

A Critical Appraisal of Boko-Haram Insurgency and the Criminal Topography of Sambisa Geosphere

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Abstract:

Ever since the Boko Haram insurgents found a safe haven in the Sambisa forest from where they launch their attacks on the Nigerian state, neither Nigeria nor the forest has known any peace ever since. Despite efforts by the Nigerian government to subdue the sect, it continues to pose threats and commit all forms of atrocity against innocent civilians and all aspects of life. More so, the rapid expansion of the group into neighboring Chad, Niger, and Cameroon Republic threatens the peace and stability of the entire region. This paper was therefore an attempt to critically examine Boko-Haram insurgency and the precipitous criminal topography of Sambisa geosphere. The paper argued that although the socio-political, socio-economic and socio-cultural consequences of these security problems have been widely reported by many writers the criminal tendencies that characterized the topography of the Sambisa forest and their resultant challenges to combatting the insurgents has only received cursory attention. The paper recommends that the government should provide social services, proper education, employment to the youth, and

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economic development in general in the region in order not only to convince people especially the locals not to support Boko Haram anymore, but also to prevent a similar insurgency from reappearing again.

Keywords: Boko Haram, Criminal Topography, Insurgency, Sambisa Geosphere,

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1.0 Introduction

About a decade ago when scholars and analysts wrote about security problems in Africa, northern Nigeria rarely registered in their assessments this is because there was still no insurgency in the region, and the group popularly known as Boko Haram, which literally means “Western education is sinful” in the Hausa language, was considered moderate revivalists attempting to implement social change. Put differently the violent potential of Boko Haram was neither recognized nor anticipated (Feldman, 2009). However, today, Nigeria and its neighbors face ever-evolving threats of Boko Haram Insurgency.

The world has witnessed an unprecedented rise in the activities of Islamic extremist groups across the continents. Boko Haram, like other extremist groups, has engaged in guerrilla warfare against the Nigerian government and people, threatening the establishment of the Nigerian state and its neighbors in the Lake Chad Basin. The activities of the group have claimed many lives of innocent civilians, damaged properties, and created tension within Nigeria. The devastated effect of the Boko Haram insurgency on the population has generated mixed feelings, concerns, and triggered international condemnation.

Despite efforts by the Nigerian government to subdue the sect, it continues to pose threats and commit all forms of atrocity against innocent civilians and all aspects of life. More so, the rapid expansion of the group into neighboring Chad, Niger, and Cameroon Republic threatens the peace and stability of the entire region.

Again since its emergence in northeastern Nigeria a security vacuum within the region has been created. The threat of the group to Nigeria, its neighbors and the international community cannot be ignored. Living conditions in the region have been degraded, life and properties have been destroyed, enforced disappearance of persons and an increasing refugee crisis across the region calls for action. Despite efforts by the Nigerian government and its partners to combat the Boko Haram insurgency, the group continues to pose a threat and challenge to the government of Nigeria and its partners. The security situation in the region has deteriorated, and the territorial integrity of Nigeria is being undermined (Diyoke, 2016).

Although the socio-political, socio-economic and socio-cultural consequences of these security problems have been widely reported by many writers and is therefore in the public domain, the precipitous criminal topography of the Sambisa geosphere and their environmental consequences however has only received cursory attention.

Outside the wide coverage that Sambisa forest occupation by the Boko Haram insurgents has received in the mass media, the consequences of such occupation on Sambisa forest itself has never been given any serious consideration.

It is a known fact that since 2013 when the Boko Haram insurgents found a safe haven in the Sambisa forest from where they launch their attacks on the Nigerian state, neither Nigeria nor the forest has known any peace ever since. Sambisa forest occupation by the Boko Haram insurgents and indeed the use of forests in general as hide outs for criminal elements in the society is throwing up a new challenges and it is becoming increasingly difficult to combat such insurgents. The question that begs for answer is how does the existence of Sambisa forest aid insurgency growth in Nigeria, what are the specific characteristics Sambisa geosphere that hinder every effort geared towards insurgency reduction

Hence, this research paper seeks critically appraise the concepts behind Boko Haram insurgency taken into account the precipitatory criminal topography of the Sambisa geosphere how the government can use that understanding to effectively fight the group and possible ways forward.

