

The phrase *Boko Haram* contains no etymologically Hausa word*

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Newman (2013) argues that the Hausa word *bóokòò* has no listed (dictionary) sense that's etymologically derived as a loanword from English *book*. This claim, which he styles “The Correct Answer” (2013, 7), rejects the consensus of 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 *bóokòò*—to a “semantic extension” of an older Hausa lexical item *bóokòò*₁ meaning ‘deceit’.

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 alternative, to be presented here, denies that *bóokòò*₁ and *bóokòò*₂ are cognate—something Newman implicitly assumes.

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 *cook* > Hausa *kúunkúu* (not **kóokóo*). 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 *bok(è)o* ‘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 it’s well known that *Boko Haram* spread primarily through Kanuri-speaking agency (e.g. Bukarti 2021, 23) and a Kanuri etymology 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 *fótò* ‘photo(graph)’, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀sì* ‘English’ and *gàrèjì* ‘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 *bóokòò*₂.²

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 *bóokòò*₁ meaning is undeniable: *biri-boko* (‘clever deception’, lit. ‘monkey-fraud’, no tone given) and *bóokò-bóokò* ‘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 *bóokòò*₁ is significantly “older” than *bóokòò*₂. What’s less clear is whether the modern sense of *bóokòò*₂, referring to romanized (non-Ajami) Hausa orthography (Skinner 1996, 24; Newman 2000, 726; Jaggar 2001, 698; Phillips 2004, 57fn8—all cited by Newman 2013), has any etymological relationship to *bóokòò*₁ whatsoever. 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 *bóokòò*₁ > *bóokòò*₂ as follows.³

(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 successor regimes.⁴ From a strictly semantic angle, however, no simple mechanism motivates the arrow in (1), and Newman’s talk of “extension” doesn’t make it so. At best, the right side of (1) is an arbitrarily chosen instance of the left, selected from a potentially infinite set; certainly no necessity exists to choose the particular example of western schooling among all imaginable situations of perceived deception. And as the semantic arbitrariness of (1) undermines the Muhammad/Newman etymology, no viable option remains for relating *bóokòò*₁ and *bóokòò*₂ etymologically at all. What remains, in keeping with classical comparative method (Meillet 1925, 35), is the possibility of accidental homophony for these two listemes of the Hausa dictionary, nor can I see any empirical objection to a sequence of events where Hausa possessed *bóokòò*₁ as an old and indigenous vocabulary item, but then much later borrowed *book* from English (possibly via a neighboring indigenous language) and so obtained *bóokòò*₂ by the development in (2), cf. Loimeier (2012, 139), Hogan (2015).⁵

(2) *book* > a particular form and content of literacy, namely British colonial, alphabetic and non-Islamic

The semantic mechanism of (2) is less arbitrary than the alleged “extension” in (1). (2) is just a banal case of semantic *narrowing*, to be expected in view of the independent fact (which Newman himself notes) that, long before Lugard imposed the British *rāj*, Hausa already possessed an older and well integrated Arabic loanword denoting ‘book’, given in Roman form as either *letaafi* or *littafi*. This situation is precisely parallel to standard textbook cases of loanword narrowing like English *beef* and *pork*, which were adopted from Old French

* 1 May 2014, last updated 17 February 2022. Professors P. Newman (Indiana) and N. Cyffer (Vienna) kindly answered my naive questions about this matter via email, without necessarily endorsing anything in this note. Thanks for comments also to Professor S. Baldi (Napoli) and late Professor R. Schuh (Los Angeles). Newman’s blog came to my attention via languageblog.idc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=11954.

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.

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, catered exclusively to the sons of Muslim aristocratic allies of the British. The declared aim of the school was to educate potential emirs and aristocrats who would succeed their parents and continue to help the British administer their constituencies while British officers supervised—a colonial system called indirect rule.

The other branch of the colonial school system consisted of a few schools reserved almost exclusively for the sons of non-Muslim chiefs and big men who also played a supporting role in colonization. This group of schools was designed to train teachers, clerks, and workers for the colonial civil service.

While missionary education was restricted to a few non-Muslim provinces of colonial Northern Nigeria, and the exclusive state-funded schools educated a select group of privileged boys, the vast majority of Muslim Northern Nigerians remained without any form of Western education. This educational lag also persisted because there was suspicion in the Muslim emirates that Western education was a vector for ideas and practices deemed un-Islamic. (Ochonu 2014)

2. Among other spelling pronunciations of English loans in 9ja languages, such as [fú(w)èl] ‘petrol’ (< *fuel*) instead of [fyú(w)ùl].

