

Boko Haram and female suicide bombers

An 'Islamic' terrorist organisation and gender

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In this essay, I discuss the nascence and growth of the terrorist group Boko Haram (BH) – meaning 'Western education is forbidden' – in Nigeria and what we possibly could imagine concerning the gender relations within the group. I deduce such from the news in the media (which I follow on a daily basis), from gender relations as they exist in the area where I worked for 30 years and on which I focussed in many of my articles, but also through regular phone calls. At its foundation, the group is opposed to western education, which is related to and a remnant of the former colonial school system. The same opposition exists in north Cameroon but here it gave rise to the foundation of many private Islamic schools that came with the 1990s Islamic fundamentalist movements. These schools are partly created to make schooling of women more accessible (Van Santen, 2014a; 2014b).

I will take Papa – a Muslim man I have known since he was four years of age and who is now in his thirties – and his family as a point of departure. He was born in the region where the terror of Boko Haram – related to Daech – has a heavy impact. He calls me regularly. Until recently, he, the eldest son of a family of six children, still lived in the compound of his mother where we mourned his father's death in 2005. Three years ago, he found a job in Cameroon's capital Yaoundé, 1500 kilometres south from his birth town Mokolo.

Papa is Fulani, Fulbe. They brought Islam to Cameroon's northern regions in the 18th century and for centuries they coexisted with other ethnic groups having various religious affiliations – Christians but also 'Pagan' religions. Converted (Islamised) people of other ethnic backgrounds adopted a Fulbe marriage and bride wealth system, economic occupations, and even their language changed (Van Santen, 1993). Conversion of groups

further north – Kanuri, Kotoko Arab-Choa – around Lake Chad came from Arab influences.

BH not only wreaks terror in Nigeria, but also regularly attacks villages on the Cameroonian side of the border, killing people at random.¹ Thus villages around the border have been abandoned and many Nigerian citizens have fled to Cameroon's larger villages and cities. Unfortunately, these towns, like Mora, Kolofata,² Maroua, Makary, Bodo, and so on,³ are similarly subjected to attacks.

In Zamay, 16 kilometres from Mokolo, there is a refugee camp of about 30,000; in Maroua, one with 80,000 refugees.⁴ Recently, also refugee camps have been attacked.

Terrorism

Terrorist organisations are characterised by anonymity and violation of 'established norms' (Laqueur, 1978, pp. 8, 125), they are not democratic, and they violate persons and matters in order to obtain their aims (Schwind, 1978, p. 25). Though we can make a distinction between political and criminal terror, those two are mostly related (Tromp, 1978, p. 30). Women partake in most terrorist organisations: within the terrorist cells' operating in France, at least 40 percent of the operating members are women.⁵ Research on the women's participation in the terrorist group RAF taught me that politicians blame women's emancipation for their involvement and that also psychologists and other academics link it to women's emancipation and called female participants even 'phallic women' (Van Santen, 1982, p. 10).

It is not unimportant to come up with a definition of terrorism as diverse Islamic groups – for example, the Kurds – are called terrorists by some governments while they are regarded as legislative actors to oppose 'terrorist' dictators or 'real terrorist groups' by others.⁶ We can consider BH as a terrorist organisation as they not only consistently violate existing norms, but also do so in a horrid way, sowing fear and chaos in the entire region. The majority of the media in 'the West' clearly feel that one could just refer to 'Islam as an ideology' to know their aims and motives, forgetting that Islam is a religion and not an ideology and that the cultural background of the various Islamic societies is far more important for the values of a community and its gender relations than religion.

According to Mang (2013) and many other authors,⁷ also in Nigeria many Christians consider Islam to be a homogenous religion and, for



Papa

long, BH and its activities stood for 'Islam and its policies, and its ways to deal with society'. However, in Cameroon, for a long time the same cultural area as North Nigeria, the situation has been different since the colonial period and independence: Islam and Christianity rather harmonised and most people were aware that Islam, like Christianity, has 'various ways', 'many roads', acknowledges the same prophets, and are based on the same source (Van Santen, 1993). So, to understand BH's motives, we cannot just call attention to Islamic rules or Sharia: Papa is a gentle humorous man, and a pious Muslim, as was his father, as was his grandfather, a well-known Marabout (religious teacher), as is his mother, a well-known Marabout too, as are his brothers and sisters and many people in his surroundings. So what is the relationship between these various Muslim populations? Where and why did it go astray in the case of the BH members?

Gender and masculinity in crisis

In most societies, there is a hegemonic ideal of masculinity or femininity. Due to changes in social and economic circumstances of a society, gender roles may get another meaning. In the past in Muslim Fulbe society, people married at an early age, boys at seventeen and girls at fourteen or fifteen. The couple remained within the compound of the father and divorce was rather easy. As Papa's (maternal) grandfather explained to me once:

If your sons live in your compound with their wife/wives, you can keep an eye on them; if they are easy tempered, you can keep them from treating their wife/wives badly. You can interfere, and in due time, as time goes by, they will learn how to behave in a respectful way towards women.

He was the head, the father of the house, the *Baaba Saare* of a large extended household. What he tells us is also about teaching the young men about the content of gender roles: that one needs to be gentle and control one's anger in spite of one's character. At a young age, Papa's grandfather had travelled to Nigeria to be educated, so did many young men of his generation. Now an elderly man, he was responsible for the religious education of his family and he taught his children, grandchildren and many other kids the Qur'an and how to read and write. His son, Papa's maternal uncle, took care of the economic occupations: agriculture and the cattle.

