Boko Haram, bandits and slave-raiders: identities and violence in a Central African borderland

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ABSTRACT
Boko Haram is a religiously motivated insurgency with a complex history in Nigeria and origins in urban Maiduguri. Through most of its existence Boko Haram has shown an affinity for border regions: the frontier zones between Nigeria and Niger, the Mandara Mountains on the border with Cameroon, and the shorelines and islands of Lake Chad. This paper argues that this is an historically mediated process. Boko Haram as a borderland phenomenon echoes the *hijra* of Usman dan Fodio, but also structured forms of violence and wealth creation that have historically united elites and their followers in the region. Moreover, there are continuities between the actions and actors associated with earlier phases of border violence and processes involving Boko Haram today. This suggests that Boko Haram will not be “defeated,” but rather that the region will see a reversion to forms of border violence that were prevalent as recently as the early 2000s.

KEYWORDS
Boko Haram; border violence; slave-raiding; banditry; history and terrorism

RÉSUMÉ
Boko Haram est une insurrection à motivation religieuse ayant une histoire complexe au Nigeria et des origines dans le Maiduguri urbain. Pendant la plus grande partie de son existence, Boko Haram a montré une affinité pour les régions frontalières : les zones frontalières entre le Nigeria et le Niger, les monts Mandara à la frontière avec le Cameroun, et les rives et les îles du lac Tchad. Le présent article soutient qu’il s’agit là d’un processus influencé par l’histoire. En tant que phénomène frontalier, Boko Haram fait écho à la *hijra* d’Usman dan Fodio, mais aussi à des formes structurées de violence et de création des richesses qui ont historiquement uni les élites et leurs partisans dans la région. En outre, il existe des continuités entre les actions et les acteurs associés aux phases antérieures de la violence frontalière et les processus impliquant Boko Haram aujourd’hui. Cela suggère que Boko Haram ne sera pas « vaincu » mais plutôt que la région connaîtra un retour aux formes de violence frontalière qui prévalaient aussi récemment qu’au début des années 2000.

Introduction

Since 2009, the Boko Haram terrorist organisation has convulsed the southern Lake Chad Basin, in a conflict that has caused tens of thousands of deaths, the brutal displacement of
many hundreds of thousands of people and extraordinary levels of suffering. The conflict first really intruded into the consciousness of Westerners with the mass kidnapping of schoolgirls from Chibok, in northeastern Nigeria, in 2014. Since then Western media and general publics have largely portrayed the violence associated with Boko Haram in two somewhat incommensurate ways: first, as the expression of ancient tendencies towards “tribal” violence in a remote part of the world, and second as simply a regional franchise of global jihad, inspired by non-African movements like the Taliban, al-Qaeda and ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria). In one view, Boko Haram’s violence is primordial; in the other, it is derivative. Both viewpoints erase history and regional agency from an understanding of Boko Haram’s activities.

Academic analyses of the methods and motivations of Boko Haram have been more nuanced, albeit frequently handicapped by the challenges of getting information on a movement that has increasingly moved into dispersed rural warfare and terrorism since 2011 and that seems to be prone to splintering on ideological, strategic and personal grounds. The first such split, between Boko Haram and Ansaru, took place in 2012 but did not prevent cooperation between the two groups after that time. The more recent split between the Abubakar Shekau and the Islamic State’s West Africa Province (ISWAP) factions may be more consequential over the longer term (Kassim 2018), involving different approaches to jihad and relations with external groups, internal violent conflict and separate territories. It is notable that such dissension and fragmentation was also characteristic of earlier episodes of jihad as well, including the early nineteenth-century jihad of Usman dan Fodio and his successors (Last 2014).

Academic studies of Boko Haram frequently mirror the background and analytical expertise of the researchers in question, and often implicitly involve tensions between different interpretive frameworks. Should Boko Haram be examined as a regional phenomenon, developing largely according to local logics (Seignobos 2016; de Montclos 2015; Thurston 2018), or as a movement significantly responding to global political and ideological currents (Zenn 2018; Celso 2015)? Should it be understood primarily through the lens of Islamic religious disputation (Mohammed 2014), counterinsurgency (Barkindo 2018) or underdevelopment (Magrin and de Montclos 2018), or through the analysis of specific aspects of the insurgency – its gendered elements, for example (Matfess 2017), or its economic effects (Issa 2014)? Such tensions are probably inevitable and, in fact, researchers on Boko Haram have generally recognised the complex and multifaceted nature of the insurgency, even as they give priority to one or another of its aspects.