2.0 Conceptual Issues

2.0.1 Boko Haram

According to Oluwatosin, (2016) Boko Haram members prefer to be known by their Arabic name Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad meaning "People committed to the propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad." The group is believed to have been formed in the town of Maiduguri in North East Nigeria, where the locals nicknamed its members "Boko Haram," a combination of the Hausa word "boko", which literally means "Western education" and the Arabic word "haram" which figuratively means "sin" and literally means "forbidden". Adesina, (2013) viewed Boko Haram as the bloodiest militant against the innocent citizens that continually wreaked havoc on the people of the North Eastern Nigeria. The scholar further posited that the sect emerged in the year 1995 under the auspices of Shabaab group. Mallam Lawal was the leader. When Lawal later proceeded for further study, Muhammad Yusuf emerged the leader of the group which opened the group to political influence and popularity in the North-Eastern Nigeria. The crisis that started in Bornu later spread to Kano, Yobe and Bauchi States.

Adoba, (2016) emphasized that

“Northern Nigeria has been a hotbed of religious uprising, most often between the dominant Muslims and minority Christians in the region. Islam has become heterogeneous with the springing up of many Islamic sects. These sects are opposed to the local Nigerian Islamic teachings of the Sufi brotherhood and are gradually alienating themselves from the main Islamic body.”

The Maitatsine uprising of the 1980s was a good example of the emerging trend of domestic terrorism in Nigeria. However, the emergence of Boko Haram and their operation represent a departure from the religious uprising in northern Nigeria, as observed in the dimension of violence carried out by the sect that has never been witnessed before in the country. These activities have resulted in the death of scores of people and damage to properties. Adoba, (2016) attributed the causes of this spate of violence to economic imbalance, psychology, political differences, and grievances among certain groups of people in the country.

2.0.2 Insurgency

According to U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide (2016) Insurgency is the organized use of subversion and violence to seize, nullify, or challenge political control of a region. It is primarily a political struggle, in which both sides use armed force to create space for their political, economic and influence activities to be effective. Insurgency is not always conducted by a single group with a centralized, military-style command structure, but may involve a complex matrix of different actors with various aims, loosely connected in dynamic and non-hierarchical networks. To be successful, insurgencies require charismatic leadership, supporters, recruits, supplies, safe havens, and funding (often from illicit activities).

It is also observed that insurgency may involve other actors with different interests, a single national group, as seen in the case of Boko Haram, ISIS, and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, does not always conduct it; they are loosely connected in dynamic and non-hierarchical networks. The insurgencies need a charismatic leadership, supporters, and funding (mostly from illegal activities) in order to operate successfully. Depending on the situation, insurgent group may receive local or foreign support from state or non-state actors based on their interests.

According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary normally, insurgent groups such as Boko Haram, Al-Qaeda, and similar networks fall into the category of “irregular warfare,” because they lack the organization of a revolution, even though it has the same aims. Insurgents usually take advantage of remote areas, where they build momentum and gain local support in order to operate effectively. An insurgency may take the form of ethnic or religious identity related to political or economic struggle. Insurgents tend to use guerrilla tactics such as bombing, ambushing, kidnapping, killings, and assassination in order to create fear or gain recognition. For instance the Boko Haram Insurgency is an extremist Islamic sect in northeast Nigeria that has created havoc across the country and neighboring countries such as Cameroun, Chad and Niger. Its violent attack on government offices, the United Nations, civilians, and churches threaten the sovereignty of the country (Walker, 2012).

According to Walker, (2012) an insurgency is born when a government of the day fails to address social or regional polarization, sectarianism, endemic corruption, crime, various forms of radicalism, or rising expectations of the society. It was in the line that the International Crisis Group, (2016) argued that the insurgencies in Northern Nigeria follow similar patterns: they are cyclical, and produced by identical religious, economic and political factors. As mentioned earlier, political and military elites became so absorbed in the struggle for power that they neglected everything else, including development. The elites’ lust for power also coincided with a sudden oil boom, which only benefited them but not the citizens. Transforming Nigeria into an oil nation in the 1970s led to the destruction of the agriculture and transportation sectors. This produced economic ills such as high prices, retrenchment and unemployment in Northern Nigeria and particularly in Kano. Maitatsine was able to manipulate the grievances and attracted the jobless and homeless youth from the countryside, which were involved in petty jobs such as barbering, cobbling, cap knitting and petty trade.

Similarly, Yusuf also tapped into widespread grievances such as declining standards of living, corruption, unemployment, military dictatorship, police brutality, police exploitation. The group attracted poor peasants, farmers, school dropouts and university graduates who could not find employment, and blamed the government for the inefficiency in the distribution of resources. Yusuf could garner massive support beyond Maiduguri, not only in Borno State but across Northern Nigeria, and even in the neighboring countries of Niger, Chad and Cameroon (Agbiboa, 2017).

