

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Is education *haram*? How former members of north-east Nigeria's insurgency view and experience 'Western' education

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Abstract

Conflict related to the 'Boko Haram' insurgency has ravaged north-east Nigeria and its neighbouring countries for over a decade. Much public and media attention has focused on the insurgents' apparent hostility towards Western (*boko*) education. Yet, education has received relatively little attention within scholarship of the insurgency. Drawing on eighteen interviews and group conversations with former members conducted in 2021 and 2024, we explore what role disenchantment with Western education played in the recruitment of members, and to what extent critical views were nurtured and perpetuated during the insurgency. Mobilizing insights from education research, we highlight how Western knowledge occupied an ambiguous status among the insurgents. Avowed opposition to Western education was at loggerheads with the practical and tactical needs of the insurgency, which dominated decision making on the ground. Encounters and experiences after leaving the insurgency further convinced our respondents that Western education was useful. The article highlights that we cannot understand how violent jihadi groups view education by looking merely at their propaganda and tactics, but that we need to pay close attention to the on-the-ground experiences of ordinary members.

Résumé

Le conflit lié à l'insurrection de « Boko Haram » ravage le nord-est du Nigeria et les pays voisins depuis plus d'une décennie. L'hostilité apparente des insurgés envers l'éducation occidentale (*boko*) a fait l'objet d'une attention particulière de la part du public et des médias. Pourtant, l'éducation a reçu relativement peu d'attention dans les études sur l'insurrection. À partir de dix-huit entretiens et conversations de groupe menés en 2021 et 2024 avec d'anciens membres, les auteurs explorent le rôle du désenchantement envers l'éducation occidentale dans le recrutement des membres, et dans quelle mesure les opinions critiques ont été nourries et perpétuées pendant l'insurrection. En mobilisant les éclairages de la recherche en éducation, ils mettent en évidence le statut ambigu du savoir occidental parmi les insurgés. L'opposition déclarée à l'éducation occidentale était en contradiction avec les

besoins pratiques et tactiques de l'insurrection, qui dominaient la prise de décision sur le terrain. Les rencontres et les expériences vécues après la fin de l'insurrection n'ont fait que renforcer la conviction des personnes interrogées de l'utilité de l'éducation occidentale. L'article souligne qu'on ne peut pas comprendre comment les groupes djihadistes violents jugent l'éducation en se basant uniquement sur leur propagande et leurs tactiques, mais qu'il faut prêter une attention particulière aux expériences sur le terrain des membres ordinaires.

Resumo

O conflito relacionado com a insurgência do 'Boko Haram' tem devastado o nordeste da Nigéria e os países vizinhos há mais de uma década. Grande parte da atenção do público e da mídia tem-se concentrado na aparente hostilidade dos insurgentes em relação à educação ocidental (boko). No entanto, a educação tem recebido relativamente pouca atenção nos estudos sobre a insurgência. Com base em dezoito entrevistas e conversas em grupo com ex-membros realizadas em 2021 e 2024, exploramos o papel que o desencanto com a educação ocidental desempenhou no recrutamento de membros e até que ponto as visões críticas foram cultivadas e perpetuadas durante a insurgência. Mobilizando percepções da investigação em educação, destacamos como o conhecimento ocidental ocupava um estatuto ambíguo entre os insurgentes. A oposição declarada à educação ocidental estava em conflito com as necessidades práticas e táticas da insurgência, que dominavam a tomada de decisões no terreno. Os encontros e experiências após deixarem a insurgência convenceram ainda mais os nossos entrevistados de que a educação ocidental era útil. O artigo destaca que não podemos compreender como os grupos jihadistas violentos encaram a educação apenas observando a sua propaganda e táticas, mas que precisamos prestar muita atenção às experiências no terreno dos membros comuns.

Introduction

In recent decades, 'Western' education¹ has come under attack by militant jihadi groups in various parts of the world. Schools have been attacked by the Taliban in Afghanistan and the Tehrik-i-Taliban in Pakistan, by al-Qaeda and its affiliates in Syria and Yemen, and by the 'Islamic State' and its affiliates in Syria and Iraq. On the African continent, Western educational institutions have been targeted by al-Shabaab in Somalia and Kenya, by al-Qaeda affiliates in Burkina Faso and Mali, by Islamic State affiliates in Burkina Faso, Mali and Mozambique, and by 'Boko Haram' in Cameroon, Niger and Nigeria.²

While attacks on schools are a common and longstanding tactic of war,³ jihadi-led attacks have taken on new ideological dimensions. Different jihadi groups have put forward similar objections to the presumably 'Westernized' nature of the schools they target, often invoking co-education of boys and girls and specific curriculum content perceived to contradict Islamic teachings.⁴ Existing scholarship, notably within the field of education, has made helpful contributions by highlighting that, such shared

¹ This term is discussed in the main text below.

² See 'Resources: education under attack' on the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack website at <<https://protectingeducation.org/>>, accessed 7 July 2025.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

narratives notwithstanding, essentialist/racist tropes that collapse distinct historical events into a single narrative of ‘Muslim men opposing (girls’) education’ are unhelpful (Khoja-Moolji 2015). Instead, scholars have urged us to explore the specific historical and political circumstances in which discourses of opposition to Western education are grounded in different contexts (Khoja-Moolji 2015; Novelli 2010).

These arguments build on a larger body of work within education scholarship that highlights how ‘education’ (read as Western-style formal schooling) is not ‘inevitably a force for good’ (Saltarelli and Bush 2000: v), and that those opposed to it are not automatically obscurantist fanatics. Post- and de-colonial scholars in this field have outlined the specific colonial histories of Western education systems and their roles as disciplinary institutions, as well as their entwinement with Western thought systems including colonial Christianity and more recently secularism, contributing to epistemic domination and the marginalization of other ways of knowing (Nyamnjoh 2012; Tikly 2004). Scholars have also pointed out imperial entanglements, and how education interventions have been enlisted by the security agendas of Western occupying forces, for example in Iraq and Afghanistan (Novelli 2010; Novelli and Kutan 2023). At the same time, it has been acknowledged that hegemonic Western forms of knowledge are often what people, rightly or wrongly, pin their hopes on for social and economic advancement under neoliberal capitalism (Hajir 2024; Tikly 2004).

These ideas help us see education, and more specifically schooling, as political and contested. However, beyond situating attacks and jihadi discourses on Western education within their wider contexts, the body of literature outlined here has largely left unexplored the actual place of Western knowledge and education within militant jihadi movements. Conversely, scholarship specifically interested in militant jihadi groups has shown limited interest in education. While some literature acknowledges jihadi leaders’ proclaimed ideology regarding education (e.g. Thurston 2018b), little is known about whether or how avowed ideological opposition to Western education at leadership level translates to ordinary members’ views.