In Fulbe society, women were and are entitled to their own economic activities; in nomad societies, they travel far to sell milk, butter, and other items (Van Santen, 2014c, p. 195) and they continue their own activities also in settled contexts. Being able to read and write was and is an important matter in Fulbe society for women as well as for men. Both had access to education.

Changes in the content of gender roles may subsequently lead to what anthropologists have called a 'crisis in masculinity' (Van Santen & Willemse, 1999; Van Santen, 2010a). Until now, Papa was never able to marry. Initially, he went to school much longer (pastoralists hardly attended French schools), and, secondly, he just did not have the means, as getting married is a costly event. The young men of today are no longer just the sons of the *Baaba Saare*: they are young Muslim men with many other identities: they are or have been students, scholars, lovers, urban inhabitants, et cetera. Willemse and I (1999) have argued that the disappearance of 'traditional' or existing structures concerning the construction of masculinity may lead to violent behaviour.

Islamic (fundamentalist) activities and women's education

Living in desperate situations, like many youngsters do when they no longer can depend on the former values of their society, nor have jobs in the newly created society, or try to migrate to elsewhere in search for a (economically) 'better' existence, can be only one step away from using an Islamic identity to become active members of one of the many violent groups that operate in the Sahara region. In much of the literature I read on BH, this reasoning regularly comes to the fore.⁸

Papa considered BH as a group without a logic or ideology, but the start of the movement did not come out of the blue. In our NWO programme

'Islam in Africa', we spoke of 'moving frontiers',⁹ by which we meant the change in Islamic identities from – to put it bluntly – Islam as a 'habitus'¹⁰ towards an Islamic identity that is consciously given content, also politically, in new social surroundings. In that, also the geographical borders and the geographic territories (make a) move. The activities of the so-called Daech in various parts of the world are a prominent example of this, but they are nothing new (Loimeier, 2013). Moving Islamic frontiers are part of an African history in which conquering and withdrawing empires and kingdoms play their part, as do many Islamic revival movements. The latter often address wrongdoing and corrupt political systems in attempts to overthrow the elite. All this is in no way different from the history of European or any other society. For a long time in the literature on the process of Islamisation or revival movements, gender differences were absolutely taken for granted, though men's and women's reasons to Islamise or join and take part in Islamist political groups may be completely different (Van Santen, 1993; 2002; 2016).

The region where Papa grew up and the north of Nigeria where BH is active, was – until the arrivals of the colonials – the same cultural area. Islam had come with political subjugation by Islamic (Fulbe) kingdoms that settled in this area. It was divided after the British and French colonisers had invaded the areas. In the past, the Islamic faith could not be detached from the political situation: an imam could even appoint a political leader. But also in the new political constellation in Islamic regions in Cameroon, 'traditional' political and religious leaders are still quite close. (Van Santen, 2010b).

Following the Islamic faith, accepting Islam as a religion, being a Muslim, deepening one's knowledge of the faith, becoming literate by studying the Arab language and the Qur'an, are very much part of an identity construction among the Fulbe. As in many other parts of the world, the line between indigenous customs and Islam is often ambiguous, but the Fulbe interpretation of Islam has always been regarded as rather orthodox. In many regions in Cameroon and Nigeria, being Fulbe was tantamount to 'being a good Muslim'. As such, one of the distinctive characteristics is the use of Fulfulde, their language, as the primary medium of religious instruction (Tukur Saad & Abba, 1994). However, it used to be written in the Arab script.

Acquisition of Islamic learning is itinerant. The most important activity of mainstream Islamic scholars is the teaching and learning of the Arabic language, *fiqh*, basic Islamic theology, jurisprudence, and poetry, *mbooku*, which is of special great importance and has a written as well as an oral

tradition. In the Fodio family – Uthman dan Fodio was the founder of the Islamic Sokoto Empire in the 19th century – the intellectualism of five generations of women can be traced (Mack & Boyd, 2000; Boyd & Shagarai, 1986).

For long, education meant education in the Arab language. French schools were established in the 1920s in Maroua, and only in 1958 in Mokolo (Van Santen, 1993). The setting up of French schools – mostly by missionaries – meant that a Christian alternative became available for the non-Muslim populations who never had the habit of reading and writing. With that, the written French of the coloniser became dominant. For the Islamic population, refusing a secular French education is seen in retrospect as an act of resistance against the colonisers and for a long time both boys and for girls were dissuaded from it. As a result of this, southern national – often Christian – officials claim (also in government documents) that, in the north, analphabetism is still quite prevalent. That they are talking about people who were already literate when they themselves were still walking around in goatskins seems to escape them.

In the north, non-Islamic ethnic groups were keen on attending these missionary schools, thus they got a head start in ‘secular’ (read: western) education: in this way, they could get rid of their inferior status as ‘unbelievers’ – an equivalent for ‘uneducated’ or ‘analphabetic’ people. Due to the laic nature – division of religion and public life – as laid down in the constitution of the Cameroonian state (a heritage from the former colonial French government), religious symbols are forbidden in public spaces and everyone has to enter the classroom bareheaded, like in France (Van Santen, 2014a; 2014b). I made a film of Maimouna, Papa’s sister, in which there is the impressive image of her taking off her headscarf just before she enters the classroom.¹¹ However, unlike in Nigeria, where, in several states, Sharia law has been introduced (Mohammed, 2013; Harnischfeger, 2013), in Cameroon, the religious leaders view ‘*laïcité*’ as ‘freedom of religion and expression’, with which they feel comfortable.

