COVID-19, Boko Haram and the Pursuit of Survival: A Battle of Lives against Livelihoods

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With more than 10,000 COVID-19 confirmed cases and death toll just shy of 300 as of June 02, 2020, Nigeria is the third most impacted country by the novel coronavirus in Africa. In the wake of the pandemic, non-essential movements may have lulled under a nationwide lockdown, but not the insurgent violence of Boko Haram. Described by the United Nations (UN) as “the worst humanitarian crisis in the world” (UN News, 2016; Withnall, 2016), the Boko Haram insurgency has killed more than 36,000 people and displaced at least two million people in northeastern Nigeria since 2009. Now in the wake of COVID-19, the million-dollar question is—“how an ‘unsettled’ population will come to be settled within regions that remain fundamentally ‘unsettled’” (Simone, 2020: 8). In April 2020, the elusive Boko Haram faction leader Abubakar Shekau issued an audio recording claiming that the coronavirus was brought about by “evil” and that his version of Islam is an “anti-virus” (Anka, 2020). The group blatantly flouts social distancing precautions. As Shekau revealed: “Here… We join hands, we eat from one bowl, we are doing very very very well” (ibid.). So well that the group has been on the offensive since the pandemic began, killing 92 Chadian soldiers on March 23, 2020, in the deadliest attack in that country’s history (AP, 2020a). Nigeria’s lockdown measures have weakened people’s ability to
eat and move about freely, making the poor in northeastern Nigeria ever more susceptible to Boko Haram’s gilded recruitment strategy. More than half the Nigerian population live on less than $2 a day, and most have to go out everyday to earn a living.

In recent months, Boko Haram has ramped up its deadly attacks on road users in northeast Nigeria, making it difficult for humanitarian workers to gain access to about 7.9 million people—more than one in two people in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa states—in need of humanitarian assistance and most vulnerable to the spread of COVID-19 (OCHA, 2020). Grave concerns have been expressed about the potentially “devastating consequences” of the coronavirus pandemic for the already weakened immune system of northeastern Nigeria, where 60% of health facilities are functioning partially or not at all, and there is poor access to safe drinking water (many IDPs face long waiting lines to fetch drinking water) and sanitation infrastructure (UN News, 2020). With about 200 million people, Nigeria has only 13 molecular laboratories able to test for the coronavirus (Daily Trust, 2020). Internally displaced persons (IDPs) are especially vulnerable to the arrival of COVID-19 since they already face outbreaks of several deadly diseases that are already present in the region, including cholera, malaria, and measles. COVID-19 has interrupted the administering of immunizations against cholera and measles as well as polio, putting the lives of an estimated 80 million children at further risk (AP, 2020b). Overcrowding at the IDP camps in northeastern Nigeria is another major concern, making social distancing almost impossible. However, more than the lack of capacity to deal with the virus, the biggest challenge of COVID-19 is the attitude of a significant portion of average Nigerians. “If at all there is anything coronavirus it’s for rich men not for the poor man,” said a middle-aged Nigerian man. “So, we are free men and will continue to live free. That’s their business.” Another Nigerian citizen insisted that, “Nothing shows
me the sickness is in this country. I can’t wear gloves and be covering that I can’t breathe well because of a rumor outside of my country” (Al Jazeera, 2020).

Figure 1. State Specialist Hospital, Maiduguri, Borno State. Photo by Author, January 2018

In 2019 alone, 180,000 people fled their homes in northeastern Nigeria following an upsurge in the fighting. The vast bulk of those fleeing (largely women and children) ended up in severely overcrowded displacement camps in Borno state, the epicenter of the Boko Haram insurgency. Borno state has since become one of the largest centers of the spread of COVID-19 in Nigeria (with close to 300 confirmed cases and approaching 30 deaths as of June 02, 2020), after a health worker died from COVID-19 on 18 April, 2020 (Musa, 2020). “Mysterious deaths” have also been recorded in both Kano, the second largest city in Nigeria, and Yobe, one of the key states worst affected by the Boko Haram crisis, with many of the victims reportedly showing COVID-19 symptoms (Brown, 2020). Fears of unrecorded coronavirus surge have precipitated the
construction of quarantine shelters by the UN migration agency, International Organization for Migration (IOM), to help reduce the growing risk of virus spread by relocating people from congested camps to the new facilities. “Given the rapidly evolving situation in Nigeria,” says Franz Celestin, IOM Chief of Mission, “we must ensure that the health of displaced and host communities is a central part of our response” (UN News, 2020).