According to a report by Mercy Corps (2016), many of the youth who joined Boko Haram reported scarce employment opportunities. In addition, business ownership is an important part of identity in Nigeria, for many youth, successful business ownership is a way of advancing in society. Half of the former recruits interviewed by Mercy Corps ran small enterprises or micro-businesses. These entrepreneurs ranged from small traders to bigger inter-city traders, from shop owners to tailors to salon owners to butchers.

In the report, the individuals described having few options without powerful “godfathers” to support them with capital for their businesses or small cash transfers to buy new equipment or goods (Congress Committee of Counter Terrorism, 2011). Boko Haram was filling this void by providing financial services to these individuals. Some of the youth interviewed by Mercy Corps explained that they accepted loans prior to joining the Boko Haram group. If these individuals were unable to repay their loans, they faced death threats. The way to get out of this situation was for them to join Boko Haram. Furthermore, some of the former recruits interviewed had regular employment and wanted to expand a business on the side. This report demonstrates that it is not only the abjectly poor or unemployed who were joining Boko Haram. Some of these young men were seeking to improve their economic condition and status.

2.0.3 Criminal Topography

Scholars and social analysts have defined crime from different perspectives. As such, a general definition of the concept has eluded the academia for years this is because what constitutes crime varies from culture to culture, and from time to time. Criminals have been various things to different people throughout time ranging from heroes to villains, fools, revolutionaries, deviants or scumbags. For instance, those that subscribe to legalist perspective see crime as a category created by law (Lindsay, 2008). Therefore, crime is defined as behavior that violates the criminal code. However, a more comprehensive definition closely associated with Sutherland's interests in white collar crime (1949) sees crime as a social harm. According to Martin, (2003) in Ade, (2010) crime or offence (or criminal offence) is an act harmful not only to some individual or individuals but also to a community, society or the state "a public wrong". It refers to actions that are forbidden by law; offence against the state, conducts such as committing murder, stealing property, resisting arrest, driving while under the influence of alcohol and possessing or selling illegal drugs and seen as an act that violates a political or

moral rule; an act of a single individual acting from personal motive, or maybe organized activity whereby gangs of mobsters seek to enrich themselves at the expense of the general public, and resort to violence and murder in order to achieve their goals Ade, (2010).

Topography on the other hand refers to a detailed description of a particular place, city, county, region, or tract of land. According Merriam-Webster Dictionary topography is a detailed map of the surface features of land that includes the mountains, hills, creeks, and other bumps and lumps on a particular hunk of earth. This handy word is a Greek-rooted combo of topos meaning "place" and graphein "to write."

However, both the 'topography of crime' and the 'geography of crime' inform the field of environmental criminology, while the former studies the localized and fine features of landscape and cityscape as these influence crimes and its prevention. The latter examines the broader spatial swath in order to describe and make sense of crime. Both must be mastered for environmental criminology to gain ground as a science and to become a tool to prevent crime. From time immemorial crime and criminality are significant aspects of daily life and as such have been studied closely by human geographers who have examined the interactions between crime, space and society. The occurrence of crime shows strong spatial variations. This perhaps unsurprisingly, explains why geographers were initially concerned with mapping and explaining patterns of crime (Fyfe 2000), largely in urban centres of the West. The distribution of crime has been explained with reference to theories of human ecology, the built environment, housing markets and forms of urban management, including policing.

3.0 The Precipitatory Criminal Topography of Sambisa Geosphere

Geographically Bodumin, (2017) posited that the Sambisa forest is located at the Northeastern tip of the west Sudanian Savanna and the southern boundary of the Sahel Acacia Savanna about 60 km. south east of Maiduguri the capital of the state of Borno (Bodumin, 2017) It occupies parts of the states of Borno, Yobe, Gombe, Bauchi along the corridor Darazo, Jigawa, and some parts of Kano state farther north. It is administered by the Local government areas of Nigeria of Askira/Uba in the south, by Dambo in the southwest, and by Konduga and Jere in the west.(Wikipedia, retrieved 20 April 2019).

The name of the forest comes from the village of Sambisa which is on the border with Gwoza in the East. The Gwoza hills in the East have peaks of 1,300 meters above sea level and form

part of the Mandara Mountains range along the Cameroon-Nigeria border. The forest is drained by seasonal streams into the Yedseram and the Ngadda Rivers (Mbaya and Malgwi, 2010).

The climate is hot, dry and wet with minimum temperatures of about 21.5 °C between December and February, a maximum of about 48 °C in May and average temperatures of about 28-29 °C. The dry season is from November to May and the wet season is between May and September/October with annual rainfall of about 190 mm.