This is despite scholars cautioning against treating jihadi rhetoric and tactics as a reliable proxy for the perspectives and experiences of ordinary members (Thurston 2019). Darryl Li (2015: 15) writes that ‘no political movement should ever be understood primarily through its own propaganda . . . Without a clearer sense of how people take up, interpret, modify, criticize or parody this media production, this brand of analysis will tend to play up everything that seems exotic or bizarre.’ Relatedly, Li (*ibid.*) highlights how a narrow focus on the violent tactics of jihadi groups does little to further our understanding of these groups, while easily feeding racist and Islamophobic stereotypes.

By exploring the ambiguous place of Western education within the so-called Boko Haram insurgency in north-east Nigeria, we seek to address current gaps in knowledge about the role of (opposition to) Western education for Boko Haram and other militant jihadi groups. We argue that a better understanding of how such groups relate to Western education can help us develop a better sense of their origins and internal workings, as well as inform appropriate educational responses to them. In this article, we both draw on the insights provided by existing scholarship in the field of education and conflict to make sense of the Boko Haram insurgency and use insights emerging from studying this insurgency to propose a new set of questions to

ask in the context of other violent uprisings objecting to Western education, charting a course for future research.

The so-called Boko Haram conflict, which has ravaged north-east Nigeria and its neighbouring countries for well over a decade, offers a fruitful case study for exploring the nexus between (opposition to) Western education and militant jihadism. Much public and media attention has focused on the insurgents' apparent hostility towards Western or *boko* education, starting with scrutiny of insurgency leader Muhammad Yusuf's preaching against the permissibility of Western education, which earned his movement the nickname Boko Haram or, as it is commonly translated, 'Western education is forbidden'. High-profile attacks on Western schools, including the killing of fifty-nine schoolboys at the Federal Government College Buni Yadi, Yobe State, in February 2014, and mass kidnappings of students, including the spectacular abduction of 276 schoolgirls from the Government Girls' Secondary School Chibok in April 2014 (HRW 2016; International Crisis Group 2018), furthered perceptions of the insurgency being fuelled by opposition to Western education.

However, no in-depth study has explored the actual role of opposition to Western education for the insurgency. To date, scholarship of the insurgency has mostly been the domain of historians (Higazi 2015; Kassim and Nwankpa 2018; MacEachern 2018; Mustapha 2014; Mustapha and Meagher 2020), security scholars and political scientists (Matfess 2017; Pérouse de Montclos 2014; 2016; Zenn and Pearson 2014) and specialists in Islam (Sani Umar 2020; Thurston 2018a). These scholars have shed light on the political and sectarian struggles, socio-economic and environmental conditions, gender dynamics and historical blueprints for violent confrontation in the region, yet they have paid little attention to education.

Drawing on interviews and group conversations with former members of the insurgency, this article steps into this void. We explore what, if any, role disenchantment with the existing Western education system played in the recruitment of members, to what extent critical views of that system were nurtured and perpetuated inside the insurgency, and how former members view Western education today. We highlight that Western education occupied an ambiguous status inside the insurgency, which did not go unnoticed by ordinary members. Our respondents were acutely aware of the tangible benefits Western education could offer in specific circumstances, including inside Boko Haram.

Conceptually, the literature on education and conflict has long discussed education (most often read as schooling) as having 'two faces': a positive as well as a negative one (Saltarelli and Bush 2000). It has been argued that education or schooling can promote social and economic justice and peace, but also sow hatred, cause grievances and divisions, and solidify, or exacerbate, existing power disparities. While helpful for moving away from purely celebratory accounts of schooling, we find this dichotomic view somewhat limiting when attempting to make sense of our respondents' perspectives on Western education in a context where this education system has a complicated and contentious history and where the jury is out on whether it can indeed help poor and marginalized groups achieve social and economic mobility. Instead, we draw on Paulson's (2008: 1) work, which highlights 'ambiguities' and the 'multiple and ... often contradictory' faces of education in situations affected by conflict.

We use the terms ‘Western education’ and ‘Western knowledge’ in this article as these are commonly used in Nigerian parlance. However, we acknowledge that the label ‘Western’ insufficiently acknowledges that this education system now has its own history in Nigeria, its colonial origins notwithstanding. We also use the Hausa term ‘*boko*’. Historically, it referred to the education system introduced by the British, connoting colonial domination and concerns about Christian proselytization. Today, it is often used more broadly to refer to Nigerian elites perceived to be Westernized and corrupt.

The next section describes the methods and data. We then trace the history of Western education in north-east Nigeria and provide an overview of the conflict and existing literature on the role of education within it. Subsequent sections discuss the discourse of the insurgency leadership on Western education and the role this played for the recruitment of ordinary members, the status of Western education inside the insurgency, and former members’ views on Western education today.

Methods and data

Data for this article comes from a total of seven weeks of fieldwork conducted in July–September 2021 and April–June 2024 in Borno (Maiduguri and Bama) and Yobe (Damaturu and Buni Yadi), the states most heavily affected by the conflict. Our overall study focused on the nexus between education, notably Islamic education, and the insurgency. We conducted a total of eighteen interviews and group conversations with former members, twenty-three interviews and group conversations with Islamic teachers, ten interviews and group conversations with parents, seven group conversations with Islamic school students and eighteen key informant interviews.

The data creation was led by Yagana Bukar, who is a long-term resident of Borno and has extensively researched the insurgency and its impacts on the region. She is fluent in Hausa and Kanuri, the major regional languages. She was assisted by Ali Galadima, also a long-term resident of Borno, and Sadiu Salisu, a recent graduate of the Qur’anic education or *almajiri* system from Kano. Hannah Hoechner, who has extensive research experience on Islamic education in northern Nigeria, designed the research tools and provided feedback throughout the data creation. We analysed the data through repeated reading of transcripts and coding in NVivo.

In this article, we draw primarily on data from interviews with former members (see Table 1); these were conducted on the UniMaid Campus and in guesthouses in Maiduguri and Bama (with former members travelling to meet the research team there), as well as in different internally displaced persons’ camps (Muna Garage, Farm Centre and Dalori IDP camps in Maiduguri and Government Senior Secondary School (GSSS) camp in Bama). Given the volatility of the security situation and the risks involved in pre-announced return visits, the research team engaged mostly with those available for interview at the time of each visit.

We recruited former members for interview by drawing on the existing networks of the members of the research team (notably Bukar’s contacts among non-state security providers, or vigilantes), to facilitate access in a context where fear and suspicion are rife. We then used snowball techniques to recruit further interviewees. We refer to respondents using descriptors to ensure their safety and anonymity.