3. The same *bóokòò*₁ > *bóokòò*₂ scenario is alluded to, if not explicitly endorsed, by Skinner (1977, 153). Brigaglia suggests a more nuanced variant of (1), glossing *bóokòò*₁ as “a mimetic costume”... indicating the inauthenticity of the cultural practices associated with modern education” (2012, 3), but remains agnostic between (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. (Phillips 2004, 55)

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 big 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 *yan boko* [those who are like Westerners; literally, sons of Western education], they will not accept because they don’t like *yan boko*. (Renne 2010, 46f. quoting “one community leader” in Zaria)

5. In Northern Nigeria there is often a distinction between *makarantan boko* (schools providing ‘Western’ education) and *makarantan addini* (school for religious instruction) or *makarantan allo* (school of the slate understood to be Koranic schools). (Danjibo 2009, 8)

without displacing native *cow* and *pig*, acquiring instead an extra, disambiguating semantic feature such that the loanwords denote only the *flesh* of the respective animals whose kinds they etymologically name (Bloomfield 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 *bóókòò*₂, 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 *bóókòò*₁ and *bóókòò*₂—is never the most elegantly satisfying solution for a lexicographer, but it can't be excluded *a priori* 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 *bóókòò*₂ is indeed an English loanword that developed by semantic narrowing as in (2), in accordance with the massive consensus of historians and *pape* 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 (*aiké'n*) with the neocolonial state: “*Boko haram da aiké'n gomenati haram*” (Chouin & al. 2014, 215).⁷ 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” (Ogúnlesi 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 certificate” (Qbásanjó 2015).⁹

Indeed the status of (1) as secondary/‘folk’ etymology independent of historical development (2) does not make it irrelevant to social actors. On the contrary, the abusive ethno-religious-nationalist flourish of *bóókòò*₂, even if resting on a mere pun, is ripe for deployment:

Sans doute Mohamed Yusuf... a-t-il trouvé ce double sens judicieux, car il était effectivement très critique envers l'école occidentale apportée par la colonisation, mais surtout envers la fonction publique et l'État qui en sont issus et, plus généralement encore, envers le mode de vie occidental, les tenant pour des sources de l'immoralité et de la corruption de la société nigérienne contemporaine. [Mohammed Yusuf certainly... appreciated this double sense [of *bóókòò*] as he was severely critical of western schooling brought by colonialism and especially of the public administration and state structure it enabled, as well as of the western lifestyle which he blamed for the immorality and corruption of present Nigerian social life. (Foucher 2021)

As to the rapid growth of the sect, this is much less mysterious than the name, and needs no supernatural cause:

Sheik Abba Aji, 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 rude 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” (Sóyínká 2012, Sóyínká *apud* Ajáyí 2019, cf. Montclos 2020), despite the superficial impression to that effect conveyed by the Hausa folk etymology in (1). Instead, expressed in whichever language, *Boko* includes a basic element of class rebellion against proverbial ‘pen robbers’ who practice neocolonial “authority stealing” (Aníkúlá.pò Kú.ti 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

Much of the above is covered in a 48-minute video documentary by Xavier Muntz, posted 22 Dec 2016 12:06 GMT: *Boko Haram; behind the rise of Nigeria's armed group. An investigation into the origins and ideology of the rebel group and its bloody rise.* www.aljazeera.com/programmes/specialseries/2016/11/boko-haram-rise-nigeria-armed-group-161101145500150.html

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).

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 [*boko* [[Ø] *haram*]], and in that sense it's correct to describe the name as “an amalgam of pidgin English, Arabic and Hausa” (Nossiter 2014). A similar quotative truncation circa 1980 produced the label *Mai-Tatsine* from a prohibitory shibboleth expressed in ungrammatical Hausa “*Allah ya tsine...*” (Hiskett 1987, 221).
7. And Ja'far Mahmoud denounced Yusuf by negating both of his conjuncts: “*Boko da aikin gwamnati ba haramun ba ne*” (Brigaglia 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” (Buhari 2015). Yusuf's execution was allegedly ordered by Modu Sherif(f), the Borno governor who rode to power on official *shari'a* but whose private paramilitary went rogue and fused with the original Wahhābi into the BH insurgency (Vicky 2012, Davis 2014, Fálànà 2014, Mustapha 2014). The direct responsibility of the Nigeria Police Force for this one political hit job does not, of course, erase the Nigerian Army's own extensive record of systematic war crimes, including during anti-BH operations (Amnesty International 2015).
9. Thus, irrespective of espoused religion, residents of the state capital Maiduguri have been singled out for attack at rural roadblocks (Montclos 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's not... 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. (Qlópáádé 2014).

By contrast, the fond elite-fixation of “[r]estarting the stalled nation-building process” by promoting “imagined community” (Ádíbè 2014 glibly citing Anderson 1983) ignores the headline of Anderson's namedropped book, that “print-languages laid the basis for national consciousness” (1983 44). Ádíbè cites no evidence of recent progress in mass literacy such as his thesis would require. On the contrary, connoisseurs of federal education policy will recall how General Qbásanjó (wearing civilian cloak) in a fit of pique abolished the National Institute for Nigerian Languages in 2006 (Aziza 2011, Wakil 2012). By this rabid act alone demolishing Crowther's heritage of indigenous print-languages since 1849 (Ajáyí 1960, Fáfúnwá & al. 1989), the “political father of Nigeria” (Adébáyó 2013) earned himself at least an honorary *Boko Haram* doctorate, if not a full *daddy pastor* title in the cult itself.

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