The Sambisa forest is one of the few forests in North Eastern Nigeria where sparse vegetation is the norm. Most of the vegetation is typical of the Sudanian Savanna although, because of human activity, some parts have become more like the Sahel savanna. The forest consists of a mixture of open woodland and sections of very dense vegetation of short trees about two metres high and thorny bushes, with a height of 1/2-1 metre, which is difficult to penetrate (Bodunrin, 2014). Major trees and bushes in the forest include tallow, rubber, wild black plum, date palm, birch, monkey bread, bush willow tamarind and terminalia.

Earlier the colonial government had marked the forest out as a game reserve. However today, Sambisa has become one of the strongest bases of the Boko Haram insurgents who run back into its dark recesses anytime they have finished their slaughter of harmless citizens. During the colonial era, the Sambisa game reserve covered an area of 2,258 km² (872 sq mi) in the eastern part of the forest. Later reports put the size of the game reserve at 518 square kilometers, or 686 square kilometers although some official documents included the Marguba Forest Reserve in the Sambisa Game Reserve (Thisdaylive.com 10th May 2014).

From 1970, the reserve was used for safaris. It had a large population of leopards, lions, elephants, hyenas, that tourists could observe from cabins or safari lodges. In 1991, the government of the state of Borno incorporated this reserve into the national park of the Chad Basin. However, the abandonment of its management, following the Sambisa takeover by Boko Haram insurgents in February 2013, led to the gradual disappearance of animals, lodges collapsed or was destroyed, vegetation invaded roads, and rivers dried up.



Figure 1: Map of Nigeria showing Sambisa Forest

Source: *Google Earth 2019*

The Sambisa forest, especially the mountainous region of Gwoza near the Cameroon border, is used as shelter by the jihadist Boko Haram group and is believed to be where they keep their hostages and victims especially the kidnapped Chibok girls in April 2014.

It is no longer debatable that countries, where insurgents are prevalent used forested regions to hide from government troops. In Sierra Leone, for example, forests enabled the Revolutionary United Front to regroup, recruit, and indoctrinate child soldiers (USAID, 2005). In the same vein CIFOR (2003), noted that countries experiencing violent conflict their forests account for about 40 percent of the world's tropical forests and over half of all tropical forests outside Brazil cited in (Aju and Aju, 2018).

It was on this basis that Aju and Aju, (2018) opined that areas within countries that are most likely to experience armed conflicts tend to be those with characteristics that provide the means or motives for war. Such areas include secluded places where insurgents can hide and exploit valuable natural resources to finance military activities. In addition, such areas also tend to be remote and inaccessible and are capable of providing refuge, funds and food for combatants (FAO, 2005). It is not surprising therefore that several research findings dealing

with conflicts show that many violent conflicts often occur in forested regions particularly in poor countries. Apart from being often located in secluded, remote and inaccessible areas, forests often have valuable timber, petroleum, land, ivory, diamonds, gold and other minerals, the demand for which can lead to competition and hence conflicts.

It was thus not surprising that Boko Haram found a safe haven in Sambisa forest an ideal hiding place to carry out their illicit activities successfully.

Another very important driving factor linking forests and insurgency and criminal tendencies is the tendency of central governments to view forested regions as peripheral places containing few people and being of little political importance or economic value. More often than not, the only interest governments have on such regions is to extract timber or minerals. As a result, forested regions have traditionally been poorly integrated into national political processes and only receive few public services especially in Third World countries nay Nigeria. Many violent outbreaks of insurgencies in such regions are therefore the result of such long-standing government neglect or a weak and ineffective presence of central authorities. This is because, such situations leave room for political activists or insurgents and other criminal elements to fill the void.

As a homegrown insurgence movement, that comprises members from the same ethnic and geographical background, Yusuf Mohamed the Boko Haram leader and founder capitalize on this lapses and failure of government to gain followers and sympathy of his people.

He took advantage of the vacuum created by the weak system of government to promote a religious political movement in the northern region of Nigeria. This is because most insurgent activities are common within a marginalized society where the majority of the people are aggrieved, and government support is low. Insurgent groups capitalized on these issues to provoke a popular movement against the government and its institutions. In such conditions, it becomes unavoidable for groups not to emerge and challenge government authority as witnessed in the case of Boko Haram and other militant groups around the world.

