A Season of Monotheism

Muslim response to humanist cyberactivism in Northern Nigeria

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Abstract— With the rise of social media in Nigeria, humanists communities are now able to safely proselytize their beliefs or unbelief. Organizations like the Humanists society of Northern Nigeria, Atheist Society of Nigeria are spearheading social media campaigns within networks of Northern Nigerians. This Paper investigates the nature of the religious response to such cyberactivism on social media, particularly Facebook. Using data from social media feeds, we look at the measures being taken by believers to counter humanist campaigns. Our findings suggests that the religious argument is undergoing a transformation with an emphasis towards monotheism as a bridge between different religious frames.

Keywords-; *Social Media; Digital Culture; Northern Nigeria; frame-alignment*

I. INTRODUCTION

The implication of humanist cyberactivism in Northern Nigeria is still a subject of debate. The exponential rise in humanists evangelism has raised concerns within religious communities. With Facebook being the most popular social media platform in the region (Abdullahi, 2017), by harnessing its reach, and the anonymity and distance provided by social media, humanist cyberactivists are able to render obsolete some of the traditional methods of dissent control (Abdullahi, 2017).

In other regions of the world, traditional religion has adjusted to cyber athiesm, and so according to Campbell and Heidi (2005), religion is one of the most popular topics in the internet, this is also true in some parts of Africa where evangelical groups have sought to use the medium to extend their reaches to a new tech savvy generation. (Asamoah and Kwabena, 2007).

In Northern Nigeria, decades of religious conflict and an insurgency led by fundamentalist Muslims has resulted in a unique situation which has thus far been exploited by humanist cyber activists. With some researches pointing to a rise in atheism as a result of humanist activism, this paper explores the response of the religious community of Northern Nigeria to humanist cyber activism.

Expanding upon (Abdullahi, 2017) which explored humanist centered framing on social media, we look at the response by Northern Nigeria' religious community to humanist cyber activism.

II. BACKGROUND

A. Humanist Cyber Activism in Northern Nigeria

The Humanist Society of Northern Nigeria, a loose collection of anti religious activists is the public platform used by anti religious activists in Northern Nigeria. With the threat of death facing apostates, most activists can not publicly like or register with such openly anti religious platforms. Most activists are thus forced to register through anonymous accounts by bypassing the stringent identity requirements of social media platforms (Abdullahi, 2017). This anti religious activism has caught the attention of numerous senior religious clerics within the region, with some of them blaming the internet for the rising trend of open atheism.

In 2014, an international organisations collaborated with humanist activists and secured the release of Mubarak Bala, a an who was confined to a psychiatric hospital after renouncing Islam. Today, humanist activism is mostly confined to social media (facebook and twitter) with groups of activists ranging from a few hundred to a thousand delivering news narratives and other opinion based materials framed around humanist themes. The Athiest Association of Nigeria is the only officially registered atheist organization in Nigeria. According to humanist activists, the Nigerian Corporate Affairs Commission has prevented the registration of the Humanist Society of Northern Nigeria and other organizations.(Interview with Mubarak Bala, 2017)

1) Religion and Irreligion in the Digital Space

While churches in the Nigerian south have been quick to adopt digital technologies for proseyletisation (Chiluwa, 2012) the trend has been considerably slower in Northern Nigeria.

Religious groups such as Izala have official facebook pages and other forums where they routinely post news, updates and other material (Abdullahi, 2017)

Another Salafi group recently launched the darulfikr Islamic databank project where a compedium of Nigerian whabbi preaching, texts , audio and video is uploaded for free downloads (darulfikr.com, 2017)

The sufi orders of Qadariyyah and Tijaniyyah also have a visible presence on facebook and twitter (Abdullahi, 2017). Numerous sub groups (state, and local) also have different pages and groups on facebook.

The Humanist Society of Northern Nigeria has atleast one facebook secret group and a public facebook page (Abdullahi, 2017). Interviews have also revealed that it has vibrant whatsapp group with numerous members. Quranist presence is also on Facebook, with a group dedicated to community support and a twitter handle QuranistsNg that is only nominally active.

