The phrase Boko Haram contains no etymologically Hausa word*

Victor Manfredi
African Studies Center, Boston University

Newman (2013) argues that the Hausa word bóokòo has no listed (dictionary) sense that’s etymologically derived as a loanword from English book. This claim, which has been repeated by ‘The Correct Answer’ (2013), 5, rests on the consistent historical literature that the sense of ‘non-Islamic literacy’, as conveyed by the first word of the phrase Boko Haram, evokes English book as a metonymy for the Roman alphabet introduced in elite schools of the Apartheid-style British colonial regime in Northern Nigeria circa 1900.1 Newman’s counterproposal, which he credits originally to Muhammad (1968), attributes the meaning of ‘non-Islamic literacy’—call it bóokòo—to a “semantic extension” of an older Hausa lexical item bóokò, meaning ‘deceit’.2

Newman’s proposal, like any etymology, is a historical hypothesis resting on independent criteria of nonaccidental phonetic and semantic similarity, as compared to alternative possibilities that may be more or less likely on logical and empirical grounds (cf. Bloomfield 1933, 15). For phonetics, Newman’s case is plausible if speculative, but for semantics it’s highly dubious and a more plausible alternative exists. The phonetic irregularities of bóokòo, for example, make it even less likely than what Newman implies, and as for the semantic arbitrariness of (1) undermines the Muhammad/Newman etymology, no viable option remains for relating bóokòo to indigenous vocabulary items.

On the phonetic side, Newman notes that a Hausa nativisation of English book would be expected to have a high vowel [u] not a mid vowel [o], as in parallel cases like English book > Hausa ka{s}ekè (not *bóokò). The point is relevant only if accompanied by a guarantee that Hausa borrowed English book directly, not via an intermediary. In Kanuri, for example, the vowel of bóökè is ‘school, Western education’ is indeed mid (Cyffer & Hutchison 1990, 20). Here and now I’m unable to prove that any local language played an intermediary role in a borrowing from English to Hausa, but the Kanuri datum suggests that such mediation could ‘solve’ the vowel height problem where Hausa is concerned. Adoption pathways aside, phonetic irregularity is evidently more frequent in loans from earlier stages of nativization; e.g. yorùbá has many cases presenting unexpected vowels, like fìbì ‘(photograph)’, ìgíjì ‘English’ and gírìjì ‘garage’, but none of these inscrutable mysteries puts the English etymologies in doubt. Spelling pronunciation of <b o o k > should also be entertained as a promising explanation for the unexpected [o] of bóokòo.2

Regardless of how the phonetics works out, no etymology stands on one leg, and the semantic leg of the Muhammad-Newman conjecture teeters on the edge of wishfulness. Newman observes two bound collocations of Hausa where the presence of the bóokòo meaning is undeniable: bìiri-bọokọ ‘clever deception’, lit. ‘monkey-fraud’, (none given) and bóokọ-bọokọ ‘deceptive/fraudulent’ (with constructional vowel-length). Both formations are clearly older than the arrival of British colonial schools with alphabetic books and non-Islamic instruction, and from this fact, Newman rightly infers that bóokò is significantly “older” than bóokòo. What’s less clear is whether the modern bóokòo, referring to romanized (non-Ajami) Hausa orthography (Skei 1996), 24; Newman 2000, 726; Jaggar 2001, 698; Phillips 2004, 57 fn8—all cited by Newman 2013—has any etymological relationship to bóokò. Whatever. Newman assumes that such a relationship exists, specifically endorsing the proposal by Muhammad (1968) that the original meaning of ‘deceit’ evolved to include “reading or writing which is not connected with Islam”. Newman schematises the shift—which he calls an “extension”—from bóokòo > bóokò as follows3

(1) ‘sham, fraud > western education (including the writing of Hausa in Roman script)” (2013, 8)

In pragmatic terms, the derivation in (1) entails a negative value judgement of non-Islamic culture. This valuation may well have been and continue to be salient, as a matter of political ideology, for many/most Hausa speakers living under British military occupation and their rule, British colonial authorities decreed a ban on Christian missionary activities in the Muslim emirates, cutting off these regions from the missionary educational enterprise, the major instrument for the spread of Western education in much of Nigeria and Africa.