Though Islamic revival movements have always been part of West African Islam, starting from the 1990s onwards, Islam in North Cameroon has been receiving new impulses from Islamic ‘fundamentalist’ movements calling for a purification of Islam. This means that many people, women as well as men, demand to be instructed about the ‘true’ path of Islam and itinerant Islamic ‘white’ preachers travel around, a phenomenon covered by the Arabic term *daa’wa*. In their homes, people listen to cassettes with sermons of various Islamic teachers, and discuss them. In these dialogues, women and men participate equally. A recent development is searching for



Maimouna's graduation

Internet sites, but in the north this is still a new phenomenon due to poor access to the net.

Papa's grandfather and many other then young men who went, in their time, to Nigeria in search for knowledge, had adopted a Sufi way of life as the Quadriyya and Tidjaniya brotherhoods have been active in North Nigeria for centuries. Upon return, these educated men instructed local people. As a consequence, their way of praying became accepted by many people without them realising its Sufi character. With the recent waves, there is more freedom for Sufism, which for political reasons had long been forbidden in Cameroon. Simultaneously many habits related to Sufism are 'attacked' by fundamentalist groups, as, for example, the use of prayer beads, which fundamentalists consider a 'heathen' item (Van Santen, 2012). However, the highest imams and *ustas* (religious teachers), as part of the *Ulamaa*, explained to me that they were keeping an eye on people whom they considered to be too 'extremist'. They had in mind people who preached *Salafi* Islam, regardless of the fact that they themselves received their education in the heartland of *Salafism*, Saudi Arabia, and did not speak French. Thus, as a religious teacher exclaimed: 'these days there are many roads'.

The Muslim elite population often expressed their desire to have a 'non-western alternative' for the present-day 'western based development'.¹² As a good friend, and director of an Islamic private school, expressed it: '... Islam does not refuse education, but colonial and southern schools have refused Islam.'¹³ The elite realised that this 'secular' education could be of use after all. In addition, as the above-mentioned director added, '*le développement passé par les femmes*', meaning that if women did not partake in development and education it was useless. Thus, with the recent Islamic fundamentalist waves came the installation of private Islamic (primary as

well as secondary) schools, mostly built using money from Saudi Arabian Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), not only in the larger cities such as Maroua and Garoua and elsewhere (also in the south), but also in small villages. More girls than boys attend these private Islamic schools as, in the state subsidised secular schools, they need to take off their headscarves. The curriculum in these schools is the same as in ordinary public schools, but they are also taught Arabic.¹⁴ Thus, education is not a neutral endeavour but was and is politically tense: though local politicians are present for the inauguration of 'Islamic schools' (registered by the Ministry of Education), these schools subtly challenge the existing political power balance.

But, if education is so important in this cultural area that for long included Nigeria, why is this Nigerian terrorist group called 'education forbidden', and why have schools and girls attending these schools been an important target in such a violent way?

Boko Haram

Boko Haram started with a tiny group of mostly young people in their early twenties – in the mid-90s – men as well as women from Maiduguri, who called themselves the 'Nigerian Taleban'. Taleban, an original Arab word, is used to indicate 'pupils' of Islamic 'traditional' schools. There were many comparable groups with dissimilar names that equally confronted politicians, the religious elite, and others and opposed the way Sharia had been introduced (Aghedo & Oarhe, 2012). Women were active in it too, but, according to 'hearsay', carried out 'female tasks', the domestic chores. Initially, the group mostly consisted of Kanuri people, the main inhabitants of this part of Nigeria¹⁵; the ethnic composition of the members of the group afterwards is a point of discussion.¹⁶

The Nigerian government decimated the groups, but those remaining joined Mohammed Yusuf, a scholar from Maiduguri, who was allowed to return from exile in Saudi Arabia after having sworn to the Borno state deputy governor during a 2005 pilgrimage to Mecca that he would never espouse to a violent 'jihad' ideology.¹⁷ He continued to preach.

The leader of a remaining (former) Islamist group, the Nigerian Mohammed Ali was radicalised by *jihadi* literature in Saudi Arabia, and was accused of having fought alongside the *Mujahedeen* in Afghanistan.¹⁸ He is supposed to have been responsible for initiating Mohammed Yusuf into a militant *jihadi* ideology and worldview (Mohammed, 2013, p. 13).

The main message of the sect is the rejection of secularism, democracy,

Western education, Westernisation, and the separation of politics and the state. Further, the rejection of authority, of parents as well as of corrupt political and religious leaders, equally the rejection of cultural diversity. For many members, the Nigerian State is 'a cesspit of social vices' (Onuoha, 2013, p. 160).

Further, Yusuf was categorical that *'boko'*, western education, was abhorrent and could lead to unbelief. These were just *haram*, forbidden. Many analogous aspects came to the fore in the movements we described for North Cameroon providing the basis for the foundation of Islamic schools. However, it is mainly colonial or missionary education that is rejected, as also in Nigeria, since the early twentieth century, organisations such as the Ahmadiyya Brotherhood and Young (and later) Ansar-ud Deen sought to provide quality (Western) education free of Christian indoctrination while rejecting *Salafism* (Mohammed, 2013, p. 17).

Until 2009, the group was characterised by intensive criticism of the existing secular system with its corruption and poor governance (Governor Ali Modu Sheriff 2003–2011) of the Borno and other states as well as the conspicuous consumption and opulence of the Western-educated elites in the midst of poverty¹⁹: thus, they criticised an existing political structure, no different from many of the revival movements in history.

The rejection of secularism is mostly based on a fatwa in the 14th century by a Damascene scholar – Ahmad Ibn Taymiyyah (1268-1328) – who urged Muslims to rise against the Mongols. His basic message was that it is the duty of Muslims to revolt against and change apostate rulers and governments in order to help re-establish a proper Islamic state. This fatwa is often used to justify suicide bombings (Mohammed, 2013, p. 14). Further, the rejection of Western democracy is enhanced by the Saudi Arabian establishment's aversion to democracy as a potential threat to the monarchy.