B. Religion on Social Media

Islam is the dominant religion in Northern Nigeria but a very large Christian minority exists throughout the region with high concentrations in the states of Plateau, Taraba and Benue.(Abdullahi, 2017)

Sunni Islam of the Maliki school of Jurisprudence is the prominent amongst Muslims. The Sufi Orders of Qadariyyah and Tijaniyyah dominate the sufi spectrum with a growing vocal but minority Wahabbi groups (Izala, Salafiyya etc).

Shi'a Islam, imported into the region in the 1970s has been growing in size under the Islamic Movement of Nigeria. The group subscribes to the twelve Jafari school of thought inherited from Iran. (Abdullahi, 2017). A Minority Quranist population exists mostly among the educated elite in Northern Nigeria, these groups, diverse in beliefs find common ground in their idea of Sola scriptura which rejects the authority and in some cases the legitimacy of all other books besides the Quran in matters of jurisprudence (Abdullahi, 2017).

Other faiths such as the Baha'i faith and the Ahmadiyyah faith are a minority in the region. The Ahmadiyyah runs a charity school and hospital in the regional commercial capital of Kano and other cities, but it nevertheless remains mostly invisible in contemporary religious debate.

Atheism and Humanism is less than 1 percent of Northern Nigeria (nationsencyclopedia.com, 2017) but chances are, the stigma associated with it and the danger of facing societal retribution means it is well under represented in surveys.

III. THE STUDY

Data from the Facebook feeds of members of the Humanist Society of Northern Nigeria was collected (January 2014 to February 2018). Facebook was elected based on Abdullahi (2017) which suggested that Facebook is the most popular social media platform in the region, it also showed that political interaction was more frequent on Facebook when

compared with other social media platforms. Interviews with humanist activists in (Abdullahi, 2017) has also indicated their own preference for facebook activism. This might be related to the services offered by facebook such as freebasics which seem to amplify class segregation (Abdullahi, 2017).

Some members of the society were selected based on information from Mubarak Bala, the public face of the society, and other humanist activists. In gathering the data, interaction between the selected humanist activists and others in the form of comments to posts, tagging, mentions etc were used. Particular emphasis was placed on religious posts, matters relating to religion, social ethics etc. But posts which were framed around a humanist context (see Abdullahi, 2017 an era of humanist) were also used. The responders were selected based on their Interaction with humanist activists across the themes highlighted above.

The data was analysed and themes developed using an iterative inductive approach.

A. Data

Public social media from prominent humanist , liberal muslim, traditional Muslim and fundamentalist muslim cyberactivists was used. The data from Facebook posts on Humanist issues and the corresponding responses in comments, shares was analyzed. Themes developed from these responses were used to classify respondents and the extract patterns.

Humanist Cyber Activists	Liberal, Religious Respondents	Religious Respondents	Extremist Religious Respondents
Isa Wali	Kubra Mohamet	Ahmad Wada	Darul Fikr
Mubarak Bala	Fatima Hams	Aliyu N Ashafura	Aminu Daurawa
Rusau Ginau	Abdulrazak Ibrahim	Hajara Bukar	Kano Hisbah
Mati Jarumi	Maryam Jeemare	Abduljalil Ismail	
Maryam Dhimmi	Amina Umar Miango	Hauwa Malami	
Mohammed Ness	Jummai Mohammed	Ahmed Umar Bolori	
Aisha Abubakar Hassan	Bichia Maisango	Bilkisu Yero	
Zainab Nasir	Ibrahim Fombina	Tijanni Ahmad	
Ronke Akintade Ogunleye	Hassan Abdullahi	Yassir Ramdan Gwale	
Davis Keykey Egbele	Gimba Kakanda	Yakubu Musa	
Teejay Alamin	Aliyu Bashir Almusawi	Nuraddeen Adamu Augie	

Usman Hassan	Abubakar Manzo	Sheriff Almuhammad	
Khadijah Talatu	Tijami Amin Turaki	Aliyu Assufiy Algambawiy	
Ibrahim Abdullahi Haruna	Kadria Ahmed	Aliyu Dahiru Aliyu	
Bello Amunikel		Adamu Tilde	
Aliyu Jarumi		Zakari Othman Tilde	
Galadima Nagudu		Aliyu Tilde	
Bamaguje Dodangi		Jafar Jafar	
Safiya Musa		Rabiu Ahmad	
Umar Faruk		Ibrahim Sanyi Sanyi	
Hussein Muhammad			
Zainab Ibrahim			
Zainab Gambo			