Boko Haram members are mostly from the Kanuri and Hausa tribes, and located within the northeast region of Nigeria. However, other elements within the Lake Chad region, that later joined the movement, are members from neighboring countries (Niger, Chad, and Cameroon Republic). The group has frequently demonstrated knowledge of the terrain in which they operate. They study security forces movement, relocate their bases at will, and conceal most of

their activities from security forces. For example, their relocation from its base from Maiduguri to Kanema, a remote village far from government presence, was a good example of knowledge of the terrain in which they operate. According to Diyoke, (2016) part of the challenge is just how vast Sambisa is, covering parts of four Nigerian states. It's been called an ideal place for Boko Haram to hide because it's large, sparsely populated and has lots of tree cover that hampers aerial surveillance. It also has few roads and a rocky, hilly terrain, making access by land difficult to nearly impossible.

An example that easily comes to mind was the abduction of over two hundred schoolgirls, in 2014, from a community called Chibok in Borno state by Boko Haram members. Five years later, the abducted girls have not been traced or rescued by the government. Because of the knowledge of the terrain and Sambisa topography, Boko Haram has been able to deny security forces the ability to locate or rescue the Chibok girls. Additionally, Boko Haram has been able to dominate its areas of operation, establish bases, and shift within Niger, Nigeria, Chad, and the Republic of Cameroon unopposed. The group has employed the services of local inhabitants, who also provide support and information to the group, further enhancing their knowledge of terrain.

According to Professor Umar Maryah of University of Maiduguri, the forest covers an area stretching approximately 60,000 square kilometres across the north east from Borno, Yobe, Gombe, Bauchi states along the Darazo corridor, Jigawa and right up to some parts of Kano State in the far north. It harbours a sizable population of wildlife, typical of savannah habitats worldwide and a conducive environment for animals such as monkeys, antelopes, lions, elephants, as well as bird species such as ostrich, bustard and a lot of those migrating species. There is no Sambisa without the sustaining game reserve for hunters and farmers. This means that a lot of animals in the Sambisa reserve contribute to making the land very fertile for farmers in the surrounding villages to make big harvests from the land. The forest reserve has been handed to the federal Government through the National Park (theguardian.com April 2014).

Again lots locals have rightly associate Sambisa forest with wicked and poisonous reptiles such as loud hissing rattle snakes and giant crustaceans crawling underneath the forest vegetation which can be as high as two metres in some sections. In addition, it is not the typical forest one sees along some southern states which could be as high as 100m, creating a primary, secondary

and tertiary scenario. It is a single dimensional forest which is visible driving through the main road that connects Maiduguri, Konduga and Barma. Actually it also graduates from trees as low as half a metre to the extremely thick areas where human skins cannot penetrate without being hurt by thorns if you do not have a cutlass or something to ward them off. That is the nature of the forest which is being manipulated and controlled by Boko Haram who has become masters of the savannah (theguardian.com, April 2014).

As a corollary, guerrillas deny all vital information of themselves to the enemy, who is enveloped in an impenetrable fog. They take advantage of knowledge of terrain to gain initiative and operate on the ground of their own choosing. They attack weakness and withdraw when conditions are not promising. Guerrillas are expert at running away from major confrontation because their aim is to exhaust security forces and prolong the struggle (Falode, 2016). Unlike government troops, guerrillas effectively engage locals and recruits from inhabitant of their geographical location (community) with knowledge of the terrain and can easily spot any unusual movement in their controlled (Mao Tse-tung, 1978). Thus the poor knowledge of the Nigeria military personals about the Sambisa forest terrain in most continue to hinder their successful fight against Boko Haram terrorists in Northeastern Nigeria.

4.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

The activities of the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria have presented a series of security challenges to the government and people of Nigeria, particularly the northeast region where the group fully operates. Furthermore, it has not only negatively affected the people, but have slowed down commercial activities and development in the region.

The Nigerian government efforts to combat the group and restore law and order in the region have proven counterproductive for almost a decade owing to several reasons such as the topography of Sambisa geosphere. Consequently, it is essential for the government to take every step necessary to defeat and deter the growing threat of the Boko Haram insurgency in order to restore peace and the livelihood of the people in the region.

Again it has been established that the Boko Haram insurgency is a politically motivated movement with religious views. The group took advantage of government weaknesses to promote resentments among the poor population to rally for popular support for the cause of Sharia Islamic state, which they believed would address the ills of society and bad governance.

Therefore, the Nigeria government and her neighbors should address the social-economic problems of the country by implementing policies and programs to address the peoples' suffering. Through infrastructural development, investment in human capital, and trade promotion, this will in turn reduce the poverty rate in the country and as well as unemployment.

In addition, as some previous insurgents have shown in the past in other parts of the world, it is difficult to defeat through only conventional military means a group using guerrilla warfare methods. The government too has an essential role to play in providing social services, proper education, employment to the youth, and economic development in general in the region in order not only to convince people especially the locals not to support Boko Haram anymore, but also to prevent a similar insurgency from reappearing again.



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