The British went even further, establishing a two-tiered educational system that made colonial education an elitist affair, reserved for a few privileged Northern Nigerians. The first school system, exemplified by the prestigious Katsina College founded in 1921, was a vector for ideas and practices deemed un-Islamic. (Ochonu 2014, 2015) Western education was a two-tiered educational system that made colonial education an elitist affair, reserved for a few privileged Northern Nigerians. The first school system, exemplified by the prestigious Katsina College founded in 1921, was a vector for ideas and practices deemed un-Islamic. (Ochonu 2014, 2015).

1. Northern Nigeria became a British Protectorate in 1900 and colonial control was consolidated between then and 1907. Unwilling to offend the Muslim populations of many provinces, and wary of alienating Muslim elites the colonizers were cultivating as allies in their rule, British colonial authorities decreed a ban on Christian missionary activities in the Muslim emirates, cutting off these regions from the missionary educational enterprise, the major instrument for the spread of Western education in much of Nigeria and Africa.

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2. Among other spelling pronunciations of English loans in 9a languages, such as f[u]/wl ‘petrol’ (<fuel) instead of [fyw]wl.

3. The same bóokòo > bóokò implication is alluded to, if not explicitly endorsed, by Skinner (1977, 153). Brigaglia suggests a more nuanced variant of (1), glossing bóokò as “‘school, Western education’ is also connected with modern education’” (2012, 3), but remains agnostic about (1) and the more conventional view expressed in (2) below.

4. For example, in the July 1984… issue of Afkar magazine, Ahmad Hallirio Arfani attributed the Romanization of Hausa to a missionary and colonial conspiracy to undermine Islamic civilization and ultimately destroy Islam. (Philips 2004, 55)

5. I will use this opportunity to give government some advice if they are going to do something like polio [immunisation] in the future. They need to contact NGos [people like us] because we live among them [the masses], we used to help them, and if we talk to them, they will accept. But if they use ifi boko [those who are like Westerners; literally, sons of Western education], they will not accept because they don’t like ‘yan boko.

6. In Northern Nigeria there is often a distinction between makaratan buks (schools providing ‘Western’ education) and makaratan addini (school for religious instruction) or makaratan allin (school of the slate understood to be Koranic schools). (Danjibo 2009, 8)
possessed an older and well integrated Arabic loanword denoting ‘book’, given in Roman form as either letaфи or litфи. This situation is precisely parallel to standard textbook cases of loanword narrowing like English beef and pork, which were adopted from Old French without displacing native cow and pig, acquiring instead an extra, disambiguating semantic feature such that the loanwords denote only the flesh of the respective species whose kinds they etymologically name (Bloomehold 1933, 465). Beyond the simplicity and naturalness of the narrowing explanation, one more factor motivating (reducing the arbitrariness of) the semantic shift in (2) is the evident fact that the source language of бо́кó хара́н, on this hypothesis, is identical to the additional semantic feature [+English] that’s responsible for the narrowing, excluding Qur’anic literacy which is intrinsically [-English]. Such metonymic identity must be pure coincidence under hypothesis (1), further straining credulity in that scenario. The example illustrates how etymology clarifies the difference between, and interaction of, reference and sense in the evolution of social institutions (Benveniste 1969, 11f).

Accidental homophony—here, between бо́кó хара́н and бо́кó ха́рм—is never the most elegantly satisfying solution for a lexicographer, but it can’t be excluded априори and in this instance there’s no good alternative in view. Moreover, there’s independent reason to impugn the semantic mechanism proposed in (1) as folk etymology, something that tends to occur whenever ideological motives—in this case, colonial culture clash—encourage “secondary reasoning and… reinterpretations” (Boas 1910, 67). Such political imperatives are urgently important to observe and understand, but they don’t suspend normal requirements of evidence and inference.

In sum, if бо́кó ха́рм is indeed an English loanword that developed by semantic narrowing as in (2), in accordance with the massive consensus of historians and пае Muhammad and Newman’s ideologically tendentious hypothesis in (1), then it means that no part of the catchphrase Boko Haram is etymologically Hausa at all.6