In his preaching, Yusuf constantly reminded his followers, whom he addressed as 'brothers' (not sisters), that the road would be rough and tough. In 2008, BH members got into a bitter dispute with Izala groups (another purist Islamist group²⁰) with whom they used to share the same mosque. The now leader Abubakar Shekau was even imprisoned. In order to avoid criticism from the group, a Tidjaniya (so a Sufi) imam conceded to some of their demands by stating that 'women should not work on farms and that the whole body should be covered' (Harnischfeger, 2013). It reminded me of an exclamation of one of Papa's uncles, another religious teacher, concerning Islamic dressing: 'we do not want those black crows in our street. Our women have always been properly dressed. Where in the

Quran should I read that their outfits should be black?' In other words, some leaders give in to an expressed need of 'controlling' women, which is not necessarily founded on a Qur'anic reading, while others think it is ridiculous.

Many authors, as well as some journalists, agree that the Nigerian security police mismanaged the crisis from the outset, by shooting and wounding members who went to bury co-members who had died in a road accident in June 2009; by harassing members who went out for *daa'wa* (preaching); and the massive onslaught against members of the sect and the capture and thereafter brutal murder of its leader in July 2009 (Last, 2009; Onuoha, 2013). They made things worse with 'their extra-judicial killings' (Oio, 2010; Davis, 2012). In addition, rape of married women and young girls in July 2011 by security services drove the movement even more to the extreme. After the open confrontation in July 2009 with the military, the group went underground in order to rebuild and resurface. In 2010, the former second man in charge of the group, Abubakar Shekau, emerged as the leader. Some sources claim that he lacked both a proper religious as well as a secular education.²¹

In January 2012, a new military strategy was to amass troops in urban areas, which had as a side effect that violence was exported to and escalated in the rural areas, where BH operates and terrorises herders and peasants, making use of traditional conflicts between Fulbe cattle-keepers and agriculturalists from other ethnic groups.²² Local government officials abandoned their posts and took refuge in state capitals. Since then, BH is unpredictable. Along the years, aggression against those who do not agree with the ideology of the group and/or who opt out, *Kharijites*, became stronger and they have come to be called unbelievers and sinners. It seems to legitimise the killing of Muslims as well as Christians, who are both, due to their worldview, regarded as enemies. In October 2010, following a prison breakout at Bauchi (Abimbola, 2011), the group became known for its targeted assassinations (often schools and churches but also mosques), drive-by shootings, and suicide bombings. Kidnapping and hostage taking, before rejected as a method, has become accepted. Extensively on the news was the French family whose members – three adults and four children – were kidnapped in North Cameroon as well as the Catholic priest Vandenbeusch who worked in Mokolo.²³

I asked a friend, Christian and active as a nurse in the local hospital, if joining the group would have to do with the fact that youngsters (non-Muslims more than Muslims, Van Santen, 2001) are often abandoned or no longer have a place in society, but she claimed she heard stories that



Islamic school

youngsters are often forced to join the group. In May 2015, I spoke to Baaba Rey, Papa's younger brother: for years, he trafficked petrol illegally across the border with Nigeria. During one of his journeys in 2014, with four other people trafficking like him, he ran into them, 'those so much feared'. They had come to a village, and set fire to houses and to shops. They killed three of his fellow-traffickers. They also killed the Christian people in the village. Other people tried to defend themselves. The BH members started talking to him, they spoke Hausa and some English, no Fulfulde, his language:

They asked me if I could drive them with a car to the Cameroonian border. I said I did not know how to drive, and that I did not know where the border was. They told me that they would give me a weapon, "you can become one of us". I said: "I know the Islamic faith, I am a Muslim, it is not for the interest to know Allah if I would join you. And besides: I can't kill people like that, people who are innocent". They replied: "but these are only those Christians. If you come with us you can Islamise them". I told them "I am not going to enter your group, I can't do that". They started shooting again, left and right; they started to burn down more houses. Quickly with the only colleague who was left I took for the road with my motorcycle and escaped from them, thanking Allah. After that I have not returned to carry out my business. We mentioned the 'incident' to the authorities and they have put up signs on the road saying: "this road is blocked, dangerous".

International anger rose to a high point after the kidnapping of 219 school-girls. Until now these girls have not been found. In 2015, BH proclaimed

that they are part of the caliphate IS²⁴, using the same tactics in order to build 'A World Islamic State'.

Since 2014, BH members regularly crossed the border with Cameroon, right up till Chad and Niger. The invaders killed men while often taking women and girls along. Neighbouring countries criticised former Nigerian's president Jonathan Goodluck's sloppy way of dealing with terrorism, and resolved to act themselves. In March 2015, presidential elections in Nigeria took place. The Muslim Muhammadu Buhari, dictator in the 80s, won the elections and the Christian president accepted his defeat. In North Cameroon, the population, Christians as well as Muslims, were convinced things would get better. Papa's mother told me after the elections: *'Daama jonta kam, daama'*, meaning 'the worse is over'. Maimouna told me that some refugees already dared to return, so much confidence did they have in the newly elected president even before he was installed.