Table 1: Selected Humanist and Religious Activists used in the study

IV. FINDING- TRANSFORMATION OF THE ISLAMIC RESPONSE TO HUMANISM

Analysis of the data indicates that the religious response to humanist activism has undergone three prominent transformations, these transformations were possibly necessitated by the need to transform the religious narrative and produce frames that could effectively challenge the narrative of humanist activists.

A. *The Period of Compassion (Pre 2014)*

As suggested by Last (2013), the response to social dissent in Northern Nigeria depends on the groups political capital, or at least its political ambitions. Humanist cyberactivism came to the consciousness of Northern Nigeria in May of 2014 with the Free Mubarak Bala campaign which united atheists, humanists and secularists from Northern Nigeria with the common aim of ensuring the security and safety of non believers. It is thus understandable that before July 2014, humanist campaigns were mostly ignored or derided, even on social media. A number of posts and comments actually alluded to the insanity of atheists which might explain the treatment of Mubarak Bala. While apostasy by converting to a competing religious creed was heresy and looked down upon, atheism was seen by many as a condition

caused either by Jinns (spirits) or psychological disorders. Threats of violence, though present were very little. Activists were mostly seen as helpless victims that require help. At least a few cases of people threatening activists actually invoked a severe reprimand from fellow theists. This, however is perhaps keeping in line with the customs in Northern Nigeria where violence is usually only used against social dissidents with the approval of the community leaders (Last, 2013).

The lack of active social condemnation and a general compassionate approach towards humanism indicates that within the socio-political hierarchy of ideas, humanism had not yet crystallised into a movement of social dissent. In this period our subjects within the extremist, and religious groups showed a remarkable degree of compassion towards humanism. While it was condemned, it humanists were usually called “batattu” or lost souls who needed to be saved from the influence of the west. The blame here was placed squarely on western influence who “corrupt the minds of our people”.

This compassion perhaps explains why Mubarak Bala was confined to a psychiatric care and not lynched when he renounced Islam. Also of note here is the fact that most responders to humanist activists in this period were those classified as “Liberal Muslims”. The Liberal Muslims saw the humanism not as threat but as an indication of the growing discontent for traditional religious ideas. Because Islam has used its success and its allure as proof of its divine origins, a number of Liberal Muslims shared and held up humanist write-ups as a testament of the failure of traditional and fundamentalist groups.

B. *The Period of Violence (2015)*

The emergence of the Free Mubarak Bala movement was a pivotal moment for humanist activists. By challenging the traditional diagnosis which claimed atheism was a disorder, humanist activists were declaring their political ambitions and in essence, declaring dissent *Tawaye*. The international voice given to the movement by bodies like International Humanist Ethical Union and AAA might also have contributed to this evolution.

By such open activism, humanists were now challenging the social contract upon which a greater part of the society is built. Around July 2014, the narrative witnessed a marked evolution, with calls for violence against atheists. Threatening language also became much more common while calls for restraint slowly dissipated. Perhaps united by the common purpose of the FreeMubarakBala movement, the period May 2014-December 2014 witnessed a marked increase in humanist activism. However, this increase also roughly coincided with the expansion of BokoHaram and also saw a severe clamp down which greatly restricted civil liberties in much of Northern Nigeria. Faced with active humanist cyber activism, the effect on religious respondents was visible in attempts at creating religious apologia and then calls for an outright use of violence against what was framed as an attack on Islam by a christian/western conspiracy .

1) Redefining Terror

Redefining the concept of terror was seen as a critical way of defending religion from accusations of violence and terrorism. This takes varying forms but usually start with an attempt to distinguish the terrorism of Osama bin Laden and other fundamentalists who had once been defended by multiple Salafi imams, from the terrorism of Bokoharam, which is being inflicted on the region.