The choice between etymologies (1) and (2) also has less recondite consequences. According to primary observations in the cities of Niamey, Maradi and Zinder north of Nigeria’s nominal border, Boko Haram was derived as a “nickname… given to the movement by outsiders” by truncating a slogan repeated by the late Mohammed Yusuf on video discs, forbidding not just the colonial European format of literacy but any employment (а́би) with the neocolonial state: “Boko haram da а́би nematt haram” (Chouin & al. 2014, 215f). Such textual analysis documents the movement’s overtly insurrectionary stance, years before the allegedly radicalising moment when Yusuf was publicly executed by police “hours after soldiers arrested him and handed him over” (Ogúñí-Ale 2014, cf. Duodu 2009).8 Yusuf regarded alphabetic literacy as an index of the economic failure of colonial and successor regimes, roughly on the semantic lines of (2), not as a mere breach of doctrinal religion as proponents of (1) would have it. He reportedly told his followers, “Your education is useless, tear [up] your certificates” (Obasanjо 2015).9

As to the rapid growth of the sect, this is much less mysterious than the name, and needs no supernormal cause: Sheik Abba Ajì, a Maiduguri-based Muslim scholar considered to be moderate, once attributed the rate of conversion to this group to the level of joblessness and hopelessness in the present generation of youths. “The situation is so bad. People are hungry, people are suffering. People see clearly that leaders are cheating. Today you are with a local government chairman or commissioner who has nothing prior to his election or appointment; tomorrow, he builds a big house and owns fleets of cars. So the people see these acts and they are beginning to revolt”, he said. (Salkida 2009)

Were it not for a country like Nigeria, where government has failed to provide basic life support for its citizens, late Yusuf may have never thrived. [In] a functional environment with opportunities for all, equal justice for all, fairness to all and governed by leaders that are responsible for their people, the rade and retrogressive teachings of late Yusuf would have not received the attention of about a million followers all over the north. (Salkida 2010)

Thus the Boko phenomenon doesn’t reduce to cultural/ideological expressions of “religious virulence”, “a religious virus” or “Fulanisation” (Søyémká 2012, Sóyémká аджн Ajáyí 2019, cf. Montcels 2020), despite the superficial impression to that effect conveyed by the Hausa folk etymology in (1). Instead, expressed in whichever language, бо́кó includes a basic element of class rebellion against proverbial ‘pen robbers’ who practice neocolonial “authority stealing” (Anikulá ̀pó Kúí 1980) as well understood by popular ‘common sense’ (Gramsci 1935, 231). This and similar movements thrive in empty political-economic spaces relinquished by failed/failing post-colonial states (Foucher 2020).

Dogo Turenchi Halal!

POSTSCRIPT 28 MAY 2017


28 October 2018

Nagarajan & al. (2017, 2018) provide sociological background on armed youth recruitment and enlistment in the Borno area.

24 February 2021

Boko’s Salafi ideology is detailed by Sounaye (2017).

REFERENCES


6. The haram part being obviously Arabic. More accurately: any Hausa input to the name Boko Haram is nonlexical. Phonetics aside, Hausa may well have contributed productive nominalization of the copular sentence [бо́кó хара́н] and in that sense it’s correct to describe the name as “an amalgam of pidgin English, Arabic and Hausa” (Nositer 2014). A similar quotative truncation circa 1980 produced the label Ма́й-Татине (Gramsì 1935, 231). This and similar movements thrive in empty political-economic spaces relinquished by failed/failing post-colonial states (Foucher 2020).

7. And Jàfar Mahmoud denounced Yusuf by negating both of his conjunctures: “Boko da а́ййн гуяаннаяну бу харуман бу ха” (Brigadja 2012, 22).

8. “An eccentric and unorthodox preacher with a tiny following was given posthumous fame and following by his extrajudicial murder at the hands of the police” (Bájì 2014). Yusuf’s execution was allegedly ordered by Modu Shemíño, the Bornu governor who rode to power on official “political father of Nigeria” (Adibe, J. [2014]. I’m [the] political father of Nigeria - OBJ. www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/post/2014/05/14/boko-haram-nigeria-adibe.

9. Thus, irrespective of espoused religion, residents of the state capital Maiduguri have been singled out for attack at rural roadblocks (Montcels 2014, 9f. citing Idris & al. 2014). The same finding is well articulated by a leading journalist covering the Chibok mass abduction: Boko Haram… the name is often misconstrued. It isn’t… anti-Western, but it’s mostly about the Western educated elites who ran Nigeria for many years and who disenfranchised the north of Nigeria which still has high rates of poverty, high rates of illiteracy, high rates of unemployment (Ogbàádzí 2014).

By contrast, the fond elite-fixation of “[restarting the stalled nation-building process] by promoting ‘imagined community’ (Adibe 2014)” is earned at least an honorary Boko Haram doctorate, if not a full daddyfader title in the cult itself.