There are many ways to think productively about a complex social movement and conflict that has embroiled the southern Lake Chad Basin over almost two decades. This paper stands as yet another perspective on the origins and actions of Boko Haram, examining the insurgency as a borderland phenomenon. In this paper, I make the claim that one productive way to understand Boko Haram is by examining the continuity between its activities in the borderlands of the Lake Chad Basin and earlier forms of border violence and wealth creation that existed in this region between the precolonial period and the early 2000s. The links between some of these historical forms of violence and Boko Haram today are indirect: some border populations identify Boko Haram as slave-raiders, and indeed there are close parallels between the ways in which Boko Haram treats (especially female) captives and the actions of slave raiders a century ago. In other cases, the links are more direct, involving continuity in personnel and activities in
smuggling and banditry through the last thirty years. This is not to say that Boko Haram is some simple expression of historical action: it is a thoroughly modern terrorist organisation. It exists, however, within a historical milieu, one that is not only religious but that significantly involves other aspects of history in this region.

It hardly needs to be noted that this perspective, as with those others, is quite partial. This article makes no claim to offer a comprehensive history of Boko Haram: that would require a very different, and much longer, work. It does not treat the origins of Boko Haram in urban Maiduguri from the late 1990s to 2009, in either political or religious dimensions. It does not place Boko Haram within wider contexts of factional violence or lawlessness in Nigeria, although there are important links that can be made between these different processes, especially in terms of elite criminality and the activities of security forces. I also make no claim that looking at the history of borderlands in the Lake Chad Basin necessarily offers a more accurate understanding of Boko Haram than do the perspectives noted above. A borderland perspective does, however, emphasise the degree to which Boko Haram has been a transnational insurgency since very early in its history, and it accords to some degree with how populations on the border between Nigeria and Cameroon understand Boko Haram today.

This paper derives primarily from my experiences and data gathered doing archaeological and ethnohistorical research in this region since the 1980s, most of it along the international frontier between Cameroon and Nigeria (MacEachern 2018). This work was undertaken in and around the Mandara Mountains in both Cameroon and Nigeria; in the plains of northern Cameroon, between Keroua, Mora, Waza and Kalwa; and around Kousseri-N’Djaména, in the context of a cultural heritage management project focused in southern Chad in the early 2000s. This area corresponds to a primary focus of Boko Haram activity in the 2012–2017 time period, and broadly to the territory within which Shekau’s faction of Boko Haram operates today (with the ISWAP faction operating today around Lake Chad and between Maiduguri and the Nigerien border, as well as in southern Niger). My research involved frequent encounters with certain kinds of border illegality – especially smuggling – and constant effort to avoid others – particularly banditry, which was endemic in regions where two sets of international frontiers were only two hours’ drive apart. In the course of that research, I engaged with local informants on their perceptions of borderland activities, and have continued to do so via telephone and social media after fieldwork in the region became impossible after 2012. As noted above, this area does not encompass all of Boko Haram’s activity; to the extent that my perspectives are distinctive, they derive from my experiences in these regions.

**Boko Haram on the borders**

For a movement that began in urban Maiduguri and that counted scions of a number of well-off urban Kanuri families among its early members (Mohammed 2014), Boko Haram has always demonstrated a striking affinity for international borders. This movement into borderlands was first evident with the predecessor “Nigerian Taleban” movement, which in 2003 first moved from Maiduguri to the Kanama area along the Nigerien border in Yobe state and then, upon being ejected from that region after clashes with security forces, took refuge around the Mandara Mountains on the Cameroon–Nigeria border (Mohammed 2014; Reinert and Garçon 2014). The “Nigerian Taleban” was later...
dispersed from the Mandara area as well, but its successor, Boko Haram, and the factions that split off from it would return to the lands between the Mandara Mountains and the shorelines and islands of Lake Chad – borderlands shared by all four countries in the region – after 2009. It is absolutely true that Boko Haram began as a movement in urban Maiduguri, but the insurgency has since 2009 been almost completely a rural movement, with attacks into urban areas but with its bases in the countryside. It is notable as well that many of Boko Haram’s leaders, including Muhammad Yusuf and Abubakar Shekau, have rural backgrounds, as did many of its early followers in Maiduguri – including rural areas on the Cameroon–Nigeria border (Thurston 2018, 35–43, 226; Walker 2016, 158–215).

Boko Haram continues to operate in borderland regions in the present and is probably most active on a day-to-day basis in those areas (Seignobos 2014, 2016; Mahmood and Ani 2018). These regions experienced very significant levels of violence in the late twentieth century (Issa 2004, 2007), in part as a result of civil war in Chad and its aftermath (including state suppression) through the 1980s and 1990s (Nolutshungu 1996). While these levels of violence do not approach those of the present crisis, they led to significant disruption of social and political structures in the region, and to the establishment of new systems of power that drew from both state structures and the productive potentialities of violence (Seignobos 2011; Roitman 1998). It is very likely that any future suppression of Boko Haram will result in the gradual integration of members of the insurgency – and, importantly, the communities in which they exist – into structures of border violence and licit/illicit behaviour that have existed in these regions for decades.