Papa informed me, and the media confirmed this fact, that in this period the army liberated over 200 women, but the school children were not amongst them.²⁵ Simultaneously, on BH's side, women were also fighting against the army. Since the reign of the new 'chief', president Buhari, over 700 people got killed in BH attacks, and about 2,5 million people left their homesteads and fields.²⁶

Since 2014, BH captured over two thousand women and girls. It is suggested that they are abused and/or trained to fight with the men and carry out suicide attacks.²⁷ And indeed, nearly all attacks of last year in Cameroon have been carried out by girls: on the 22th of July 2015 in Maroua, two suicide attacks took place carried out by girls aged 13 years: one inside the central market, the other in a densely populated neighbourhood. Many people were killed and wounded. On Saturday the 25th of July 2015, another suicide attack took place in a bar near the 'Green Bridge'; again many victims. Maimouna told me: 'It's so horrible mama, not only all those casualties, but if I walk with my baby on my back the men stare at me suspiciously as any woman can be a suicide bomber. This suspicion, it hurts so tremendously'.

In November 2015, a suicide bomber entered the palace of a traditional chief in Kolofota and killed five people, while outside three girls blew themselves up.²⁸ In Nigeria, in December 2015, two female suicide bombers killed 30 people on the fish market in the Nigerian town Madagali; in the same month in Cameroon, in Makary, two women killed many people on a busy market with their suicide bombs.²⁹ In January 2016, we again learned about a series of suicide attacks on a market, this time in the centre of Bodo, Cameroon, where 35 people were killed while at least 65 people were

wounded. In February 2016, the refugee camps were targeted: two women exploded themselves killing many women and children among a total of 58 people killed.³⁰ A third female suicide attacker recognised her parents, brothers, and sisters among the refugees and refused to explode herself.³¹

None of the people I know or spoke to refer to the members of Boko Haram as 'people of their religion'.

Gender relations within BH's groups

Can we, dare we, say anything at all about the gender relations within the group? We have learned that men have founded the group and that in the beginning female members took part. The division of labour was such, so say the media, that they carried out the 'female tasks' but what do they mean by female tasks? In this region, men do their own laundry,³² may cook, do the shopping, all tasks we would – in Dutch society at least – easily describe as feminine. And is killing or act as a suicide bomber a female or a male task?

At the start of BH, educated women participated and, knowing women's role within Muslim society in this part of the world and despite suggestions in the literature about women's role within Islam, I assume that they not only did the laundry, but played their role in discussing or even formulating ideological viewpoints. After the initial period, the hearsays of member's involvement gets rather vague: many are supposed to have been forced and their situation and the mechanisms for their actions will most likely be similar to those of child-soldiers elsewhere in the world; this will go for women as well as men.³³ Some may initially have entered on their own account. There was a time that Papa's mother and sister expressed their worries that Sanda, Papa's youngest brother, would become an *'intégriste'*, as they call people who become obsessively religious (like *Izala* members (Niger), like *Salafists*³⁴). He even skipped school on Friday afternoons to go to the mosque. When I talked with him about all this praying in order to find out what his drive was, he explained: 'I just ask God to give me a room of my own'. At the time, he, a pupil at secondary school, was still sleeping in his mother and sisters' room. To consider such innocent worries or everyday problems of adolescents may prevent them from searching the extreme.

Girls have carried out suicide attacks³⁵, while suicide was not a common feature in African societies, so was this on their own volition or did they not even know what they were going to do? Although, in the literature

on BH, no attention is given to gender issues, we understand that groups claim that:

- women ought to be placed under supervision (Harnischfeger, 2013, p. 30);
- they should know their place (Harnischfeger, 2013, p. 38);
- control over them should be tightened;
- women should not be allowed to work on the land and should keep their body covered;
- women and children should not be killed but enslaved;
- their ideology is against the Nigerian law, which says that there should be no discrimination of women, by this implying that Islam and/or the groups discriminate women (Harnischfeger, 2013, p. 49)³⁶;
- in a video message, the leader repeated several times that girls and women should leave ‘western education’, that he will ‘marry them out’ at the age of thirteen or nine years, like they did to his mother.³⁷

These issues can only be understood in the context of this particular society: mentioning that women should be placed under supervision and that control should be tightened implies that they used to have ‘liberties’ in the eyes of the malicious leaders. That women should be enslaved ought to be regarded in the historical context of this region in which, till the arrival of the colonisers (1899), the various ‘Pagan’ populations living on the mountainous border areas of present Nigeria and Cameroon used to be raided and enslaved. These ‘pagan’ population – contrarily to the Muslims – were not ‘educated’, meaning they could write nor read Arabic. These groups also often voluntarily exchanged their children for food or other items, knowing their children would be taken care of by the Muslim family and it created special ties between themselves and these families from which they profited. Those children mostly Islamised, got educated, were entitled to a bride price upon marriage, and married Muslims: Papa’s paternal Fulbe aunt married a man who was adopted by a Muslim family at a young age (Van Santen, 1993; 2002). Women of these non –Fulbe groups labour their fields, while I never saw Muslim women till the land in rural surroundings; thus the mentioning of the restriction for women to work the land.

Until the 1960s, populations in the mountainous area still used to go naked (that is in our ‘western’ eyes: they did wear ‘*cache-sexes*’ and goat-skins), and now dress in simple coloured cotton outfits, hence the remark that women should cover themselves. We saw in the media pictures of the kidnapped school girls ‘veiled’ and hidden in grey and black outfits that

completely covered them³⁸, but Muslim Cameroonian women never wore such garments (Van Santen, 2013) and nowhere in the Qur'an – like Papa's uncle already mentioned – is it written that women should dress up like that and/or just wear black.³⁹ It is copying patriarchal Saudi-Arabian habits; 'once more white people who prescribe us how to behave as if we cannot read the Qur'an on our own account', as another religious teacher remarked. Wearing the *niqab* is even prohibited in Cameroon.