Table 1. Overview of interviews and group conversations drawn on in the article

No.	Date	Place	Gender, age, ethnicity and origin	Education
FM1	16/7/2021	Guest House, Bama (respondent travelled from GSSS Bama IDP camp, Bama)	Interview in Kanuri with man in his early 20s, from Bama	Mostly Qur'anic education (confusing account)
FM2	16/7/2021	Guest House, Bama (respondent travelled from GSSS Bama IDP camp, Bama)	Interview in Kanuri with man in his mid-20s, Shuwa father and Kanuri mother, grew up in Bama	Qur'anic education only
FM3	16/7/2021	Guest House, Bama (respondent travelled from GSSS Bama IDP camp, Bama)	Group discussion in Kanuri with 8 men in their early 20s, Shuwa (2 respondents), Kanuri (4 respondents), Gamargu (1 respondent), 'Gwoza' (1 respondent), from Bama (6 respondents) and from Gwoza (1 respondent)	Qur'anic education only (5 respondents), some primary education (1 respondent), some secondary education (1 respondent) and 'both Islamic and Western education' (1 respondent)
FM4	25/7/2021	UniMaid campus, Maiduguri	Interview in Hausa with man in his early 20s, Kanuri, from Bama	Some secondary education and some Islamiyya education
FM5	27/7/2021	Dalori IDP camp, Maiduguri	Interview in Kanuri with man in his early 20s, Kanuri, from Bama	Finished junior secondary school
FM6	27/7/2021	Dalori IDP camp, Maiduguri	Interview in Kanuri with man in his early 20s, grew up in Banki	Some primary education
FM7	31/7/2021	Muna Garage IDP camp, Maiduguri	Interview in Kanuri with man in his mid-40s, Kanuri, from near Bama	Extensive Qur'anic education/ <i>malam</i>
FM8	31/7/2021	UniMaid campus, Maiduguri	Interview in Hausa with man in his mid-30s, Shuwa mother and Kanuri father, attended <i>sangayya</i> in Bama	Qur'anic education only
FM9	31/7/2021	Muna Garage IDP camp, Maiduguri	Interview in Hausa with man in his mid-30s, Kanuri, attended <i>sangayya</i> in Bama and Dikwa	Some primary education and Qur'anic education
FM10	31/7/2021	Muna Garage IDP camp, Maiduguri	Interview in Kanuri with man in his late 40s, Kanuri, from Bama	Extensive Qur'anic education/ <i>malam</i>

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

No.	Date	Place	Gender, age, ethnicity and origin	Education
FM11	31/7/2021	Muna Garage IDP camp, Maiduguri	Interview in Kanuri with man in his early 30s, Kanuri, from Banki	Extensive Qur'anic education/ <i>malam</i>
FM12	31/7/2021	Muna Garage IDP camp, Maiduguri	Interview in Kanuri with man in his mid-40s, Kanuri, from Dikwa	Qur'anic education only
FM13	31/7/2021	Muna Garage IDP camp, Maiduguri	Interview in Kanuri with man in his late 30s, from Dikwa	Qur'anic education
FM14	31/7/2021	Muna Garage IDP camp, Maiduguri	Interview in Kanuri with man in his early 30s, from Bama	Some secondary education
FM15	4/8/2021	Farm Centre IDP camp, Maiduguri	Group conversation in Kanuri with 4 women in their mid-20s to mid-30s, all respondents Kanuri, from Banki (2 respondents) and Bama (2 respondents)	Islamiyya education (1 respondent), some Qur'anic education (1 respondent), some Islamiyya and Qur'anic education (1 respondent) and some primary education (1 respondent)
FM16	1/4/2024	Marazain Hotel, Maiduguri	Group conversation in Kanuri with 6 men in their 20s–40s (ISWAP faction), all respondents Kanuri, from Maiduguri (2 respondents) and from Malam Fatori, Abadam and Ngala (1 respondent each)	Only Qur'anic education (3 respondents), Islamiyya education (1 respondent), completed secondary education (1 respondent) and diploma holder (1 respondent)
FM17	1/4/2024	Marazain Hotel, Maiduguri	Group conversation in Kanuri with 5 men in their 20s and 30s (Shekau faction), all Kanuri, from Banki/Bama (3 respondents) and Konduga (2 respondents)	Only Qur'anic education (1 respondent), some primary education and Qur'anic education (1 respondent), some Western and Islamiyya education (1 respondent), primary education (1 respondent) and no education (1 respondent)
FM18	11/5/2024	Marazain Hotel, Maiduguri	Group conversation in Kanuri with 10 men in their 20s and 30s (Shekau and ISWAP factions), Kanuri (3 respondents), Shuwa (1 respondent), Mafa (1 respondent), Mulwe (2 respondents), Margi (1 respondent) and information not disclosed (2 respondents)	Only Qur'anic education (6 respondents), secondary school leaver (1 respondent), Islamiyya education (1 respondent) and information not disclosed (2 respondents)
PA1	5/9/2021	GSSS Bama IDP camp, Bama	Group conversation in Kanuri with 8 fathers aged 25–63	

Interviews were conducted in English, Hausa and/or Kanuri, depending on the preferences of respondents.

Most of the former members we spoke to were in their twenties or thirties, and the oldest were in their forties. Except for four women participating in a group conversation, all respondents were male. Individual interviews were mostly conducted one on one, while focus group discussions were facilitated primarily by Bukar, a woman in her fifties. We did not find the gender of the interviewer to notably influence responses and respondents did not express any reluctance to speak to a female researcher. Indeed, Bukar's positionality as an older woman with a university career appeared to facilitate trust and respect, with some respondents subsequently turning to her for help with their own educational endeavours. We make sense of this in light of our respondents' avowed rejection of the insurgents' ideology, including its professed stance on Western education and its gendered aspects. Several former respondents voiced upset about the insurgents' treatment and denigration of women, notably older women and mothers.

Most of our respondents were from Bama and surrounding villages and identified as Kanuri. We documented respondents' educational profiles, yet we do not claim representativeness in our sample. The majority of our interlocutors (twenty-seven out of forty-five) had only religious education, one had no education at all, and the others had attended either primary or secondary school. One respondent held a diploma. This is largely in line with average educational attainment in the region (see below).

In light of the highly dynamic nature of the conflict, it is important to highlight that our interviews mostly explore the perspectives and experiences of young men who joined the insurgency, often under duress and many of them as children or adolescents. They did so during its expansionary phase (2013–15), when insurgents under the leadership of Abubakar Shekau captured large swathes of territory across Borno and neighbouring states as well as in Niger and Cameroon. However, our respondents also included people who had been part of the insurgency from the beginning, when members were more likely to join freely, drawn in by Muhammad Yusuf's charismatic preaching and promise of a righteous, pious life in his orbit.

Most of our respondents discussed experiences within the insurgency faction led by Abubakar Shekau, who inherited leadership of the group after Yusuf's violent death in police custody in 2009. However, we also conducted one group conversation with young men who had joined ISWAP (Islamic State's West Africa Province or *Wilayat Garb Ifriqiya*) after it split from Shekau's faction in 2016 (see below).

Our respondents included both defectors and members/fighters captured by the security forces. However, we did not interview active members, and former members still sympathizing with the insurgent cause are unlikely to have put themselves forward for interview. Most of our respondents had spent time in prison and/or undergone deradicalization or rehabilitation programmes.