It is possible to understand Boko Haram’s affinity for borderlands in a number of different ways. A retreat to the borders when faced with state persecution certainly fits with overarching historical and religious narratives across the Islamic world, and in this case particularly with the hijra (emigration/flight into exile) of Usman dan Fodio, the Fulani cleric who became the inspirational founder of the Sokoto Caliphate at the beginning of the nineteenth century (van Beek 1988; Pieri and Zenn 2016; Fenwick 2013). Dan Fodio’s conflict with Yunfa, the Sultan of the Hausa state of Gobir, his withdrawal into exile and his ultimate triumph in turn echo Muhammad’s flight from Mecca to Medina in AD 622 – a powerful antecedent for Muslims, and one that in northern Nigeria was in the twentieth century sometimes conflated with dan Fodio’s hijra (van Beek 1988, 173). It is notable that Muhammad Yusuf, the founder of Boko Haram, and his followers took the Fulani Usman dan Fodio and his Hausa/Fulani Sokoto Caliphate as their historical model and inspiration, even though the contemporary history of Kanuri Borno itself was dominated by Shaykh Muhammad al-Amin al-Kanemi, the great political and religious adversary of dan Fodio and his successors. Echoes of these tensions between rulers, reformers and, later, the European colonial powers would echo through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (de Montclos 2015; Fenwick 2013).

The popular attraction of a history in which righteous Muslims retreat from the strongholds of a wicked and tyrannical ruler, to build their strength and ultimately return in triumph, is obvious. By March 2015, most of the territory of modern Borno State in Nigeria was under at least partial Boko Haram control, with the state capital at Maiduguri virtually surrounded and under regular attack (Pieri and Zenn 2016, fig. 1). It may well have seemed to Boko Haram’s followers that history was repeating itself, and that they
would return from the borders to overthrow the wicked rulers who ruled the city, just as Usman dan Fodio – and even Muhammad – had done before them.

An emphasis on the historico-religious dynamics of *hijra* and return provides us with important perspectives on the motivations of Boko Haram leaders and their followers, but it risks situating those motivations entirely in the past, as if Boko Haram is simply replicating historical models. There is no reason to think that that is the case; Muhammad Yusuf was a sophisticated political actor in Maiduguri in the early 2000s, and his successor Abubakar Shekau seems much more acute than he is often given credit for (Barkindo 2018). While religious ideology might have been one inspiration for a move to border regions in the first place, it hardly seems likely to have sustained a growing insurgency over the course of years of unremitting state pressure. It seems likely that we should look to other factors to explain Boko Haram’s long-term activities in, and occupation of, border regions in the Lake Chad Basin.

One set of factors would simply involve the refuge that the international frontiers of the region provide. Frontiers are, after all, lines of demarcation, places where particular forms of sovereignty end and others begin. Successful insurgencies are often critically dependent upon such demarcations, on the refuge that retreat beyond the sovereignty of the enemy state affords and – very frequently – on the existence of supportive sovereignties on the other side of such frontiers. Certainly, a large number of twentieth- and twenty-first-century insurgencies – in Vietnam, Afghanistan and Northern Ireland, for example – would have taken very different forms without the resources that borderlands and their limits to sovereignty involve. Boko Haram in its different incarnations through time (including Ansaru, ISWAP and the Shekau faction) has made use of international frontiers, for example in the movement of hostages, beginning with the French family kidnapped in Waza National Park in Cameroon in February 2013 and probably including at least some of the Chibok schoolgirls. On the other hand, none of the surrounding countries appear to have supported Boko Haram: its history is not like that of the conflict in Darfur, for example, where insurgencies acted as much as proxies for competing state governments as independent actors (Tubiana 2008). Boko Haram’s border operations require more explanation than simply the possibility of retreating across international frontiers.

**Border violence, wealth and Boko Haram**

It is a remarkable fact, and one more or less unrecognised in the scholarly literature on Boko Haram, that the borderlands where the insurgency operates today are also the site of an extensive anthropological and historical literature on border violence, wealth creation and (il)legality, developed since the late 1990s. This geographical concentration of work on the possibilities and dangers of borderlands is more or less unique in Africa and rare in other parts of the world, especially given the very small number of researchers actually working over this period in the southern Lake Chad Basin. This literature is varied in topic and aim. It includes, for example, Saïbou Issa’s (2001, 2004, 2010) research on colonial and modern cross-border banditry south of Lake Chad, as well as Janet Roitman’s (1998, 2005, 2006) work on fiscal and political relationships between modern states and their subjects in border areas – in which the bandits described by Issa voice their own (self-interested, self-justifying and emphatic) opinions on how state bureaucracies and elites combine to create wealth. Marielle Debo’s (2008, 2016) research on the life-courses of...
of men in Chad who follow the métier des armes, the “ordinary job of weapons,” in their navigation of various forms of armed work may seem more remote spatially and socially. However, it involves extensive discussion of the refuges where such groups sustain themselves around Chad’s frontiers – while the seamless transitions between the statuses of soldier, rebel, bandit and customs inspector that she describes provide sometimes startling insights into the potential difficulties in deciding who, exactly, is an insurgent and when, exactly, an insurgency like Boko Haram has ended. Christian Seignobos (2002, 2011) has provided fine-grained research on rural banditry, militias and their social dynamics in Cameroon, coupled with an expansive regional knowledge that is really unequalled. My own work on Boko Haram as an historical phenomenon (MacEachern 2018) exists entirely within the context of this earlier body of work.