Most probably, girls were more or less forced to become Muslims imitating the behaviour of other people in the group; they were taught one or two surahs, how to carry out their prayers, and combine the two. As the girls themselves do not read Arab, they cannot verify the content of their 'new religion'. They will take any ideology that their capturers prescribe them for granted, presuming that that is what Islam is about, precisely in the same ways as in former days people copied the habits of the Fulbe population believing that their customs were Islamic while many of their habits were related to the former Fulbe nomad lifestyle. In Muslim Fulbe society, women and men are instructed about the content of their religion that prescribes them entitlement to education. As a consequence, many women claimed and claim their role in public life and society, a role they were also entitled to in nomad society.

That girls should be given in marriage is an item of attention: the way it is expressed by Shekau feels like a revenge of the wrongdoings to his own mother. In former Fulbe society, boys and girls both 'married' at a young age (Van Santen, 2014d), and divorce was and is easy.⁴⁰ There is much discussion at what attitude to take nowadays concerning this issue and some religious leaders are of opinion that girls/women should 'marry' when they want to become sexually active, but they can continue their studies. BH's leader is not a Pullo, he is Kanuri⁴¹, as was the former leader Mohammed Yusuf. This ethnic group, which Islamised in the 11th century, had a prominent empire in the pre-colonial period – the Kanem-Borno Empire – with more direct Arab influences.⁴² Gender relations within their former empire and society were dissimilar to that in Fulbe society. But, if the present leader indeed never got any proper (religious nor secular) education, he repeats an alleged viewpoint of women's place in society. Papa's mother, who never had a 'secular' French education, does not speak French, but is literate in Arabic, once scolded a man who dared to say that men were superior:

When you say these things you are not only no real Pullo (singular of Fulbe), but you also say wrong things in front of Allah, so you are not a true Muslim. You men [she was really in a furious state by then] you are finally all whores. Like hot animals you run after the womenfolk, and then you dare to say that it is women who cause *fitna* 'chaos'. In the Qur'an it is clearly stated that women and men are equal.⁴³ Has there ever been a man who gave birth to a child? But the things you men permit yourselves! Do you, men, not need us, women? In the Qur'an there is the story of Miriam [Mary, mother of Jesus], who gave birth to a child, without needing a man for conception. Where can you point out to me a similar kind of story in which males play the leading part?⁴⁴

Maimouna, who went to university, reflects on my work these days. While studying in Yaoundé, situated in the more Christian South, she once went for prayers to a mosque coming out furiously: '... a girl approached me, saying that I was not properly covered. Who the hell does she think she is. I finished reading the Qur'an when I was 12!' After graduation, she was appointed as a teacher in Kousseri, a town near Lake Chad, where she was regularly harassed. She then told me: 'I'm scared mama, I'm really scared of what is awaiting us women if the situation gets out of hand'. She is a hard working autonomous woman, she is a good Muslim. So, if we refer to Islam to understand gender relations, we get nowhere, because, in pre-Islamic as well as in Islamic Fulbe society, women and men's worlds were segregated yet equally valued. This is what many authors fail to understand: segregation does not equal subordination.

Maimouna got married, continued to work, and gave birth to a beautiful baby girl. The event made me think of all these girls that had been taken hostage and, if still alive, were probably raped by BH male members – not a very religiously approved act – and got pregnant. And women within the group who act in a violent way, do they do so for (presumed) religious reasons, or to obey or live up to the expectations of, or fear for, the menfolk? A captured girl with a suicide belt⁴⁵ told policemen that she was forced to do so, which probably goes for most of them, but is it so difficult to imagine that some did in the past revolted against the colonial legacy of the educational system? Or can we possibly imagine that some become as crazy as their leader or are as addicted to violence as some of the male members?⁴⁶

In Fulbe society, girls return to their mother's place to give birth and are supported by an eloquent aunt. The captured girls cannot do so and will be incredibly lonely. If I have to imagine what it is like, I think of the enslavement of people in former days and the stories the grandmother of another



Papa, his mother and me, his youngest brother, and two of his sisters

friend told me in the 80s: in 1914, she had been captured at the age of seven and had been taken along. Also, in those days, the invaders were quite reckless. She Islamised in the course of time and married an also enslaved Islamised man. However, when she was freed when the British and French took over the territory after the First World War, she refused to return to her parents because she said she had become a Muslim and could not live in the mountainous area anymore where she would not be able to carry out her prayers. Her daughter married the son of the ruler who enslaved her, had her own business, and used her money to go to Mecca; her granddaughter has always been economically independent too.

In my work, I have often explained the gender relations within North Cameroonian society (within the Fulbe groups as well as in non-Muslim environments). Women have access to education, to economic activities, and the headscarf never was an issue in Cameroon in 1986 when I arrived for the first time. Willemse and I wrote in our work that, in many discourses of fundamentalist movements, women are depicted on the one hand as the symbol of a better society, and on the other hand as the cause of decay of that same society (Hawley & Proudfoot, 1994, pp. 25-30; Van Santen & Willemse, 1999). In other words, women's behaviour is symptomatic of the moral state of society. Women give – in the eyes of the menfolk – substance to a moral discourse of a better society and at the same time preserve the sense of control and power for its male members.

BH's dogma seems to fit this idea, but this does not mean that their ideology fits the content of the religion as it was expressed during former revival movements. The founder of the Sokoto Empire (1800) – Uthman dan Fodio, a Pullo – stated:

Oh Muslim women, do not listen to the words of the misguided ones who seek to lead you astray by ordering you to obey your husbands instead of telling you to obey Allah and his Messenger. They tell you that a woman's happiness lies in obeying her husband. This is no more than a camouflage to make you satisfy their needs. They impose on you duties which neither Allah nor his Messenger imposed on you. They make you cook, wash clothes and do other things which they desire while they fail to teach you what Allah and His Prophet have prescribed for you. Neither Allah nor His Prophet charges you with such duties. (Ogunbiyi, 1969)⁴⁷

The Muslim population does not consider the present actions of the group as being 'Islamic', and probably the gender relations within the group are not either.

