The Era of Humanism

Humanist Cyberactivism in Northern Nigeria

Aminu Aliyu Abdullahi

aminusumaila@aminusumaila.com

Abstract— There has been a growing presence of openly humanist and anti theists individuals of Northern Nigerian descent on social media, using studies that looked at internet use and religiosity some have cited the correlation between internet penetration and atheism as proof that Internet usage is responsible for this growth of humanist activism. This research challenges that perspective by studying for the first time, this growing community of social dissenters. We argue that the social conditions in Northern Nigeria are fueling the growth of digital humanism which is also moving away from cyberactivism to become a full fledged cybersect. Analyzing the framing of humanist argument, we suggest that Humanists through cyberactivism are exploiting social conditions within the region, which currently favor mass mobilization.

Keywords- *Digital Anthropology, Social Media, Northern Nigeria, Humanism; Cyberactivism; Frame Alignment*

I. INTRODUCTION

Social Media sites in Northern Nigeria, especially Facebook are witnessing an unusual upsurge in humanist evangelism (Almuhajir, 2016), This has led to an upsurge in calls to regulate social media use (Abdullahi, 2017) and sometimes to censor it. Of particular concern to the religious conservatives is not merely the rise in atheism but also the seeming rise in the number of Muslims identifying with liberal concepts and doctrines who are therefore not willing to counter such humanist activism (Bala, 2017; Abdullahi, 2017).

Some Northern Nigerian Academics have linked social media use to the rising trend of atheist evangelism and a general loss of decline in religiosity (Almuhajir, 2016), some have cited researches linking internet use to atheism as proof of the liberalizing influence of social media. Researches like Downes (2014) which suggested that internet use has a significant correlation with the degree of religiousness. The research found that use of the internet is associated with a

decrease in religious affiliations, with internet use found to contribute 20% of the observable decrease in religiousness among Americans from 1980 to the 2000s (Downey, 2014).

The link between internet usage and religiosity has also featured strongly in other researches. According to Campbell and Heidi (2005), religion is one of the most popular topics in the internet, this is also true in Africa where evangelical groups have sought to use the medium to extend their reaches to a new tech savvy generation. (Asamoah and Kwabena, 2007). Cimino and Smith (2011) have hinted that the rise of New Atheism might not be unconnected to the proliferation of internet connectivity in the early 2000s.

In Northern Nigeria, Abdullahi (2017) has suggested that religious discussion is one of the most popular topics on Facebook, which also happens to be the most popular social media platform in the region. Since the 1970's, the region has experienced a gradual erosion of its secular and multi religious character (BenAmara, 2013). With the Rise of Boko Haram, an Islamist group seeking to create a caliphate in Nigeria, this threat to atheists, humanists and other liberal groups has only increased (Adesoji, 2010).

This new found threat has compelled many Humanists groups to seek alternate means of communicating their messages and remaining engaged with the wider society. (Nigerianhumanists, 2015). This tech savvy generation are finding that the social media forums and platforms present a safe means of conveying their messages across. Humanists Activists are finding that these platforms can be easily used to source international support for their causes. The Free-Mubarak Bala movement in 2014, with the aid of international groups like the IHEU, successfully ensured the release of Mubarak Bala, a man who was forcefully confined to a psychiatric hospital after renouncing Islam (BBC, 2014) (IHEU, 2014).

A. Threat of Change

Numerous religious figures have shown concern regarding the rising activity of humanists and atheists on social media, figures including the leader of the terror group Boko Haram have argued that the internet is leading to the rising cases of unbelief throughout the region (Bala, 2017). Although these assertions have not been investigated, there are researches

which have shown that such cyber evangelism could be a prelude to a larger social change. According to Howard *et al.* (2013) during the Arab Spring protests in Egypt and Tunisia, the use of social media positively correlates with the number of protests on the street. This hints at the virility of these platforms in bringing about social change.

But researches like Dawson *et al.* (2013) have indicated that rather than leading to unbelief, the internet could actually strengthen religious bonds by providing novel ways to rejuvenate religious experience. Keller (2014) has also argued that the internet, rather than killing religion, is actually serving as a tool for evangelism.

In the absence of reliable data on humanist activity in the region, this paper presents a qualitative study which examines the structures of the growing online humanist movement. We argue that social conditions in Northern Nigeria are actually conspiring to increase the relevance of this movement which is drifting away from cyberactivism and slowly taking on the features of a cybersect.

II. BACKGROUND

A. Cyber Activism and Cyber Sectarianism

The 2015 Nigerian general elections arguably saw the most prominent use of cyber activism in Northern Nigeria. Two of the leading political parties used the internet for fund raising. Some have suggested that the strategy of exploiting social and environmental issues by activists of the then opposition party were responsible for its victory (Ross, 2015). Realizing this potential of cyber activism, the government promulgated a cyber security act, it also attempted to enact a social media law which sought to stifle speech on social media, the proposed law was abandoned after a campaign by cyber activists. Cyber activism has also reflected some of the social fault lines within the region, The Eze Oruru affair which began when cyber activists from the Nigerian south launched a campaign to rescue an underage girl which they claimed had been kidnapped by a Northerner summarily launched a wave of counter activism from the North which culminated in a team of Northern Nigerian lawyers taking up the defense of the accused Northerner pro bono, (Rhodes, 2015; Knottedpost, 2015). But the Sunusi Lamido marriage law affair is perhaps that best indication that cyber activism can translate into social and political action. In February 2017, the Emir of Kano called for reforms to Northern Nigeria's family law, the call spurned a movement of self-styled liberal activists calling for gender equality in the region (Punchng.com, 2017). Realizing the dangers in having a senior figure calling for such radical reforms, we saw for the first time conservative religious organizations venturing into the cyber activism with organized online campaigns against the reforms and person of the Emir (knottedpost, 2017b). The issue eventually took a strange political dimension when the Kano House of Assembly attempted to force the Emir's abdication, this propelled another cyber movement, possibly the first of its kind with openly liberal motivations, against established religious and