This attempt was slowly abandoned after the emergence of the ISIS caliphate. The symbolic *Bay'a* paid by Bokoharam to ISIS could have made this untenable. It then slowly evolved into the repentance theory, first proposed by emerging muslim scholar Sheriff Almuhammad, where clerics that have voiced support for terror such as Jafar Mahmud Adam and Aminu Daurawa were portrayed to have repented. The failure of the religious to satisfactorily achieve a social redefinition of terrorism is probably linked to the in-fighting within the various religious denominations. Religious terrorism was seen as a concern only for the wahhabi linked Izala movement whose celebrated clerics have long been accused of aiding and abetting terrorism and fundamentalism. The Sufi Orders and even the Iranian linked Shia Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN) saw little need to defend Izala, and in numerous instances even vigorously encouraged humanist narratives.

To Allah na tuba, don Marigayi Jafar Adam ya kira wani munafiki sai me? Wa ye bai San akidun Marigayi Jafar ba, (Allah ya jikan rai) na yada akidun ta'addanci, musamman in ta'addancin turawan yamma ya shafa.

Duk Mai bibiyar Marigayin kafin rasuwar sa, ya San yadda ya yabi Usama Bin Laden bayan harin 11/9. Ya kira Usama Bin Laden da Abu Musab Alzarqaw Yan gwagwarmaya ya fi a kirga, kuma ko rikicin sa da Mohammad Yusuf, bawai don manufa ta bambanta bane, a'a shi Marigayi

NAZARI: WANENE DAN TA'ADDA?

Kalmar ta'addanci tana cikin irin kalmomi da bature ke cewa "subjective" irin wadannan kalmomi suna da alaƙa da ma'anar da kowacce al-umma ke ba ta. Misali; har yanzu acikin mu akwai wadanda ba su amince da cewa al-Qaeda Usamah bn Laden yan ta'adda ne ba, Amma suna Allah wadarai da BH anan kasar, wasu kuma na gani Danjuma ne da Danjuma.

Kwanannan wani ba'amruke Paddock ya kashe mutane a Amruka ba gaira

Figure 1. Two narratives of terrorism. The Above by a thiest seems aims to redefine the concept of terror while the lower one by a humanist attacks a revered Shiekh Malam Jafar as a terrorist

2) Competition in Narration

Having different narratives that attempting to frame social discourse might be advantageous, humanist cyberactivists have been shown to do so (Abdullahi, 2017). However, having inconsistent narratives might be counter productive. In May 2015, a Tijanni Sufi in Kano was accused of blasphemy and was subsequently vigorously pursued by the State's religious police, Hisbah. The Hisbah was under the control of a Wahhabi linked imam Mal Aminu Daurawa. While humanists activism focused on the extra judicial dispensation of punishment, the responsibility for which they placed on organized religion, the adherents of Wahhabism

focused on attacking the Sufi brotherhoods and accused them of disparaging the saints they claim to venerate.

This competition in veneration is prominent in the responses of the religious to humanist activism. Often, believers, when responding to humanist statements quickly become consumed in inter-denominational conflict.

For example, the annual Maulud celebrations was encouraged by some humanists because of the syncretic practices that accompany the festivities. This emphasis on the syncretic within humanist propaganda is often lost in the religious response, with Sufi Muslims encouraging the humanists and Salafi Muslims claiming the Maulud is an insult to the veneration of Muhmmad because it confined the celebration of the prophet to one day.

Figure 2. Celebrating Arson? Mal Aminu Daurawa, the leader of hisbah celebrating a clamp down on Tijaniyyah Muslims accused of blasphemy

3) Appropriating Science- Islamic Science

In the search for an alternative foundation for their polemics, religious clerics and their adherents attempted to create a completely new epistemology where knowledge is derived, from the natural sciences but mediated by religious pronouncements. Similar to historiography that purposed an Islamic Science, religious respondents to humanists emphasized a contemporary mediation of all sciences with an interpretation of the Quran and Sunna championed by their

various imams. Such a frame would have easily created an alternative to some problematic theories within the sciences such as an evolution, but it was logically ill-fated because the respondents could not develop a coherent logical foundation for such mediation. In this regard, inconsistencies allowed humanist and other liberal activists to show the logical inconsistency of the arguments of numerous religious scholars.