We acknowledge that there are questions around the reliability of the accounts given by former members, who may be wary of incriminating themselves in a context that remains highly volatile. While, more recently, most surrendered members have been 'rehabilitated' without suffering harsh punishments, in the early stages of the insurgency, the security forces cracked down heavy-handedly on actual and suspected insurgents (Amnesty International 2015b). Understandably, people are extra cautious

today about revealing compromising information. Also, some surrendered members end up rejoining and may therefore choose carefully what they reveal. Memories of targeted killings by insurgents may also have made people reluctant to speak freely. To mitigate these challenges, the research team took care to emphasize the academic nature of the project, to reassure respondents that data would be handled anonymously and not be shared with state authorities or the security forces, and that we were not seeking to collect incriminating information. Wherever possible, the research team cross-checked information given by respondents with sources from within their trusted networks.

We are aware of our positionality as products of Western education systems, which may have impacted both how we conceived of the research and how respondents perceived it. It may also have affected how we engaged with our data during the analysis phase. It has therefore been particularly important to us to include Salisu as a product of Qur'anic schooling in the research team.

History of education in north-east Nigeria

Islamic education has a long history in what is today north-east Nigeria, where Islam has been present since the eleventh century (Abdurrahman and Canham 1978). Western or *boko* education was introduced at the beginning of the twentieth century in the context of British conquest. Colonial educational policy was ancillary to the larger colonial project of stabilizing 'indirect rule' in Northern Nigeria, and Western education was introduced on a narrow basis only with a view to training enough local staff to run the Native Administration.

Colonial rulers did not provide Western education on any noteworthy scale, both to keep financial liability to a minimum (Tukur 2016), and because they worried that Western education would embolden students and turn them against the colonial regime (Fafunwa 1974). Despite its narrow base, the introduction of Western education fundamentally disrupted longstanding social and political hierarchies, devaluing the knowledge of Islamic scholars or *ulama*. Upon independence in 1960, the first generation of Western-educated Muslims inherited power from the British in northern Nigeria (Fafunwa 1974).

The colonial rulers feared antagonizing Muslim constituencies, and so they discouraged missionaries, who provided Western education in other parts of Nigeria, from opening schools in Muslim parts of Northern Nigeria. Missionaries were allowed to operate in non-Muslim regions, including in the southern parts of what is today Borno State (Monguno and Umara 2020). Current inequalities in educational access and attainment across Nigeria have often been traced back to these different historical encounters with Western education (Mustapha and Meagher 2020: 48), which intermittent state efforts to enlist the general population to the cause of Western education (see the Universal Primary Education and Universal Basic Education campaigns launched in 1976 and 1999 respectively) have failed to address. Statistical surveys continuously show that Borno and the North East more widely are among the most education-deprived regions in Nigeria, with women and girls faring even worse than their male counterparts. According to 2008 data, 76.6 per cent of surveyed women and 45.7 per cent of surveyed men aged fifteen to forty-nine in the

North East zone could ‘not read at all’ (National Population Commission 2009).⁵ In 2013, 72.4 per cent of female and 53.6 per cent of male respondents in Borno and 85.6 per cent of female and 79.4 per cent of male respondents in Yobe reported having ‘no education’ at all. Conversely, 13.6 per cent of female and 27.7 per cent of male respondents in Borno and 7.4 per cent of female and 15.6 per cent of male respondents in Yobe reported having completed secondary education or more (fifteen to forty-nine-year-olds) (National Population Commission and ICF International 2014: 34ff.).⁶

Education and the conflict in north-east Nigeria

The movement that morphed into north-east Nigeria’s violent insurgency emerged around 2002 as a local quietist Salafi group. After violent clashes with the security forces and the killing of its leader, Mohammed Yusuf, in 2009, it re-grouped under the leadership of Abubakar Shekau, adopting increasingly violent tactics. In 2014, the movement became an established Islamic state. Disagreements over ideology and strategy, notably the treatment of civilians, led to the group splitting into two major factions in 2016: one headed by Abubakar Shekau until his death in May 2021, operating under the group’s original name *Jama’at Ahl al-Sunna li-Da’wa wa-l-Jihad* (JAS) or ‘People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet’s Teachings and Jihad’; and another that acts as an affiliate of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant and calls itself Islamic State’s West Africa Province (ISWAP), headed first by Abu Musab al-Barnawi (Kassim and Nwankpa 2018).

Deradicalization, rehabilitation and reintegration programmes to encourage members to defect have been in place since 2016, and there have been large-scale defections from JAS, notably in 2021 after Shekau’s death (Ya’u and Monguno 2022). While the insurgent factions have lost control of most of the territory they held at the height of the conflict, they are still able to carry out sporadic attacks, threatening security especially in rural parts of Borno State.

There now exists an insightful body of academic and grey literature on the insurgency, exploring the reasons for its emergence and documenting its devastating impacts on the region (Amnesty International 2015a; 2015b; Higazi 2015; MacEachern 2018; Matfess 2017; Mustapha 2014; Mustapha and Meagher 2020; NSRP and UNICEF 2017; Pérouse de Montclos 2014; Thurston 2018a). This research has elucidated how the complex interplay of horizontal inequalities and poverty, exacerbated by environmental degradation, interreligious and ethnic tensions, and political and sectarian power struggles, created a fertile soil for violent extremism. This body of work has also shed light on the difficult legacies the conflict has created for the region, in terms of both destroyed infrastructure and livelihoods and eroded trust and social cohesion (International Crisis Group 2019; Mustapha and Meagher 2020).

Several reports have documented the heavy toll the conflict has taken on Western educational institutions, as well as on their teachers and students (HRW 2016;

⁵ The Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) evaluates literacy in Latin rather than Arabic script, which is taught in Islamic educational institutions.

⁶ It is unclear which forms of Islamic education, if any, were counted as ‘schooling’.

International Crisis Group 2018).⁷ However, most existing studies have not dwelled much on how dynamics related to education have affected, or been affected by, the conflict. Existing work has mostly focused on the question of whether particular education experiences (or a lack thereof) or attendance at specific educational institutions have made individuals more vulnerable to recruitment (Abbo *et al.* 2017; Afzal 2020; Hansen 2016).

Several recent studies have highlighted vulnerabilities arising from limited educational opportunities, but they have also cautioned against focusing narrowly on specific educational institutions, such as Qur'anic schools or Islamic universities (Thurston 2018b; UNDP 2017). Research with former members by Mercy Corps (2016b: 2) found that '[t]here is no demographic profile of a Boko Haram supporter' and that the insurgents recruited their members from a range of educational milieus and backgrounds.

Past studies also caution against assuming that a person's attitude towards Western education is neatly defined by their educational profile. Research in Kano has shown that Qur'anic students aren't necessarily opposed to Western education, but often cannot afford to enrol (Hoechner 2018). Also, 'a degree does not guarantee a job' and 'education can frustrate students even as it nurtures aspirations and develops skills' (Thurston 2018b: 14; see also Mercy Corps 2016a). At the beginning of the insurgency, young university graduates attracted attention as they ostentatiously tore up their graduation certificates when joining Yusuf's movement.