In all of these authors’ writing, the borderlands between the nations of the Lake Chad Basin loom large: indeed, the social and political systems that they describe owe as much to the borderlands between countries as to the national governments who, in theory, control each state right up to the nation’s frontiers. The bandits and kidnappers described by Issa and Seignobos operate in border areas and move between national sovereignties in order to escape pursuit. The men who Debos describes as “living by the gun” use borderlands as areas to regroup and from which to conduct the alliance-building that (they hope) will bring them to power. They also use the wealth-making potential of frontier sites like the Ngueli Bridge between Cameroon and Chad, where cross-border trade of various degrees of legality affords the possibility of rent-collection by armed men who may, may not, or may only periodically be legitimate customs officials.

That same cross-border trade, most of it illegal, is a central engine in sustaining the economic systems described by Roitman (2005) in her book Fiscal Disobedience, which describes the tensions between citizens questioning the legitimacy of a state that attempts to tax their incomes without providing services, and regional elites and their foot soldiers, who find economic advantages in a state that only variably governs its borderlands. In my own archaeological writings in the area, I have rather cursorily examined the ways in which European colonial powers imposed international frontiers that disrupted precolonial states and non-state communities (MacEachern 2001a, 2015). However, this does not reflect the central role that the region’s borderlands have played in my experience of the southern Lake Chad Basin through the last three decades, as I have fueled my vehicles with smuggled gasoline and fed field crews on smuggled food, planned fieldwork to avoid bandit zones in those places where the borders of Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad and the Central African Republic run close together, and listened to radio trottoir speculations about the actions of the soldiers, bureaucrats, merchants and bandits who are locally recognised as the commanders of the borderlands.

A common theme running explicitly or implicitly through this literature involves the opportunities and dangers that these borderlands afford to their inhabitants, through forms of violent wealth creation and extraction. In the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, this has primarily involved smuggling and banditry/kidnapping. Both of these activities very frequently involve the manipulation of state sovereignties, smuggling by definition being the illicit movement of materials or people across borders and banditry through the exploitation of international frontiers as a means of evading pursuit and disposing of the proceeds of illicit activity.
An analysis of this phenomenon critically depends upon our understanding of the functioning of these borderlands, both historically and at present, and their relations with the more formally demarcated frontiers between states. In the Lake Chad Basin, precolonial frontier zones up to the end of the nineteenth century were both permeable and extensive compared to the areas governed by the state on a day-to-day basis; thus, state capitals could exist in close proximity to border areas where state control was episodic or provisional (Sharpe 1986; MacEachern 2015; Reyna 1990). These areas correspond to the pre-colonial “deep-rural” zones identified by Murray Last (2016), and to some degree to the “predation” zones that I discuss below. The areas claimed by nation states are much greater today, but technological advances have allowed networks of movement and evasion to expand correspondingly, for both smugglers and bandits (Roitman 2004; Seignobos 2011), while elite collusion opens up new spaces of possibility for bandits by providing zones where state sovereignty runs only periodically.

Banditry certainly takes place away from international borders, in Nigeria for example, but large-scale, organised banditry today tends to take place in areas where day-to-day government control does not exist (see for example Olaniyan 2018) and often with various degrees of tolerance/support from regional and/or national elites. Even in these cases, however, we see remarkable examples of transborder processes extending into states far away from actual international borders – in Taraba State in Nigeria, for example (International Crisis Group 2018). In a circumstance where networks of transborder movement and violence span many hundreds of kilometres, from the Central African Republic to Niger and including significant parts of Cameroon, Nigeria and Chad (Chauvin 2018; Issa 2009; Bennafia 1998), it is hard to avoid the conclusion that most of the southern Lake Chad Basin comprises a set of interlocking border zones. This is not, of course, true only of this part of Africa (Scheele 2012).

