to open new churches in areas that the church had never reached. Others frequently went to the displaced people in camps to provide pastoral care, comfort, and encourage the displaced members. A few were given relief material to distribute to their members, but instead, they shared it among

themselves and their families, leaving the members with nothing (Samuel Dali, interview by author, March 2, 2015).

5. The Effects of the Boko Haram Attacks on Women and Girls

Northern Nigeria is patriarchal, which is a major feature of this traditional society, where men dominate and control everything in the society, sometimes to the detriment of women. Before the emergence of Boko Haram women were subjected to domestic responsibilities. They were not allowed to be heard in public, kept at a low level of education, often neglected, and continually kept at home. They could only be mothers and wives and were regarded as the property of men. Especially in Kamwe culture, women are regarded as cheap laborers and seen as the property of their husbands (Makama 2013, 116).

In 2020, one of the girls who escaped after being taken captive by Boko Haram and had an unwanted pregnancy spoke of the appalling abuse experienced by those held captive by Boko Haram. This girl explained that when the Boko Haram terrorists kidnapped them, some of them were forced to convert to Islam, married to the Boko Haram fighters, or mercilessly raped. Some women and girls were forced to participate in military operations, including suicide bombing missions. In her case, four to five terrorists would have sex with her daily. She escaped only by God's grace; she cannot even explain how it happened (Mercy Kwata, interview by author, August 16, 2020).¹

Oladeji et al. (2018, 4759) assert that among the women liberated from the insurgents and relocated to one of the large IDP camps in Borno

State, the camp's clinic has recorded forty-seven women with sexual violence-related pregnancies (SVRP). Nineteen of these women delivered the babies from these unwanted pregnancies in the camp's clinic (Oladeji et al. 2018, 4764). Many women, specifically girls in the Michika Local Government Area, have children whose fathers are not known due to ungodly encounters with the insurgents. The possibility that some of these children may end up being lured to continue with the atrocities of their fathers cannot be completely ruled out since the insurgents are still recruiting poor and innocent youths in broad daylight while the government says nothing (Oladeji et al. 2018, 4765).

5.1 Widowhood and orphans

The issue of widowhood and orphans is a big challenge to women because many women have lost their husbands. As a result, the children are deprived of what belongs to them. One lady informed me that when her husband was killed by the Boko Haram insurgents in 2019, the relatives of her late husband took everything and left her and the children with nothing, which was a big challenge to her. This incident put her in a fragile situation to the extent that her neighbor took advantage of her and raped her, and nobody defended her. She also told me that when they were moved to the IDP camp, one of her daughters was raped by someone, and afterwards, she engaged in commercial sex for their survival (Rose Musa, interview by author, August 1, 2020).² These and many other challenges are a present reality to many women in Michika due to the Boko Haram terrorists. Only the grace of God in the process of holistic trauma counseling could bring succor and healing to the victims.

¹ This name is a pseudonym.

² This name is a pseudonym.

5.2 *Education of girls*

Before the emergence of Boko Haram and its attack on Michika, female education was not at an ideal level due to the limited opportunities afforded to women. One of the major consequences of Boko Haram is that girls from this region will forever lag behind their contemporaries from other parts of the country. Many girls have been uprooted from their homes and are now living with their parents, who cannot send them to school as displaced persons. All the academic activities in Northeastern Nigeria, especially in Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe States, have been disrupted since 2014, and many students stay home. Some have become street children. This makes some parents hesitant to send their children to school. Some girls are paralyzed at the thought of going back to school, thinking they may be killed or kidnapped on their way or in their hostels. Some of these girls have witnessed killing, kidnapping, abduction, and illegal detention and were forced to watch while the terrorist slaughtered their teachers and fellow students, and damaged educational buildings and other facilities (Isokpan and Durojaye 2019, 2–3).

6. Thinking Theologically About the Insurgency

Harper and Pargament (2015, 350) state that “For better or worse, people often draw upon religion and spirituality in the wake of traumatic events.” Persecution causes trauma in many Christians, which profoundly impacts their lives on the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual levels. Mutai (2015, 133) argues that since the first century, Christianity has faced different kinds of challenges, ranging from doctrinal differences to martyrdom. The violence and opposition witnessed in our context today come from political and social rivalry as well as cultural and spiritual beliefs and practices. During the persecution, Christians were devastated

in many respects, ranging from being displaced to being economically disadvantaged, causing trauma at different levels of their beings (133).

Christians face what Langberg (2015, 47) calls the dilemma of suffering. She draws on Matthew 10:29–31, which says “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows” (ESV). Using this she explains that suffering, based on this Scripture, usually comes to Christians with the approval of God. At the same time, God is portrayed as a loving Father. Langberg (2015, 47–48) argues that “The dilemma of suffering is inherent in the Scriptures. Suffering cannot occur apart from the Father. Suffering occurs with the knowledge and oversight of the Father, who obviously cares and considers us valuable.” How Christians should react to hardship is one of the questions that she considers to be relevant. Christians need to understand that these atrocities are indescribable because they are so horrifying in nature that words cannot appropriately express what occurred both inwardly and externally. As a result, the trauma is stashed away and forgotten, and life continues as usual (Langberg 2015, 47–48). In line with this, Mutai (2019, 131) notes that Christians, especially those living in IDP camps, ask where the loving God is amidst all the violence and trauma.

Mutai (2019, 134) lists a few biblical principles for responding to traumatic events, which this study finds useful. First, we need to acknowledge and expose the sinful actions of evil men. Second, we need to comprehend that our adversaries are not human beings but rather remember that our war is “against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of

evil in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:12 ESV). Third, we must remain confident about God’s power to overcome the enemy. Fourth, we should understand that God is not angry with us when we are facing terrible things. Fifth, survivors should know that lament is biblical. Sixth, Christians should learn to observe the Sabbath in the sense of resting emotionally, physically, and psychologically.

7. Conclusion

As stated in the introduction to this article, we set out to examine the impact of the insurgence of Boko Haram on the church in the Michika Local Government Area of Adamawa State, Nigeria. The study has presented a brief survey of the origin of Boko Haram and its ideology which serves as a basis for their activities, including the devastating effects it has on the church in Michika. Of course, not only the church is affected, but liberal Muslims are also affected. However, we limited our study to the impact of Boko Haram on the church in Michika. The church was affected because many church members lost their livelihoods, so the church was also in financial a crisis. Amidst the predicaments of members, the church also faced theological and pastoral care challenges. In the end, women and girls bear the brunt of the attack. The women lost their husbands and children while many of their daughters were abducted, raped, and given out to Boko Haram generals as the bounties of war. The church, its clergies, non-governmental agencies, and the government are crucial stakeholders and partners in protecting its citizens. The government needs to equip their security forces to face the terrorists to ensure the safety of its citizens.

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