Existing research with former members and captives of the insurgency problematizes a neat categorization of members as either willing supporters or victimized captives, arguing that most people fall somewhere on the spectrum between forced recruitment and voluntary enlistment (Mercy Corps 2016b; Nagarajan *et al.* 2018). Interviews with former members have highlighted a plethora of reasons why people joined, including material incentives, the excessive use of violence by the security forces, and fear of retaliation from the insurgents (Higazi 2015; Pérouse de Montclos 2016). Research has also emphasized the 'sense of belonging, purpose, and community' that the insurgency offered, as well as the critical role of family members and friends in pulling people in (Nagarajan *et al.* 2018: 4; see also Matfess 2017), cautioning against overestimating the role of ideology for recruitment. Whether opposition to Western education mattered to ordinary members who supported the insurgent cause has not been explored in any depth.

The few studies that explore how experiences of the conflict have had an impact on perspectives on education found that they strengthened demand for both Western education and broadened Islamic curricula as a means to reduce children's vulnerability to radicalization and recruitment (Coinco and Morris 2017: 20–4; UNDP 2017: 5, 49–50). Our findings contribute to this emerging body of work. Our findings also add to the limited amount of research exploring people's experiences of living inside the insurgency (Matfess 2017; Nagarajan *et al.* 2018). While most research with former members has focused on understanding the rise of armed opposition groups in north-east Nigeria, given the longevity of the insurgency, it is crucial to

⁷ Impacts on religious educational institutions and young people not enrolled in school have often been overlooked (Hoechner *et al.* forthcoming).

gain a better understanding of what happens ‘inside’ and how this shapes the views and needs of people who leave these groups.

Western education within the discourse of the insurgency leadership

As outlined before, opposition to Western education has often been perceived as an ideological cornerstone for north-eastern Nigeria’s insurgency. The moniker Boko Haram, commonly translated as ‘Western education is forbidden’, has fed into this perception. However, it is important to remember that Boko Haram is an exonym,⁸ which has been disavowed by the insurgency leadership. The following communiqué dated 3 December 2014, for example, stresses that its real concern was with ‘unbelief and corruption’ – themes that appealed strongly to the group’s early followership:

We are called JASDJ [*Jama’at Ahl al-Sunna li-Da’wa wa-l-Jihad*]; as for the reasons, why they named us ‘Boko Haram’, we never called ourselves that . . . So the enemies . . . claimed that we are forbidding teaching [as a whole]. But we do not forbid learning, technology or civilization; we only forbid unbelief and corruption. (Kassim and Nwankpa 2018: 349)

Confronted with significant opposition from the Nigerian *ulama*, Yusuf laboured to portray his views on Western education as being more nuanced than the broad-brush label ‘Boko Haram’ suggests. He articulated his views on Western education, for example, in a videotaped debate with pro-Salafi scholar Malam Isa Ali Ibrahim Pantami on 25 June 2006, in which he distinguished between Western knowledge and the system through which it is imparted. He declared the former, with some notable exceptions, to be permissible while objecting to the latter:

[M]edicine, engineering, agriculture, geography, physics, biology, chemistry, and so on. All these disciplines together, and even the English language itself, once it does not contradict the Sunna of the Prophet, in its capacity as knowledge, there is no blame [in learning it] . . . If we have our own schools, we can adopt those disciplines and teach them in our schools. The reason they cannot go to these schools, as I said, is not because of the disciplines, but because of the system. (Yusuf, 25 June 2006, quoted in Kassim and Nwankpa 2018: 12)

Yusuf’s objections to the ‘system’ were rooted in perceptions of Western education as a colonial and Christian plot designed to ‘remove the Muslims from their religion of truth towards the abyss of misguidance’ by teaching Muslims ‘skepticism about their religion, their Qur’an and their Prophet [Muhammad]. This is what they call intellectual warfare or the battle of hearts and minds’ (Yusuf, 25 June 2006, quoted in Kassim and Nwankpa 2018: 17). His verdict built on earlier critiques. In his manifesto, for example, Yusuf quoted pro-Salafi scholar and Izala founder Abubakar Gumi, who,

⁸ According to Abubakar Monguno, Reader in Geography and Director of the Centre for Disaster Risk Management and Development Studies at the University of Maiduguri, the term ‘Boko Haram’ was coined by Hausa-medium foreign media, notably Voice of America (VOA) and the BBC (personal communication, September 2023).

in the 1970s, had written that ‘colonial schools had transformed Muslim children into “either hunting dogs in the foreign hunters’ hands, or the prey of the hunt”’ (Thurston 2018b: 16).

Yusuf also objected to specific disciplinary content, as hinted at above. Not having attended Western school himself, we have reason to believe that his understanding of this content was rather weak and obtained through secondary sources or the Western-educated people with whom he interacted, including members of the Muslim Student Society or *Jama’atu al-Tajdid al-Islami* (Movement for the Revival of Islam). The disciplinary content he objected to included mostly subjects from biology and geography, notably the theory of evolution, the Big Bang theory and geological timelines, which he argued contradict the revealed story of creation. He opposed studying the solar system and the earth’s rotation around the sun as well as the rain cycle, which according to him is at odds with the Qur’anic vision of the universe. He objected to chemistry teaching on the persistence of energy, and to the questioning of God’s existence in sociology (Thurston 2018b: 13–14; see also Yusuf, c. December 2008, quoted in Kassim and Nwankpa 2018: 97). He also condemned the mixing of male and female students at school, arguing that this led to ‘fornication, lesbianism, homosexuality, and other [corruptions]’ (Thurston 2016: 15).

Yusuf thus attempted to portray his stance as somewhat nuanced and grounded in scripture. The rhetoric changed quite dramatically after his death, under Shekau’s leadership. All attempts at nuance were lost in the latter’s discourse. His angry rants no longer distinguished between specific forms of knowledge and the systems through which they are imparted:

Western education is forbidden. University is forbidden. You should all abandon the university. I totally detest the university. Bastards! You should leave the university. Western education is forbidden. (Shekau, 26 March 2014, quoted in Kassim and Nwankpa 2018: 292)

What is my concern with the dogs’ or pigs’ language? The language I am proud of is Arabic – what is the English language? What is its origin? I don’t have any concern for it. (Shekau, 5 October 2014, quoted in Kassim and Nwankpa 2018: 337)

It is worth pointing out, however, that even Shekau actively endorsed modern technology and the acquisition of relevant knowledge, as long as it was acquired outside the Western education system:

Western education is impermissible, but these electrical appliances are good . . . Even if there is no Western education, the people can learn how to create all these appliances . . . They do not even learn about these things in Western education, they only learn deception . . . You would see someone with a master’s degree in engineering, but cannot manufacture even an engine to produce pasta. (Shekau, 16 February 2009, quoted in Kassim and Nwankpa 2018: 127)

Shekau, however, did not lay out how technical knowledge was to be acquired without participating in the Western education system. The next section explores to what

extent the ideological positions outlined here informed the thinking of the former members we spoke to in our research.

The role of *boko*-critical discourses for recruitment and membership

Opposition to Western education did not come up as a significant factor for recruitment in our interviews with former members. Our respondents mostly discussed the material incentives offered by the insurgents, perceptions of the insurgents as doing 'God's work' (*aikin Allah*) and holding the key to paradise, and the pull of family members and peers who had joined.