Modern forms of border violence and wealth creation

Specific examples of border violence and wealth creation, and their relations with Boko Haram, are not hard to find. Since the 1970s, Nigeria has used its status as an oil-exporting country to support various forms of fuel subsidies for its citizens; even though those subsidies have been reduced in recent years, the cost of gasoline is much lower there than in neighbouring countries, which in turn generates a flourishing trade in smuggled fuel. Until the beginning of the Boko Haram insurgency, perhaps two-thirds of the gasoline consumed in northern Cameroon was smuggled across the border from Nigeria (Bolak Funteh 2014). It has become much more expensive in the last five years, with the development of the insurgency, but the distribution system for smuggled gasoline makes its way into every village and hamlet in northern Cameroon, whereas legal gasoline is only available through the rare filling stations – and so smuggled gasoline continues to be available. Gasoline is only one of the commodities moved illegally across borders in this region: other products range from the mundane (cotton, foodstuffs, consumer goods) to the dangerous (firearms and drugs, for example). There are persistent reports that Boko Haram continues to be associated with smuggling in the Lake Chad Basin (Légaré-Tremblay 2016; Tilouine 2016), and certainly the main zones of Boko Haram activity today are the same areas where smuggling was undertaken in past decades (International Crisis Group 2016, appendix B).
Fuel has been smuggled in different ways, sometimes in tanker-trailer trucks but frequently being run across the frontier away from border checkpoints by convoys of motorcycles piled high with plastic jerry-cans of gasoline – often 100 kg or more per motorcycle. The young men who undertake this brutally hard and dangerous work are known in Cameroon as cascadeurs (“stuntmen”) and have often graduated from operating local moto-taxis on the edges of the legal economy; they come from marginalised social circumstances and do not have the kinds of social connections that would allow them any substantial career prospects. Motorcycle-taxi (achaba) drivers in similar circumstances were important supporters of Boko Haram in the early 2000s in Maiduguri, and the initial urban attacks carried out by Boko Haram in Nigeria in 2010–2012 often involved motorcycles. Today, columns of motorcycles with armed drivers and passengers continue to be a central element in Boko Haram military tactics (Seignobos 2014). It appears that this involves significant numbers of the cascadeurs and achaba-drivers who have decided to direct their expertise towards new, more militant ends (although, given the continuing availability of smuggled gasoline, they are probably still spending some of their time in their old line of work).

Banditry was an important social and economic fact in the southern Lake Chad Basin through the twentieth century and has far deeper historical roots as a border phenomenon. It can be seen, for example, in the historically attested cattle rustling and highway robbery that took place near the borders of the precolonial state of Borno (Tijani 2010). This cattle rustling provides a striking connection to the present situation, as large-scale theft of cattle has become a significant source of income for Boko Haram (Tilouine 2016; Olaniyan and Yahaya 2016). Socially or politically marginal populations, away from the centres of government, were often described as “bandits” during the colonial period (Issa 2010; Roitman 2005, 140–146). Road banditry became a much more significant phenomenon in the late twentieth century, as the ongoing civil wars and attempts at reconciliation/“demobilisation” in Chad dramatically increased the number of men with military experience but no jobs, and of small arms, in the southern Lake Chad Basin (Debos 2016; Issa 2007). (The overthrow of Muammar Qaddafi in Libya appears to have led to the movement of additional weapons into the region (Conflict Armaments Research 2016), and into the hands of Boko Haram.) The banditry of the 1990s and early 2000s was associated with extremely high degrees of violence and striking levels of military skill among the bandits, such that police and conventional military units often found themselves outgunned, and the main road between northern Cameroon and the Chadian capital at N’Djaména could only be used by civilian vehicles in convoy, accompanied by the military. Bandits often kidnapped people in the course of their attacks, holding them for ransom. The Cameroonian government deployed national resources to combat this problem, forming the Bataillon d’Intervention Rapide (BIR, “Rapid Intervention Battalion”), which is now the country’s primary military force fighting Boko Haram. The indiscriminate violence of BIR and other “anti-gang” forces was legendary in northern Cameroon in the early 2000s.

Banditry is, again, a border phenomenon in the Lake Chad Basin: the areas where banditry, and the kidnapping of hostages often associated with it, has been most prevalent are located in proximity to state borders (Seignobos 2011; Issa 2006) for reasons noted above. As with smuggling, there are parallels with the actions of Boko Haram that indicate continuity of personnel and experience. The terrorist organisation carried out a series of kidnappings of foreigners in northern Cameroon in 2013–2014. The best known
of these kidnappings involved a family of French tourists leaving Waza National Park, which had been the epicenter of road banditry in the region in the preceding decades (Kelly 2013) – in large part because it is possible to flee from this part of northern Cameroon into either Nigeria or Chad in an hour or two. In these cases, the hostages were held for a significant amount of time, and substantial ransoms were demanded and, in most cases, probably paid (Zenn 2014), after which the hostages were released. In some cases, the kidnappers are said to have spoken French, which would have been very unusual for members of Boko Haram at the time.