BH's actions have gotten totally out of hand to put it mildly. For members of BH, opting out seems difficult.⁴⁸ Many authors commented that, in times of crisis and uncertainty, Muslim societies naturally react in religious terms. The poor existential conditions of people in the northern states of Nigeria, in both relative and absolute terms (so Mohammed *et al.*, 2013, state), coupled with a large unemployed young population feed into a vicious circle of poverty. But does this explain why they become members of these groups?

Conclusions

In many terrorist groups, women are active, also as suicide bombers. In this article, I have discussed the impact of the actions of the terrorist group Boko Haram (BH) in the northern Cameroonian region, and I have tried to describe how we possibly could imagine the gender relations within the group. At the foundation of the group, women participated on their own account. In a later period, many women and girls were captured and taken along; figures of over 2000 circulate. The subject is complex, but the conclusion tends to be quite simple: gender relations within the present group have a horrific impact on the lives of girls and women in captivity: they have been raped, enslaved, married out, probably got pregnant, et cetera, and it is most unlikely that they still have a voice to raise against their capturers. However, this is not because members of the group claim to be Muslim and/or because Islam prescribes such treatments of women. I have argued that women in this part of the world were never denied access to education and had their own economic occupations that were valued. BH's

treatment of women is the result of criminal behaviour of violent, frustrated men, whose group, in some instances in the course of their existences, may have attracted some female members, but who thereafter have captured and enslaved the women.

I have narrated the beginning of the group, when their not yet violent actions were targeted against the colonial education system and the corrupt political systems of state governors under Sharia law and I mentioned the violent reactions of the authorities and the militaries. Was the groups' initial ultimate wish to have an education that is in line with their lifestyle, religious as well as otherwise, so ridiculous? Let us face it: if we talk about education or women's access to education, as so often is done in, for example, the 'development discourse', we also need to ask ourselves what sort of education we have in mind? Was it not Spivak (1988) who not only reminded us that most 'modern' school educational systems have no connection with the everyday reality of many people and peoples in the world, but also that in most cases the 'subaltern' cannot speak, but is only spoken about? In the part of the world that is central in this article, the Arab script and poetry was related to the Muslim peoples worldview, of women as well as of men, and they both had access to this kind of education. It differed completely from the 'modern/neo colonial' French and English oriented school system that in no way correlates with the actual space people live in, think in, and experience time in (Van Santen, 2014d). What use is, for example, knowledge of French literature in nomad surroundings where no books are available? So, the initial aims of the terrorists can be understood, but the development of their actions cannot.

Can we blame people that they are against the corrupt political and religious system of their society and its wrongdoings? Can we blame people – women and men – that they want to give substance to education that is in line with their lives? We can argue that being against democracy is not very sympathetic and that our Western freedom of speech – *Je suis Charlie* – is to be treasured but who is really heard in our own system? Is capital not 'our religion' that we impose on every locality in the world? And money lacks ears.

And no, Islam need not be more misogynist than the religions in/from our own or other societies. It is the interpretations of ideologies in general that time and time again are misogynist.

Notes

1. In NRC Handelsblad of October 15th, 2015, it was mentioned that the US government sent 200 militaries to North Cameroon, local papers mention 300 US militaries. Retrieved from: <http://www.nrc.nl/handelsblad/van/2015/oktober/15/militairen-naar-kameroen-amerikaanse-steun-in-stri-1548583>
2. Retrieved from: <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20150113-le-cameroun-fait-etat-lourd-revers-sub-boko-haram-kolofata-nigeria-frontiere143-morts-maroua/>; <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2015/01/boko-haram-attacks-cameroon-military-base-2015112133225785766.html>; <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/12/29/us-nigeria-violence-cameroon-idUSKBN0K70PL20141229>; <http://news.yahoo.com/boko-haram-militants-stage-attacks-northern-cameroon-062425446.html>; <http://www.newsforafrica.com/fr/14-08-31/36768135339367681-thousands-flee-boko-haram-attacks-in-nigeria-for-cameroon.html>
3. In 2014, my former colleague Seini Boukar Lamine and nearly his whole family were taken hostage, as was the wife of the Cameroonian prime minister. Retrieved from: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-28509530>; <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/07/27/us-cameroon-violence-boko-haram-idUSKBN0FWoCQ20140727>; <http://www.ndtv.com/world-news/boko-haram-gathers-new-recruits-to-gain-foothold-in-cameroon-646916>
4. Retrieved from: <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/page?page=4a03e1926>; <http://www.koaci.com/cameroun-liberation-lepouse-vice-premier-ministre-dementie-93519.html>; <http://www.sparkcameroun.com/le-temps-de-la-solidarite-en-cemac/>
5. Broadcast 20.00 h.news, France 2, Saturday the 6th of February.
6. NRC 13th and 15th of February 2016.
7. See Mang, 2013, pp. 85-110; Pérouse de Montclos, 2013, pp. 9-33; 135-158; Harnischfegger, 2013, pp. 33-63; Hoechner, 2013, pp. 85-110; and Serrano & Pieri, 2013, pp. 192-213.
8. See note 7.
9. NWO Programme 'Future of the Religious Past'. Subprogram: *Islam in Africa, Moving Frontiers*, see alsGueye & Van Santen, 2006.
10. I consider this concept of Pierre Bourdieu (1972) to be known.
11. Film: *2005 Taking of the veil: How in one gesture the politics of the laic Cameroonian State is represented*.
12. For my viewpoint on development and its Eurocentric character, see Van Santen, 2008.
13. Interview with Mahamad Bahar, Maroua, 27-04-1998.
14. In 2007, the various regions in the northern provinces counted 28 private Islamic primary schools, seven of which were in the process of being established. There were six secondary schools with a total number of 1,318 pupils. During inauguration of secondary schools, officials from the Saudi Arabian and Cameroonian governments are present, alongside many local officials.
15. Retrieved from: <http://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/174730-fulani-kanuri-behind-boko-haram-archbishop-says-jonathans-presence.html>
16. Retrieved from: http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=42371#.Vsc5ssDhAy4
17. The word *jihad* may also mean a regard to one's 'inner self', an individual path to come to terms with oneself and the world (and one's relation with God), thus an inner spiritual struggle.