When asked directly, some former members acknowledged that Muhammad Yusuf's critical discourse on Western education resonated with them, referring to their own and others' remoteness from Western education – most of our respondents had only religious education – as well as longstanding perceptions of this type of education as being a Western/Christian imposition. When asked about the role of Western education for people's decision to join the insurgency, one young man in his twenties, for example, stated that 'many' people joined due to a 'hate of Western education'. Asked what aspects of Western education these recruits objected to, he explained:

It is all about illiteracy, and what we were being told when we were young is that Western education is for the non-believers ... so when you are brought up like that without the Western education and you have no relation with those who have gone to school, then you will not know the importance of knowledge ... and you accept that perception. (FM3)

A father in his twenties who had been displaced from rural Bama by the insurgency provided some background on such attitudes. The payment of government salaries to the Western-educated individuals recruited into the civil service made this form of education look suspicious, in a context where (agenda-)free handouts are rare:

[T]hey say if you go to Western school, even now government gives salary to those that go to *boko* school, and they don't give salary to *sangayya* students [Qur'anic school students]; if that thing [*boko* education] was good, is that what they would do? (PA1)

While the statements of the respondents cited so far speak to the idea of the Western education system being suspect in itself, other respondents referred to specific practices associated with, or the content of, Western education that they, or insurgents they knew, believed to contradict Islamic tenets. Several respondents referred to the rain cycle, the earth's rotation around the sun and the theory of evolution as contravening Islamic teachings, repeating concerns that Yusuf had highlighted in his preaching (FM10; FM16). Gender norms were also brought up on several occasions. For example:

They [insurgents] hate mixed school, mixing boys and girls, they really hate that. (FM11; the same point was made by FM10)

Our respondents stressed that positions on Western education had differed both among the insurgents and over time. One respondent in his early twenties who had spent seven years inside the insurgency acknowledged a change in tack after Yusuf's death and Shekau coming to power, arguing that while Yusuf had merely objected to specific content or practices, Shekau 'twisted everything [and] said everything is *haram*' (FM4).

Another respondent who had taught the Qur'an before and after the insurgents took control of his village in Bama distinguished between views held by the youths inside the insurgency and the elders:

[I]t is the youths that [consider Western education] *haram*, but the elders will say it is 'an eye opener', that is advancement or progress, what the elders prohibit is working for the *boko* system to earn a salary, that is *haram* ... to the elders, apart from the salary, the study of *boko* is not *haram*. (FM7)

Corroborating this, another respondent, a man in his forties who had served as an Islamic teacher and *mufti* (Islamic jurist) inside the insurgency, explained that the religiously learned within the insurgency adopted more nuanced positions on Western education than the uneducated:

[T]hose who don't have knowledge of the religion believed that Western education is *haram*, while those who have knowledge believed that some aspects of Western education are *haram*, not all. To me, not everything is *haram* ... they said that in schools they question the existence of God. To mix males and females in one place is *haram*, those are the things I believed. (FM10)

This section has documented our respondents' awareness of and perspectives on the explicitly proclaimed positions of insurgency leaders on Western education. The next section explores the messier realities of the explicit and implicit messages circulating inside the insurgency, highlighting ambiguities and contradictions.

Mixed messaging about Western education inside the insurgency

Some members reported threats or punishments for engaging with or displaying Western knowledge, which seems more in line with Shekau's blanket rejection of anything *boko* than Yusuf's attempts to distinguish *boko* knowledge from the system imparting it:

Honestly, they don't like the Western education and if they see you reading something in English, they will shout at you. (FM5; a similar point was made by FM8)

Western education is completely *haram* there, especially for women, and if you show anything to do with Western education, they will kill you. (FM14)

However, we also encountered more complicated accounts of the position of Western knowledge within the insurgency. In the experience of many former members,

individuals with Western education (just like individuals with in-depth religious knowledge) occupied a higher status inside the insurgency than non-educated members, not least because of the practical and tactical advantages that their knowledge could bring to the insurgents. One of our respondents, who had attended senior secondary school before joining the insurgency, explained:

[W]henever they capture someone educated, be it Islamic or Western, they like it, they can be beneficial, he should not be killed, not be harmed, and not be allowed to go . . . if they have such a person in captivity, they treat him with respect and they give him whatever he wants, and sometimes even the place where he sleeps is different from ours. (FM5)

The same respondent elaborated when asked whether his own school knowledge had benefited him inside the insurgency:

Yes . . . sometimes their phones will go on mute, and they are unable to unmute it, they will tell us, 'You that went to school should help us,' you see a grown-up man, but he cannot operate a phone properly. (FM5)

Our respondents also emphasized that recruits and captives able to handle modern technology were valued within the insurgency. As outlined earlier, Shekau had declared himself in favour of modern technology, yet claimed that attending Western education was not necessary to acquire relevant technical knowledge. In practice, however, it was the Western-educated who knew (or were believed to know) how to handle such technology:

[I]f they capture a 'doctor', [or] a teacher, they keep him because he is useful for them and will teach them 'laptop' or some technology . . . like a teacher, if they get him, they like that very much. (FM10)

[A]nything to do with phones, I'm the one doing it for them, anything complicated, anything to do with security on laptops, I can solve it for them, that is why I was more important to them . . . they used to search for those who have gone to school in the villages around [and forced them to join] . . . they even searched for those who have camera and computer knowledge. Initially they were saying *haram* and disbelief, that is how they deceived people. (FM3)

Medical knowledge or training was also considered an asset to the insurgency, both to treat the wounded and to dispense raided medicines, as described by this respondent:

[W]e took those with Western knowledge that is useful to us. For instance, we took a doctor from Konduga . . . At Sambisa, he was always with Shekau, he was very important to us . . . Before getting him, we did not have a qualified doctor, only those that have some knowledge of health that administer drugs through trial and error, they amputate unnecessarily. (FM17)

Another set of individuals discussed as being an asset to the insurgency were car mechanics. It was argued that their Western education made them particularly useful, allowing them to disable car security features and 'even read the car's manual to know more about the car so as to repair it' (FM9).

Knowledge of the English language was also discussed as being of strategic advantage:

[The insurgency leadership] even told members that, if possible, learn the English language . . . it is important to them, in areas of suicide bombing⁹ and also if they send you to buy a vehicle for them and if you meet security personnel on the road, if you understand English or the pidgin English, you will find your way, that is why they are using that. (FM3)

Another respondent corroborated this, arguing that the insurgency leadership used people fluent in English to 'speak to the world through the *boko*, through English, they will make you talk, and it will be useful to them' (FM4). This respondent also asserted that Shekau himself had learned English and French from captured teachers, a claim echoed by another respondent:

[T]here are big [educated] people he kept purposely in his house to teach computer and 'ABC' to the leader, nobody has access to them . . . Their duty is to teach 'laptop' and English . . . for example if he gets a highly educated person in the bush or during an attack, he will hide [that person] and provide him with all his needs, his duty is to teach only, and he will not allow other members to know [about that]. (FM13)

Another member refuted that Shekau learned English in the bush, arguing that he had learned it much earlier (FM10).¹⁰ Nonetheless, the – albeit potentially unsubstantiated – belief that Shekau secretly sought out such knowledge in the bush highlights the ambiguity surrounding Western education inside the insurgency. The former members cited here clearly perceived Western knowledge to be advantageous, suspected the insurgency leadership of secretly believing this too, despite their avowed opposition, and acknowledged the hypocrisy of this (e.g. FM7; FM13). It is unsurprising, then, that most of our interlocutors voiced positive views on Western education, reinforced by experiences they had after leaving the insurgency, as explored in the next section.