People fleeing from Boko Haram increasingly take up shelter in the relative safety of urban centers. In recent years, mass relocations to the capital cities of Maiduguri, Borno state, and Yola, Adamawa state, have resulted in overcrowding and precarious livelihoods for both residents and host communities. In Yola, for example, IDPs now outnumber the city’s population of 400,000 (Mark, 2015). The condition is further complicated by an unreliable power supply, mosquitoes, blocked roads, curfews, closed-down businesses, crowded hospitals, and food scarcity. Severe food insecurity in northeastern Nigeria occurred in part because months of fighting have cut off parts of the region from food aid. Emergency road blocks, curfews, and landmines have hampered efforts to deliver food aid to millions of people on the precipice of famine (Kah, 2017). The World Food Program has already named Nigeria as one of the 10 countries “on the brink of a hunger pandemic,” warning that the country faces “an excruciating trade-off between saving lives or livelihoods or, in a worst-case scenario, saving people from the coronavirus to have them die from hunger” (Picheta, 2020). The British anthropologist Mary Douglas tells us that, “the emergency system starts with a gradual tightening and narrowing of the normal distributive principle. It is foreseen that there would not be enough food for everybody. The emergency system starts to give short rations to the disadvantaged, the marginal, the politically ineffectual” (1987: 123).
Already living in what Henrik Vigh (2006: 105) calls a “social moratorium,” youth across Nigerian cities, from Lagos to Maiduguri, are acutely prone to feeling the sting of the COVID-19 emergency response measures as they are so often the first to be cut off from the distribution of livelihood resources and forced to fend for themselves. In the Nigerian capital Abuja, young men are reportedly looting trucks carrying bags of food, with no regard for social distancing. “People are hungry,” said one Nigerian youth. “Yes, if my job permits me to go out, Allah, I will go out. Even though I see army on the roads, I don’t care. I don’t care if army will kill me. I prefer to die by coronavirus than to die by hungry virus” (CNN, 2020). Other cities, like Lagos, have seen a surge in crime since the lockdown started. “We’ve decided to use whatever we have to defend ourselves, our people and our community,” said a local vigilante. Studies have shown that conditions of
immiseration may predispose youth to joining terror groups as a survival strategy (Agbiboa, 2013). As the sociologist Asef Bayat (2007: 579-580) tells us, “poverty and precarious life… condition the dispossessed to embrace ideologies and movements that offer communities of salvation and support while preaching radical politics… the very existential character of the urban dispossessed, their ecological reality, renders them amenable to embrace the extremist ideas of radical Islam.”

So dire is the emergency system in northeastern Nigeria that many IDPs are more worried about what to eat than of Boko Haram attacks. Yet, the news is that things are about to worsen severely before they improve (Devermont, 2020). In the looming shadow of COVID-19, some IDPs are increasingly agitating to leave their overcrowded, squalid, and famished camps, which some call a “death sentence,” and return “home” to pick up the pieces of their lives. Girbua, a farmer from Goneri village in northern Yobe state, defied every hurdle to return to his battle-scarred community. Lamenting the gross lack of support from the Nigerian military, Girbua recounted:

They [Boko Haram] came to our community and drove us away for good three years. Our community was completely deserted without a single dog on the streets. There was a time when the army had a meeting to support Goneri people to go back to their community. We asked the army commander for his men to provide security for us to return home, but they denied us and told us we are on our own. This is a rural community; we don’t have anything to boast of. I sold some of the food crops I could salvage and animals remaining to arm the youths who were helping us ward off thieves even before the Boko Haram invasion. No one has ever supported us with anything (Interviewed on 19 October, 2019).