These kidnappings were certainly done in the cause of Boko Haram and/or its offshoot Ansaru, with a number of the hostages being moved across the border into Nigeria before their release, but they were understood by local people in northern Cameroon as a continuation of the activities of the road bandits who had plagued the areas in preceding decades (author’s personal observation, 2014). There was some disagreement among local people with whom I spoke about whether those earlier road bandits were now simply calling themselves Boko Haram in order to make use of the group’s reputation for frightfulness, or whether they were acting as subcontractors, kidnapping people and then selling them on to Boko Haram or Ansaru. There was widespread agreement, however, that the principals remained the same, and that these kidnappings of foreigners were a continuation of the banditry and kidnappings that had already afflicted the region for more than twenty years at that point. It is obviously true that the more recent suffering inflicted by Boko Haram has been far more terrible than the levels of border violence experienced in these regions in the 1990s and early 2000s, but there exist significant common elements between the dynamics of violence in these different periods.

Pre-colonial and colonial slave-raiding

The kidnapping of people for ransom brings us to one of the most striking parallels between Boko Haram’s activities and even earlier forms of violence and wealth creation in regional borderlands. This involves slave-raiding, which was in precolonial times the primary means through which regional elites (especially Islamic elites) acquired the material, political and military resources – horses, fine clothing and jewelry, weapons (eventually including firearms), and the services of clerics, scribes and diplomats – that made their status legible in the cultural worlds of the southern Lake Chad Basin (MacEachern 2001b, 2015). Enslaved humans formed significant elements in the servile workforce in local states, and often played an important role in military affairs and governance (Reyna 1990). In addition, they were the primary “commodity” exported through trans-Saharan commercial networks, where they were exchanged for exotic goods (Lovejoy 2003).

Slave-raiding has been, perhaps, the quintessential form of violent wealth creation in borderlands in this region, with a history going back at least 1000 years (Lange 1988). Slave-raiding is primarily a borderland activity because enslaved people must be recognised as outside society in some way, deprived of the kinds of social connections and social capital that would allow them to contest their chattel status. In some cases, people might be enslaved as the result of criminal proceedings or the payment of a debt (Lovejoy 2012, 3–8, 82–83), and in cases of extreme famine parents in the region were sometimes known to sell their children into slavery in exchange for food (Beauvilain 1989, 116–124,
245–249). In the vast majority of cases in the southern Lake Chad Basin, however, slave-raiding was undertaken against communities that had few or no connections to the societies of the slave-raiders, and the greater that social and cultural distance, the more violent and decisive the raids (MacEachern 2011).

The most clear-cut example of this phenomenon involves the centralised states of the region, which undertook slave raids against smaller scale communities in the “predation zones” on state frontiers (Lovejoy 2003; Reyna 1990; MacEachern 2015). Many of these communities existed in refuge zones such as the Mandara Mountains, theshorelands and islands of Lake Chad and the lands around the Chari-Logone river system, where they were able to maintain their political and cultural independence, even in circumstances of slave-raiding. One paradoxical factor in the durability of slave-raiding was thus the resilience and determination of people living in the communities under threat of raids, the people living in the “predation zones” of neighbouring states. Accounts of the juxtaposition of day-to-day life and the constant threat of raids provide a horrific theme in the historical memories of the targeted groups (MacEachern 1993).

In these cases, then, state elites required access to lands that were not in fact part of their own states (because those would have invoked the reciprocal obligations that existed between rulers and subjects), but where they could deploy violence in the acquisition of the primary commodity – enslaved humans – that allowed them to support their lifestyle and status. The situation is made more complex by the frequent development of “sub-contracting polities” on the borders of more powerful states, which emulated state elite display and extended the range at which slaves could be taken, such as the Wandala state on the modern Cameroon–Nigeria border near the epicenter of Boko Haram’s activities (MacEachern 2015). However, the dynamics of the system remained the same among these “sub-contracting” groups; this was probably a central element in the precolonial spread of state institutions in the region.

Slavery was, in theory, abolished by the European colonial powers when they seized territory in West and Central Africa at the end of the nineteenth century (e.g. for Nigeria see Lovejoy and Hogendorn 1993), but in fact abolition was a gradual and ill-defined process. In the 1940s, French colonial officers worried that allowing well-off Muslim families to “adopt” starving children from poor non-Muslim communities was a continuation of child slavery under another name, and populations around the Mandara Mountains in northern Cameroon told of the kidnapping of children to act as unpaid labour as late as the 1980s (MacEachern 2011).