Before moving on to that, we would like to stress that, while our respondents highlighted that Western education could bestow a certain status upon insurgency members, ultimately, having strategically useful knowledge could not protect recruits and captives from extreme violence if they were perceived as not fully endorsing the insurgency:

⁹ The respondent did not elaborate on the ways in which knowledge of the English language would be helpful for suicide bombing. Given his later comment on security personnel, he might have been referring to the fact that an English speaker may be less likely to arouse suspicion at security checkpoints.

¹⁰ Abubakar Monguno pointed out to us that Shekau had attended Higher Islamic College in Maiduguri, where English is taught as a minor but compulsory subject.

[B]ut even if you have Western education and religious education, if you say, 'What you are doing is not correct and I cannot follow you,' in the end, they will just kill you. (FM4)

Former members' perspectives on Western education today

The former members we interviewed almost unanimously professed being interested in Western education, stating, for example:

Western education is not that *haram* to me, because as of now I am even planning to join. (FM4)

Western education is better [than *sangayya*/Qur'anic education] as for now and it's going to be useful. (FM8)

However, some had lingering doubts about the permissibility of certain practices, notably the mixing of genders in the classroom, and specific teaching content, such as parts of the geography curriculum discussed earlier (e.g. FM4; FM14).

Several respondents stated that their children were currently attending Western education (FM3; FM10; FM15; FM16; FM17), or that they had taken steps to resume their own studies (FM5), and one respondent was currently enrolled in adult literacy classes (FM6). This gives us some confidence that their professed interest in Western education was genuine, even though we remain aware of the risk that other respondents may have stated socially acceptable views in the context of the interview rather than their honest perspectives.

Two respondents (both educated in Qur'anic schools) invoked religion to justify why they thought it was legitimate to seek Western education:

God Almighty wanted to ease things for us and that is why he brought Western knowledge upon us ... Because of this I cannot say *boko* is *haram* ... God Almighty says you should seek for knowledge, not just Qur'an or Islamic knowledge but any kind. (FM2)

[E]ven some prophets like Yusuf, [and] Shuaib have sought knowledge from non-Muslims ... That made me realize that *boko* is not *haram*. (FM10)

Our respondents emphasized that, especially since leaving the insurgency, they had seen the practical importance of Western education. This included the mundane details of everyday life, as highlighted by this respondent who recounted his experience in custody:

[T]here was a time they gathered us at Ramat [Ramat Polytechnic Maiduguri] and many of us don't know how to write our names and somebody wrote them for us ... If I knew school, I would be the one writing my name ... I have so many more [examples of how *boko* education is important] ... how to operate your phone properly and to read and understand sign boards, so many ways in which it is important. (FM11; similar points were made by FM8)

Another respondent discussed in similar terms the time he had spent at an 'Operation Safe Corridor' rehabilitation facility in Gombe State:

[T]he knowledge of *boko*, I enjoyed it very much. Before, I don't know how to read or write, when I went to Gombe, they taught us how to read and write, now I can read and write to some extent; now is the time of awareness, for instance, if you have no knowledge of *boko*, you cannot operate big phones. (FM10)

Another respondent referred to the wider societal benefits of Western education:

[W]ho is producing drugs or medication? If a person has studied, he can mix chemicals to produce drugs or medication for us ... you see this cloth I'm wearing is made of cotton, and for it to become cloth is only with Western knowledge, so Western education is important ... when a woman is in labour, where should I take her? To hospital ... So, who established the hospital? It is *boko*. (FM10)

Respondents also stressed how Western education was relevant to accessing job opportunities, notably with one of the many humanitarian NGOs active in north-eastern Nigeria since the beginning of the insurgency:

[T]he school is 'very important'¹¹ because there is nothing you can do in the world now without knowledge, even in terms of jobs, you cannot secure a job with[out] knowledge, there is one NGO, they call it 360,¹² they are recruiting staff, but because of lack of education some people could not join. (FM3)

Western education is useful because, when we stayed at transit [camp], there were some people from GOAL Prime organization, they employed people with Western education, and even now I am with them. (FM5)

Both travel and the views and experiences of peers were highly relevant to how our respondents evaluated Western education, highlighting the importance of social context for how people view this education system. One respondent explained that he came to see Western education in a positive light after travelling to Lagos 'because ... [he] interacted with non-Muslims and even white people' (FM2). Another respondent explained that he was favourably disposed towards Western education today because of the support he had received from his Western-educated friend:

I benefited in many aspects, there was my childhood friend, we grew up together, he has gone to Western school and joined the military, he is a soldier now, and he was instrumental to my release from prison, and since I came out,

¹¹ The words 'very important' were in English, while the rest of the quote has been translated from Kanuri.

¹² This is a reference to FHI (Family Health International) 360 (see <<https://www.fhi360.org/>>).

he has been giving me money, sometimes he will give me up to 20,000 naira, he is helping me a lot. (FM7)

Several respondents highlighted the social mobility that their peers, who had successfully pursued Western education, had achieved, comparing the latter's experience positively to their own:

[W]hen we came out, we regretted seriously ... most of our colleagues that we left behind [when joining the insurgency] have become something in life, some have finished school and obtained government jobs, some operate vehicles, some are teachers. (FM3; similar comments were made by FM5 and FM16)

If we had attended school, none of this would have happened and I would've become something important, maybe a councillor or even senator. It is not possible to achieve all these things without going to school. If I see my friends that attended school, I cry at times, I see them driving [Toyota] Camry, [Peugeot] 406, Golf, and here I am suffering and all because I did not attend school. (FM2)

Youth participation in violent conflict has been discussed as a form of 'social navigation' through which young people seek to achieve social mobility and avoid 'social death' (Vigh 2006). Stressing how Western education had allowed their peers to get ahead in life, while their own participation in the insurgency had led them to a dead end, our respondents evaluated both Western education and the insurgency in light of the opportunities they offered, concluding that Western education would have been the better bet.