18. *Mujahid* is the term for one engaged in *Jihad*. Mostly referred to in relation to guerrilla fighters during the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan (1980s).
19. See for example: Ogunrotifa, 2013.
20. See for example Masquelier, 2009; Loimeier, 2012.
21. Retrieved from:
<http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/ARTJAWEB20140831172824/>; <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/JA2721p015.xml0/>
22. Retrieved from:
http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=42371#.Vsc5ssDhAy4
23. Retrieved from: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jGWY5wS8YIo>; <http://www.rtl.fr/actualites/info/international/article/pretre-francais-libere-au-cameroun-pas-de-ran-con-selon-fabius-7768435614>. All were released afterwards.
24. Retrieved from: <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/ARTJAWEB20140831172824/>
25. Retrieved from: <http://www.nrc.nl/handelsblad/van/2015/april/29/boko-haram-leger-nigeria-bevrijdt-bijna-300-meisje-1493715>
26. Retrieved from: <http://www.cameroonweb.com/CameroonHomePage/NewsArchive/Nigeria-Buhari-dans-l-tau-de-Boko-Haram-351498>
27. Retrieved from: <http://www.cameroonweb.com/CameroonHomePage/NewsArchive/Female-suicide-bombers-in-Cameroon-attack-that-kills-eight-345146>;
28. Retrieved from: <http://www.cameroonweb.com/CameroonHomePage/NewsArchive/Boko-Haram-Neuf-personnes-gorg-es-Kolofata-343901>
29. Retrieved from: <http://www.nrc.nl/handelsblad/van/2015/december/29/boko-haram-laat-zien-dat-het-allerminst-verslagen-1572073>; <http://www.sparkcameroun.com/trois-kamikazes-tuees-par-leurs-bombes/>
30. Retrieved from: <http://www.cameroonweb.com/CameroonHomePage/NewsArchive/Cameroon-sees-surge-in-bombings-as-Nigeria-pursues-B-Haram-356682><http://www.cameroonweb.com/CameroonHomePage/NewsArchive/Cameroon-sees-surge-in-bombings-as-Nigeria-pursues-B-Haram-356682>
31. Retrieved from: <http://www.nrc.nl/handelsblad/van/2016/februari/11/boko-haram-zeker-58-doden-in-nigeria-bij-aanslagen-1590781>
32. I often use the example of the laundry washing soap OMO, that in Cameroon shows two men in long white boubou's on the cover of the box, one asking the other: 'What do you do to get your boubou this white?', and the other one replying: 'I use OMO'.
33. NRC 2 June, 2015.
34. *Salafism* does not equal terrorism.
35. Retrieved from: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-28509530>
36. See note 7.
37. Retrieved from: http://wn.com/mohammed_muslim_convert_to_christianity,nigeria
38. Retrieved from: http://news.yahoo.com/parents-234-girls-kidnapped-nigeria-school-132856450.html;_ylt=A9mSs2M_foVV8qcASapzKAX;_ylu=X30DMTBycDZicm-tuBGNvbG8DaXIyBHBvcwM2BHZoaWQDBHNlYwNzcg-;http://edition.cnn.com/2014/04/24/world/africa/nigeria-kidnapping-answers/index.html;http://edition.cnn.com/2014/04/21/world/africa/nigeria-abducted-girls;http://abcnews.go.com/International/video/international-hotspot-boko-haram-school-girls-nigeria-suicide-28196509
39. During the pilgrimage to Mecca, the *hadj*, women go unveiled and women as well as men wear white clothes, (Van Santen, 2013).
40. We should thoroughly change the easy use of the concept of marriage with its 'western' connotations.
41. Retrieved from: <http://allafrica.com/stories/201502180245.html>

42. Retrieved from:
<http://tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/religion-geopolitics/commentaries/opinion/boko-haram-ideology-ethnicity-and-identity>; Loimeier, 2013.
43. Many *surahs* refer to this equality but in this context she meant *surah* 33, verse 35.
44. Discussion between Iya and Uthmaan bin al-Munkadir, Mokolo, February 1998.
45. Retrieved from: http://wn.com/mohammed,_muslim_convert_to_christianity,nigeria;
<https://youtu.be/SR5GoK2Fgkk>
46. The wife of a BH leader is said to have participated in capture-killing of people, The Blaze, 19 November 2013
47. Ogunbiyi (1969), in: Nur al-albab, the Enlightenment of the Intellect. In: Irshad al-Ikhwana ila ahkam.
48. Retrieved from:
<http://www.cameroonweb.com/CameroonHomePage/NewsArchive/artikel.php?ID=331941&channel=A3>

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