For the very end of the slave-raiding period, we have a remarkable historical document: a diary dictated between 1912 and 1927 by the most important slave-raider in the southern Lake Chad Basin, a Fulani chief named Hamman Yaji (Vaughan and Kirk-Green 1995). Between 1912 and 1920, this diary describes the taking of over 1600 slaves, as well as other kinds of goods and booty, and the deaths of over 150 people in the course of Hamman Yaji’s slave raids. His base was in the town of Madagali on the western side of the Mandara Mountains, now just inside Nigeria close to the international border with Cameroon. At the time, however, Hamman Yaji was a quintessential border warlord, living on the slaving frontier of the precolonial Sokoto Caliphate and – just as importantly – in an ill-defined border area between the nascent European colonies of British Northern Nigeria and German Kamerun. Neither colonial government was especially concerned with the activities of a remote chief against non-Muslims that they regarded as barbarous,
especially in the run-up to World War I. It was not until after that war, and British consolidation of control over the region, that Hamman Yaji was forced to stop raiding, and he was ultimately deposed in the mid-1920s – ironically, for being a Mahdist (an “Islamic extremist”) and not for his earlier slave-raiding.

Hamman Yaji’s diary makes evident a number of important points. In the first place, young women were the preferred targets of Hamman Yaji’s raids (David 2014; van Beek 2012). Second, there is the question of markets: what did Hamman Yaji do with all of his slaves, since the British had a decade earlier abolished the plantation slavery that was so important in the nineteenth century Sokoto Caliphate (Lovejoy and Hogendorn 1993), and the slave markets that fed it? It appears unlikely that Hamman Yaji ever made much of a monetary profit on his slaves, and it may well be that he pursued his slave-raiding activities out of a kind of cultural inertia: that was what Muslim chiefs on the frontier did. However, his diary indicates that he used enslaved young women as a kind of human currency in and of themselves, exchanging them for horses and other goods. Importantly, he also provided them as gifts to his followers and supporters, providing a human incentive for their allegiance.

**Gender, enslavement and marriage**

The parallels here to Boko Haram are quite striking. Madagali, Hamman Yaji’s headquarters just a century ago, is only eighty kilometres from Chibok. In 2014, Boko Haram would kidnap hundreds of young women from the Government Secondary School in that town, and they were of about the same age as the girls who were the most prized targets of Hamman Yaji’s raids. Abubakar Shekau, the Boko Haram leader, did not keep a diary (as far as we know), but he boasted on videos in 2014 that he would sell the Chibok schoolgirls “… in the marketplace …” – a slave marketplace that does not exist today, as it did not for Hamman Yaji. The Chibok kidnapping is only the most famous incident in a widespread pattern of Boko Haram abductions – frequently of young women, but also young men and indeed people of all ages – that has involved thousands of unfortunates. Today, non-Muslim people along the Nigeria–Cameroon borderlands refer to Boko Haram as *hamaji*, a local term for “slave-raider” derived from their memory of Hamman Yaji’s depredations (telephone conversations with local informants, 2018; personal communication, Melchisedek Chétima; David 2014; van Beek 2012). The experience of border violence seems to be rather similar to that of the colonial and even the precolonial periods.

This raises the question of the motivation behind Boko Haram’s abductions/kidnappings. This certainly involves the forced conscription of men, but also complex questions about the role of gender (and gender-based violence) and the experiences of women in Boko Haram (Pearson 2018; Bloom and Matfess 2016). It is important to remember that the Chibok schoolgirls, though by far the most famous set of abductees in the West, constitute only a small proportion of the women who have been incorporated into Boko Haram. Some women join Boko Haram willingly, because they see the possibility of better treatment within the organisation: they describe their husbands as well-off and generous; they receive their bride-wealth payments directly from their husbands, instead of having them passed on to their parents; and they are expected to remain in *purdah* – seclusion from public contact – where they occupy themselves with household duties and child care (Matfess 2017). This frees them from back-breaking agricultural labour, and harkens
back to practices of purdah involving upper-class Muslim wives in Lake Chad Basin societies in the precolonial and colonial periods.

Women who have been abducted by Boko Haram more often share a very different fate: they are expected to undertake menial labour and are subjected to both sexual and non-sexual violence from male members of the organisation. Some of the young women kidnapped from Chibok serve as model converts to Islam and enforcers of Islamic morals among women in Boko Haram groups (Bloom and Matfess 2016); apparently, those young women serve as potent symbols with Boko Haram, as they also do in the Western world. Others, since released, testify to rape and other forms of mistreatment. Notably, abducted young women are often given in forced “marriages” – in other words, sexual enslavement – to lower status members of Boko Haram, as a reward and an incentive for continued loyalty. This instrumental use of captured women precisely parallels Hamman Yaji’s actions at the beginning of the twentieth century: apparently, female slaves can be useful to warlords like Hamman Yaji and Abubakar Shekau even in the absence of slave markets.