Our respondents' professed interest in Western education did not blind them to the obstacles they, or people in a similar position to them, were likely to face in trying to access it, highlighting again the ambiguity surrounding Western education. One respondent in his twenties explained:

We want to be educated because we want to help the nation and help Islam, [but] we are poor, and we don't have anything. You cannot seek for knowledge without any money in your hands. (FM2; similar views were expressed by FM1, FM6 and FM15)

Interest in Western education also did not eclipse scepticism about how attainable its presumed benefits in terms of job opportunities were for poor people, as voiced by this respondent, also in his twenties:

[M]y mother and father don't have anything, so if I go to school and succeed, I will be able to help them. But I will prefer to start a business on my own because getting a job is not easy and I have seen so many graduates without jobs. (FM1)

Finally, our respondents' views of education were shaped by their experience of having been led to believe in an ideology they later discovered to be wrong or misguided. This

experience led some to seek education, while making others reluctant to engage with it. This held true for both Western and religious knowledge. The following respondent, a man in his late thirties who was hoping to enrol at MOGOCOLIS, the Mohammed Goni College of Legal and Islamic Studies, argued that having both Western and Islamic education was crucial to avoid being manipulated in the future:

Those that combine Arabic knowledge and English/Western (*nasara*) is the best way of studying, it increases knowledge, because if a small child grows up and he has knowledge of *boko* and Islam, it will be difficult to mislead this child, but what of the child that for instance doesn't have knowledge of Islam but only Western knowledge, he can be misled easily. But if you know both, you cannot be misled. (FM13)

This respondent continued:

The disadvantage of [being a] terrorist is more than anything you can think of. Even now, I want to go back to school, to learn . . . they came and misled us [in the area of] Islamic [studies], maybe next time they will use Western education to mislead us. If I have knowledge, no one can do that. (FM13)

Another respondent who had only Qur'anic education emphasized wanting to deepen his Islamic education 'because there are so many aspects I want to clarify for myself and I want *malam* [the Islamic teacher] to clear doubt for me' (FM2). Yet other respondents had become sceptical of either all education or specific types of education as a consequence of their experiences within the insurgency:

[Asked which type of school he preferred:] Western education, I fear the *sangayya* [Qur'anic education system] because of how we were misled. People should avoid certain books. (FM12)

[Asked if he had planned when to return to school:] [T]here is not any school that I will attend again, I am tired of studying, I am tired. Studying? Seriously, studying has some negative effects. It has taken me to places that you don't know. (FM8)

The legacies of eroded trust in the intentions of education providers will be a lasting challenge for education reconstruction in north-east Nigeria.

Conclusion

Academic studies exploring the nexus between education and militant jihadism have been few and far between. Stepping into this void, we scrutinized the relationship between Western education and the Boko Haram insurgency in north-east Nigeria. By drawing on data from interviews and group conversations with former members and situating them within north-east Nigeria's wider socio-economic and political context, this article moves beyond the narrow focus on tactics and propaganda that has dominated some of the more sensationalist reporting on militant jihadist groups

targeting Western educational institutions. Instead, we centred the experiences and perspectives of ordinary members.

In empirical terms, our findings suggest that, rather than being a primary concern for members of the Boko Haram insurgency, education-related grievances were part of a wider set of grievances feeding alienation from the (postcolonial) Nigerian state, of which Western-style schools were perceived to be an outpost. This bespeaks the inherently political nature of education. It matters a great deal who provides it and what their agenda is perceived to be.

The knowledge imparted through Western-style schools occupied an ambiguous status within the insurgency. Despite ideological messaging to the contrary, Western knowledge was sought after, and Western-educated members enjoyed a certain level of privilege. Avowed ideological opposition was at loggerheads with the practical and tactical needs of the insurgency, which dominated decision making on the ground. Our respondents did not fail to notice this contradiction as well as the tangible status benefits Western education could offer even inside Boko Haram. This highlights that the insurgency incompletely challenged hegemonic knowledge hierarchies positing Western education as desirable (Nyamnjoh 2012). The hypocrisy of the insurgency leadership regarding Western education weakened the persuasive power of its *boko*-critical discourses. These findings highlight how important it is to look behind the scenes of armed opposition groups and to not take jihadi rhetoric at face value.

Experiences and encounters they had after leaving the insurgency further influenced our respondents' views of Western education. They witnessed first-hand how Western education was essential for accessing job opportunities. They noticed how Western education had allowed their peers, who had not joined the insurgency, to get ahead in life. Displacement and social dislocation in the wake of the insurgency also opened up spaces for new social encounters that affected how former members viewed Western education.

Most of our respondents concluded that Western education was useful to get ahead in life. Many sought either to acquire it themselves or to ensure that their children acquired it. They did not necessarily abandon all reservations against practices and curriculum content perceived to be un-Islamic, however, and some doubted that poor people could advance through Western education, highlighting persistent ambiguities and contradictions (cf. Paulson 2008: 3).

Our respondents' views of education were shaped by their experience of having been led to believe in an ideology they later discovered to be misguided. This experience made them acutely aware of how education can be used to manipulate and indoctrinate, echoing ideas around education's 'negative face' (Saltarelli and Bush 2000). Fears of falling prey to insidious hidden agendas aren't new and were the reason why some of our respondents had been reluctant to engage with Western education in the first place, before the insurgency. Interestingly, after leaving the insurgency, most felt that having 'more' education of all types was their best protection going forward. However, not all agreed, and some expressed wariness either of religious education providers or of 'education' altogether.

In terms of implications for policy, these findings highlight that (re-)building trust must be a crucial component of education reconstruction. Our article has highlighted that relationships with Western-educated individuals played an important role in nurturing positive views of this education system. Respondents explained that not

knowing anyone with Western education personally had made them receptive to *boko*-critical discourses. Similarly, respondents highlighted how their views on Western education had changed as a result of meeting and engaging with people who had such an education. Reconstruction efforts can build on this insight by facilitating exchange and connection between people of different educational backgrounds.

Finally, respondents paid close attention to the actual uses to which Western education could be put and remarked on instances where it enabled social status (e.g. within the insurgency) or facilitated social mobility (e.g. by opening up job opportunities post-exit). Respondents also acknowledged, however, that many graduates struggle to find meaningful employment. This highlights that, to avoid future disenchantment, education interventions must pay close attention to whether the skills they impart can indeed be translated into meaningful opportunities.

In terms of the wider significance of our study, first, we have sought to show the value of bringing insights from education scholarship to bear on analyses of militant jihadi groups, including Boko Haram. We have highlighted how crucial it is to pay attention to the social and political relations in which education is embedded if we want to understand how it is experienced and perceived. We have argued that it is important to move away from dichotomic views of Western education as either 'good' or 'bad' to open up space for acknowledging the ambiguities and contradictions shaping many people's experiences of Western education.

Second, we hope that the insights presented here on Boko Haram can help inform future scholarship on the nexus between education and militant jihadism more broadly. Our findings have highlighted that ideological coherence cannot be taken for granted and that proclaimed opposition to Western education at leadership level is a poor proxy for the perspectives and experiences of the rank and file. Instead, researchers may want to unpick the actual status of Western knowledge and Western-educated individuals within jihadi movements and scrutinize their practical and tactical significance. Finally, scholars may want to pay attention to the social, political and economic contexts that ordinary members of such movements inhabit and navigate, as these are likely to shape their views on education at least as much as the discourses of their leaders.

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