With political capital and scholarly authority deeply linked, this early attempt at frame bridging was also seen as an encroachment into the sciences by religious clerics. It created the unintended effect of having academics and scholars sharply rebuking religious clerics. For example, when a humanist campaign targeted the religious medicine industry, religious clerics, in an attempt to prove its efficacy attempted this bridging which was unfortunately perceived as an intrusion into modern medicine by Doctors in the region.

Figure 3. Imitation to find legitimacy. A letter from an “Islamic Doctor” attempted to mimic the conventions used by Doctors but instead caused widespread outrage.

Similarly, when the leader of Kano Hisbah attempted to justify polygamy using unsubstantiated divorce figures, the cleric and the Hisbah were attacked not only by humanist and liberal activists but also by academics, who felt that the Hisbah was abusing a cherished scientific method.

4) Western Conspiracy

By framing the Bokoharam insurgency as a “western conspiracy” to destroy Islam, some religious respondents to humanist activists hoped to dismantle the fulcrum of the humanist narrative. In many instances, this strategy was extended in an effort to portray the humanist cyberactivism as a foreign conspiracy, part of a wider one against Islam, Nigeria and the North. Such a narrative was easily countered by humanist activists with videos and pictures of Wahabbi clerics with Bokoharam members. Also, given the pervasiveness of similar conspiracy theories throughout the region (Hassan, 2017), the lack of an efficient publicity

strategy on the part of religious respondents could have contributed to the failure of this narrative.

Figure 4. A Facebook post from an Islamic cleric discouraging the “imitation of the Christians and Jews”. Early Islamic response could not distinguish humanism from Christianity.

C. The Season of Monotheism. (2017 and beyond)

The emergence of religious counter activism in the form of well structured and funded social media publicity groups was noticeable from late 2016 to 2017. These groups are an indication of Islamic adaption to humanist cyberactivism. By January 2017, social media groups of the main wahabi body, Jama'atul Izalatul Bidi'a wa Ikhamatus Sunnah (JIBWIS), were actively reacting to humanist activism online. Tijaniyya and Qadariyya Sufi groups and the Shiite IMN were also visibly active as respondents to the posts of humanist cyberactivists. This surge in counter activism could be an indication to realization on the part of the religious that humanist cyber activism is a viable competitor in the political space. This period also witnessed the emergence of popular Sufi activists like Aliyu Dahiru Aliyu, Aliyu Asuffiy Algambawiy etc who were actively responding to humanist activism using tools borrowed from philosophy and other liberal Muslim sects. Under this common monotheistic identity, religious sects are finding common grounds and building a method of cyberactivism that could counter the “atheist threat” on the digital space. Violence having failed to serve any purpose, the religious community are beginning to understand that debating and propaganda on the digital space might be a necessity.

Figure 5. Late 2017, in response to humanist activity DarulFikr began sharing salafi lectures fre.

1) Monotheism as an interdenominational bridge

With multiple Islamic and Christian sects competing for an audience, a united response to the perceived threat of Athiesm would have to bridge the doctrinal differences dividing these groups.

This emphasis on a common abrahamic identity is not wholly new. In the late 1960's the government of Northern Nigeria attempted to unite the diferent sufi orders of Islma and otyher christian sects by emphasizing Usmaniyya, a common cultural and spiritual allegiance to the house of Usman Dan Fodio (Last, 2013). The dissolution of the Northern Region in 1967 interrupted this process. With the hieghtened presence of humanist activists on Social Media, anti humanist muslim activists are finding it prudent to focus on the common monthiestic and Abrahamic identity of he multiple Muslim and christian sects.

This to an extent allows sects such as wahabists to adopt liberal arguments which de-emphasize the authority or authenticity of hadiths when confronting humanist activists. Such de-emphasis allows Muslims to easily refute arguments that have long been used to attack the creed's legitimacy. For example by rejecting the authenticity of the hadith that relates the story of the marriage Prophet Muhammad to Aisha when she was 9, Muslim activists can refute claims that islam tolerates pedophilia. Such argumenst which had once been used by Quran alone muslims against mainstream muslims have now been adopted in ana allaince of conviniance to deal with the humanist threat.