In Borno state, most local level conflict and, recently, COVID-19 stabilization campaigns depend on the Nigerian military ensuring access to main roads. As a result, humanitarian efforts have been
confined to those local government areas that are physically accessible, such as Maiduguri, Mafa, and Biu. About 800,000 poor people are still stuck in areas in northern Borno that are beyond the reach of humanitarian assistance. A senior United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) official charged with implementing an integrated community stabilization program in northeast Nigeria noted that, “Everything hinges on security, as all of our work requires access. Our first question is: Is the community accessible?” (Brechenmacher, 2019: 14). The situation is not helped by reports of the government’s withdrawal of troops from far-flung outposts in the countryside and gathering them into fortified settlements it calls “super-camps.” The super-camps are inside of congested garrison towns, where soldiers in recent years settled thousands of IDPs after armed insurgents (in some cases, soldiers) burnt their villages and chased them away (Olaleye, 2019).

The crisis of displacement deeply intertwines with (im)mobility and (in)accessibility. On the one hand, mobility is the ability to move or to be moved, and mobility and immobility unfold in a “pas de deux.” Mobility is also a primary source of power and inequality. As Beverly Skeggs (2004: 49) argues, “mobility and control over mobility both reflect and reinforce power. Mobility is a resource to which not everyone has an equal relationship.” Accessibility, on the other hand, reflects the potential of opportunities for interaction (Hansen, 1959), and is tied to what Arjun Appadurai (2004) calls “navigational capacity,” that is, the capacity of immobilized and disposable bodies to form aspirations and project themselves into the future. The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic amid the war against Boko Haram points to the centrality of transportation infrastructures (i.e. roads) to everyday survival in northeastern Nigeria. Here, “If you are not on the move, the chances of survival are diminished” (Mbembe 2018). Infrastructures, according to Brian Larkin (2013: 327), constitute “the architecture for circulation, literally producing the undergirding of modern
society” and generating “the ambient environment in everyday life.” Nigeria’s lockdown has made life increasingly difficult and precarious for the country’s quintessential infrastructure—its people. In conflict-ravaged northeast Nigeria, the poor cannot afford to “stay at home.” As one commercial driver in Maiduguri puts it: “If COVID-19 doesn’t kill you, hunger must kill you” (Personal communication, April 15, 2020).

In January 2020, Nigeria’s UN Humanitarian Coordinator, Edward Kallon, called attention to the worsening insecurity on major highways and supply routes across Borno state:

I am extremely worried by the increasingly insecure environment that humanitarians are working in to provide urgent and vital assistance to civilians affected by the crisis. The humanitarian community is troubled by the increasing trend in vehicular checkpoints set up by non-state armed groups along main supply routes in the states of Borno and Yobe. These checkpoints expose civilians and humanitarians to heightened risks of being killed or abducted. I urge all parties to the conflict to protect the civilian population, including aid workers, from such grave violations of international laws, especially women and children who are among the most vulnerable and are caught up in the violence (Haruna, 2020).

The Nigerian military has warned motorists in northeastern Nigeria against stopping at “unofficial” highway checkpoints. However, the major problem facing drivers in the region is determining whether a highway roadblock has been mounted by the official Nigerian military, semi-official pro-government militias (i.e. vigilantes and hunters), or the unofficial Boko Haram insurgents.
Since the rise of Boko Haram, checkpoints have increasingly become part of a duplicitous world in Nigeria in which the real and the imaginary are interchangeable; in short, a radically uncertain world in which “there is hardly a reality without its double” (Mbembe & Roitman, 1995: 340). This “phantasmagoric” (Giddens, 1990: 18-19) nature of checkpoints reproduces the Nigerian state itself, “a phantom, at once there and not there, a ghostly presence that generates more insecurity than it prevents” (Goldstein, 2012: 32). In northeast Nigeria, especially Borno, Yobe and Adamawa states, local people draw little distinction between the Nigerian military and the Boko Haram insurgents wreaking havoc on their lives. Both are seen as agents of extreme fear: “those who seek to make others afraid; less mobile or less free to move” (Ahmed, 2004: 128).