Recall that the cascadeurs, the young motorcycle-drivers engaged in smuggling gasoline and other goods through the borderlands of the southern Lake Chad Basin, tend to be socially marginal and to exist in a status of economic deprivation. They are young men who, in the ordinary course of events, would struggle to accumulate the wealth necessary to afford a wife’s dowry and thus become a baaba saare – in Fulani, “head of a household.” Without the possibility of marriage, they would be trapped in perpetual adolescence, not accepted as grown men even in their thirties and forties (for a different area in Cameroon, see Argenti 2008). Smuggling and banditry have always been closely associated with the performance of masculinity in the region (Roitman 2005), and the ability to marry and form a household is a central part of that masculine identity. It is not surprising that young Boko Haram recruits spend a great deal of time talking about girls and marriage (International Crisis Group 2016, 14). The provision of enslaved young female abductees as “marriage” partners provides an extremely effective recruiting and retention mechanism for the group. In this, we see direct parallels between the actions of the slave-raider Hamman Yaji on the Nigerian–Kamerun border a century ago, and the leaders of Boko Haram today.

Conclusions

Boko Haram is a complex, religiously motivated insurgency that derives much of its power from the imposition of terror on communities in the Lake Chad Basin. No one analytical lens – ideological, political, economic, military – will suffice to entirely account for its motivations and activities. This paper provides one alternative perspective, examining Boko Haram in the context of historically mediated forms of violence and wealth creation that have through time united elites and their followers in the borderlands of the region. Slave-raiding/kidnapping, banditry and smuggling have all been profitable activities that depend to a significant degree upon the manipulation of state sovereignties, and upon the existence of border areas that are both accessible and where such state sovereignties are incomplete or episodic. Borderlands are thus productive regions, where ordinary people who are lucky and ruthless can become rich, and where rich and powerful people can become even more so. The activities of the latter are often closely associated with the maintenance of this borderland status (Roitman 2004).
This historical perspective allows us to examine continuities between the activities of Boko Haram on the borders today and these other forms of border work. In some cases, these are continuities of personnel, as cascadeurs and bandits became involved in the insurgency. There is no reason to deny a religious motivation for such members of Boko Haram, but they still make use of their expertise in border activities. In other cases, the continuities are less direct, as when non-Muslim populations on the Cameroon–Nigeria border refer to Boko Haram as hamaji, “slave-raiders,” or when Boko Haram insurgents turn to cattle rustling as a money-making activity – one with a long history in the region. Such continuities are of more than historical interest, however. These borderlands remain very significant sites of violence and wealth creation in the Lake Chad Basin, and indeed these systems of productive violence seem to be growing to encompass larger areas of Central Africa (Chauvin 2018). It is precisely the long-term juxtaposition of border violence and everyday life that provides this system with its durability. It is, thus, not at all surprising in an historical context that we see ISWAP attempting to carve out territory on the borders of Lake Chad where ordinary people live under its governance (Carsten and Kingimi 2018). Islamic dissidents have done so in the region for centuries (Patton 1987; Fenwick 2013).

It seems unlikely, from this perspective, that we will see any clear-cut military “defeat” of Boko Haram factions in the immediate future, despite the periodic proclamations of regional governments. This is especially the case given the mutability of border identities and the possibilities of weaponised social mobility that the borderlands afford, especially to young men (see Debos 2016). Rather, and in the “best case,” we will probably see violence in the lands of the Lake Chad Basin being reduced towards the very substantial levels that already existed in the region in the 1990s and early 2000s, with the politico-religious violence of Boko Haram increasingly resembling the earlier, more “secular” activities of road banditry, kidnapping for ransom, smuggling and ethnic conflict. Obviously, the events of the last decade – deaths, displacement, government reactions – will result in sociopolitical configurations different than those that existed twenty years ago, but the resiliency of preexisting patterns of border violence and wealth creation is striking. Smuggled gasoline and other goods still flow from Nigeria into Cameroon, across borders that in theory are closed because of the insurgency; fish are still moved from Boko Haram-controlled territory around Lake Chad into markets controlled by regional governments; herders still move their animals across borders, now including those controlled by ISWAP.

Such a result might well suit the programmes of Western governments, media and militaries, who successfully ignored these earlier periods of violence and indeed paid very little attention to Boko Haram until the Chibok abductions of 2014. Effective interventions by regional governments to improve social and economic conditions, and especially the life prospects of marginalised young men and women, might shift that dynamic. However, I see very little evidence that either national or international interventions are particularly effective today, especially at a moment in 2019 when both the ISWAP and Shekau factions of Boko Haram are enjoying renewed success in their attacks and their ability to deny state control in much of northeastern Borno and around Lake Chad. It is likely that people living in the southern Lake Chad Basin will have to endure the violence associated with Boko Haram for the foreseeable future. At the same time, they will continue to live in a borderland region, with all of the potentials for wealth-creation and violence that such regions provide.
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Notes on contributor

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