2) Amplifying the Athiest Terrorist

A masss shooting in Texas, US by Devin Kelley which was covered by most local media in the Northern Nigeria provided a portent means of frame amplification. In religious discourse, most liberal and Sufi muslims have blamed the rise of

humanism in the region on Bokoharam and the religious fundamentalism of certain sects. This might have been because humanist cyber activists have never shied away from pointing at the violence perpetrated in the name of religion. After Texas mass shoorings, reports on local media centred around the Athiest identity of Devin Kelley, which religious counter activists soon exploited and transformed into mass social media campgain with the intention of debunking the claim that Islam was responsible for Bokoharam.

MENENE TA'ADANCI KUMA SUWAYE YAN TA'ADDA??.

Tare da :- *Sheikh Musa Yusuf Asadus Sunnah (Hafizahullah).*

A Masallacin Juma'a na Abu Huraira Dake Kurna Titin Gobirawa Yan'simogal Kano.

Ranar Asabar

15/02/1439

05/11/2017

Lokaci Magrib zuwa Isha'i.

Kayi addu'a a zuciyar ka/ki.

Figure 6. Advert for a Salafi lecture on "The meaning of Terrorism", Facebook, November 2017. The Atheist terrorist provided a method for framing Humanist Cyber activism as part of an Illuminati conspiracy which applies double standard in media reporting

Prior to 2017 there have been similar attempts by religious groups in the region but not as successful. Previous rehtoric which attempted to use Pol-Pot, Stalin and Mao as examples of the atheist terrorist have not been as readily acceptable in the region. But with the Devin Kelley shooting, religious groups used Kelly not only as an example of a religious terrorist, but also as an example of the double standard in media reporting. A poarticluar sucessful religious narrative, shared thousands of times, speculated that an Illuminati conspiracy was behind efforts to bury the Kelley story and encouraged muslims to fight back by sharing.

3) Appropriating Reason- Sola Scriptura

Quranism is the Islamic version of Sola Scriptura, a belief that rejects the authprity and or authenticity of all texts besides the Quran. There are three strains of Quranism in Northern

Nigeria. The first, locally known as Kala Kato claim a precolonial origin, the other groups are the Submitters, who follow the teachings of Rashad Khalifa and other liberal Muslims (Ostein, 2012).

While early Islamic response to humanist camp gains could not sufficiently distinguish Quran Alone Muslims from humanists, Muslim respondents to the humanists soon discovered that some Muslims who preached Quran Alone and other liberal creeds, could logically refute some of the many claims of the humanists. By adopting the same methods as the Quranists, which place reason over revelation Muslim activists could now challenge humanists using the tools of reason and philosophy.

This transformation began when Salafi and other Muslims started adopting social media threads and arguments of openly Quranic Muslims such as Maryam Jemaare.

Websites and other social media groups sympathetic to Muslims started sharing the once controversial views of liberal Muslims like Kadria Ahmed, which argue that the Hijab is not a religious requirement in Islam.

The transformation is arguably an attempt at extending the Islamic Identity to liberal Muslim groups, once viewed as syncretic and therefore deviant.

V. CONCLUSION

The emergence of humanist cyberactivism in Northern Nigeria has presented a new dimension to the nature of dissent (Tawaye) a feature that has defined the social progress in the Sahel for centuries. While in the pre colonial, colonial and early republican setting the response of the state has usually served to contain outbursts of dissent, the demise of efficient local governance in the 1970s has made that impossible. With cyberactivism taking advantage of digital technologies, other social mechanism that have erstwhile been used to contain dissenters have proven inadequate. This paper shows that Northern Nigerian society is adapting to meet these challenges. Unlike in earlier situations where force is used to remedy Tawaye, social media has made open debate a necessity and in response, a community of counter activists that meets these new dissenting groups serves as the new Yan Doka or social police of the society.

In response to humanist activists we suggest that Liberal, Moderate and Extremist religious Muslim and Christian groups are finding harmony and cohesion in what Maryam Jemaare, a feminist Muslim activist called a “Season of Monotheism” defined by the use of logic, Quran Alone (sola scriptura), philosophical and generally non violent efforts to defend religion against what is perceived to be a coordinated campaign by Humanist Activists.

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