For transit workers in northeastern Nigeria, such as commercial tricycle-taxi (“Keke NAPEP”) drivers and truckers, the main threat to their pursuit of survival and access to opportunities is neither Boko Haram nor the imminent COVID-19 crisis, but endless security checkpoints mounted by soldiers who “eat their sweat.” This adds weight to recent comparative surveys which show that, among some populations, corruption is considered to be a more serious problem than unemployment, poverty, and terrorism (Rothstein, 2018: 36; Holmes, 2015). Locally imagined as famished apparatuses that shàakudi (“drink money”) and shàa-jini (“drink blood”), checkpoints are part of what Mbembe (2003: 38) calls “necropolitics”—contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death. Thus, checkpoints reflect the “omnivorous potentialities” (Masquelier, 2001: 268) of the Nigerian state, especially its seemingly infinite capacity to prey upon its citizens. During recent fieldwork in Borno state, long-haul truckers lamented how the rise of Boko Haram has given soldiers an opportunity to label as “Boko Haram” any driver that resists their diurnal demand for cash bribes and/or “sample” of commodities (from petrol to groundnuts).
Labels, Ray Abrahams (2008: 4333) once argued, “often have a lethal quality.” “Forget Boko Haram,” said Bello Idris, a truck driver from Gwoza in Borno state. “Our real problem here is the checkpoint. Sometimes when you refuse to give them the exact amount of bribe that they want, they will humiliate and threaten you by labeling you a ‘Boko Haram.’ And there is nothing you can do.” Said another Keke NAPEP driver in Maiduguri: “In the past, a driver can negotiate his way out of certain bribes. But now, the soldiers simply blackmail you, saying: ‘You better dash [bribe] us something or else we finish [kill] you and report to our bosses that we killed a ‘Boko Haram.’ ‘You noticed the car ahead of you has given us something but you want to prove tough.’ Security men now appropriate the name of Boko Haram to intimidate us into paying bribes” (Interviewed on 23 October 2019). In northeast Nigeria, hardly a month passes without media reporting on commercial drivers who have been severely beaten or, worse still, shot to death by Nigerian soldiers for refusing to pay cash bribes generally coded as “water money.” With new COVID-19 government restrictions on the number of passengers in public transport (in a car, not more than three passengers and the driver; in a Keke NAPEP, not more than two passengers and the driver), many poor drivers feel subjugated to “conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living-dead” (Mbembe, 2003: 39).

Traders conveying foodstuff and livestock between northern and southern Nigeria regularly complain of spending up to N300,000 ($775 USD) cash bribes per trip at numerous checkpoints en route. These illegal fees are generally transferred to poor Nigerians who have seen a substantial surge in food and livestock prices since the arrival of COVID-19. The chairman of a major cattle dealer’s association in Adamawa state notes that at least 100 foodstuff and livestock traders are currently out of business due to unnecessary delays at hundreds of predatory checkpoints, which
result in the perishability of foodstuff and the death of livestock (ICIR, 2019). One wonders how these out-of-work truckers are now coping in the wake of COVID-19 lockdown measures that have further deepened people’s sense of entrapment or “stuckedness” (Hage, 2009). “Ko ruwa ka dauko” (“Even if it’s water you are carrying”) is the name of a checkpoint en route to Maiduguri, just before the major checkpoint leading into the capital city. Danlami, a petroleum tanker driver in Maiduguri, explains that security operatives at Ko ruwa ka dauko insist that “even if you are carrying water, you must drop something [produce a cash bribe] before they let you safely pass” (Interviewed on 19 October 2019). At Ngamdu town, which sits on the border of Borno and Yobe states, truckers carrying firewood and charcoal to Maiduguri complained that they pay between N30 ($77 USD) and N40,000 ($103 USD) in “water money” at checkpoints. These frustrated drivers lamented that soldiers at these checkpoints do not hesitate to extract heavy bribes from them despite the fact that charcoal and firewood are essential “fuel for the common man to cook food,” more so in the time of COVID-19.

The urbanist AbdouMaliq Simone (2010: 38) tells us that “the pursuit of survival involves actions, relations, sentiments, and opportunities that are more than survival alone.” As the COVID-19 crisis in Nigeria gathers momentum, and the pursuit of life becomes increasingly difficult for marginal people, it is important to explore how the novel pandemic is overlaid by preexisting conditions of displacement, food scarcity, local immobility, and predatory checkpoints; conditions that combine to reduce people to bare life. In the battle of lives against livelihoods, there can only be a Pyrrhic victory. Yet, Nigeria enters into the eye of the COVID-19 storm with lessons gained from previous experiences of effectively managing the 2014 Ebola Virus Disease and other animal-born, acute viruses like Lassa Fever. This should give Nigerians some confidence in the uncertain times ahead.
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