political figures. The movement eventually forced the Assembly to abandon its efforts (knottedpost, 2017c). Perhaps realizing the need to have a visible online presence after the Sunusi Lamido Affair, these conservative Sunni groups amplified their presence on Social Media (Mubarak Bala, personal correspondence, October 25, 2017) following closely the strategies of the Shiite Islamic Movement of Nigeria. But the most portentous attempt at religious cyber activism was perhaps employed by the conservative Shiite group, the Islamic Movement of Nigeria which was forced underground in some Northern Nigerian states following a violent confrontation between its members and security operatives in December 2015. Declared an illegal organization in the strategic State of Kaduna, the group retreated to cyber activism to propagate its views and counter the government's narrative. It also often used closed Facebook and WhatsApp groups to mobilize its members for protests all around the Northern Region (Dauda Qom, personal interviews, 1st Oct 2017).

These growing actions are indications of the growing ability of cyber activists to impact the social and political conditions in Nigeria.

B. Humanist Activity in Northern Nigeria

The precursors to outright humanistic thought in Nigeria were the Sawabists who identified with the philosophy of Malam Aminu Kano or democratic humanism (Feinstein, 1973). Spanning a period from the 1960s to the early eighties, the movement was characterized by a reliance on humanistic ideals built around a religious and political framework (Sumaila, 1973). Today, mainstream liberal and humanistic thought is rare in Northern Nigeria. In the 1980s, proselyte campaigns by religious groups and swift economic changes ensued a period of religious radicalization which culminated with the imposition of Shariah Law in 12 out of the 19 states of the region (BenAmara, 2013). With traditional religious doctrines such as orthodox Sufism also in retreat (Hill, 2010) it became dangerous to display open dissent to conservative social currents. In the Christian areas of the region, the influx of American extremist Pentecostal churches has also resulted in radicalization (Hackett, 1998), which also often stands at par with some of the most extreme Muslim groups in the region. This state of affairs is possibly the reason why most humanists have found it safer to use social media to vent dissent and to sometimes espouse opinions deemed too liberal for the larger society such as support for gay rights, etc (Mubarak Bala, Interview, October 25, 2017).

There has been some atheist/humanist activity within Northern Nigeria's academic circles, especially around ABU Zaria where a fledgling Marxists movement once existed (Bala, 2017). The lack of a political platform under the military junta (1983-1999) and the processes of religious radicalization have each been raised to explain the sudden disappearance of the movement from public debate. But in the

early 2000s the Northern Nigerian Facebook community started witnessing the first influx of anti theists posts.

According to Mubarak Bala, an atheist who went public in 2014, the activities of these humanists became so pronounced that he was invited before the council of the Kano Emirate. A former executive governor of Kano also reached out to him and asked him to use his influence and dial down the public criticism of Islam (Mubarak Bala, interview, October 2017).

At present, there are at least three independent humanist pages that are exclusively Northern Nigerian, some of which post exclusively in the local Hausa language. Additionally, numerous Facebook accounts that are dedicated exclusively to anti theist posts exists.

C. Humanism as religious dissent (*Tawaye*)

Scholars like Murray Last have argued that religious or social dissent (*tawaye*) is a phenomenon integral to the socio cultural dynamics of Northern Nigeria, drawing on historical precedents, he considers aberrations like Bokoharam a symptom of the same cultural force that inspired earlier religious changes like the Sokoto Jihad (Last, 2013). According to Last, religion providing an outlet for an alternative conception of authority serves as a means to subtly and sometimes violently challenge the perceived injustices of the authorities on both political and moral grounds (Last, 2013). If so, religious clerics that used the term *Tawaye* or dissident (Bala, 2013) to refer to the growing humanist movement might be correct in their assertion. In such a context, the humanist movement is a protest movement that employs religious connotations like other social protest movements in the region. If so, Northern Humanists must employ the same aspects of social protests by dissenting in manners, norms or migration from the social standards of the times.

Expanding upon this concept, we will examine the nature of the protest if any and see if like other cases of *Tawaye*, the humanist movement also uses religion/humanism to speak the language of discontent and whether it uses such a language to logically justify political resistance as a moral act.

III. THE STUDY

The study involved two phases, in the first, we focused on identifying and interviewing atheists, liberals and self acclaimed humanists on the various social media platforms popular within the region (Abdullahi, 2017). 20 individuals participated in the interviews Participants were selected based on their online activism. 15 humanist cyber activists participate in whatsapp and Facebook activism participated. 10 of the individuals were interviewed after meeting with the author while five would only agree to an online interview. Five other participants self identified as “closet humanists”.

. Conventional ethnographic methods were adopted to treat the data.

In the second phase, the social media feeds of 29 prominent humanist activists spanning the period (Jan 1st 2015- Dec 31st 2016) were analyzed to develop the underlying themes and features of humanist activism.

A. Interviews

Athiists and humanists were contacted through facebook and twitter, a few were contacted through Mubarak Bala who was helpful in introducing humanists who would erstwhile have been reluctant to identify themselves. Most participants who showed this reluctance agreed to be interviewed online. The data was collected from September 2016 to August 2017. The interviews were centered around motivation and the personal stories and experiences of the participants. 19 openly humanist individuals agreed to participate in the research.

Additionally, two secret social media groups agreed to allow the researcher to observe their interactions over a span of three months.

B. Content Analysis

Data from humanist activity spanning two years from 29 prominent activists was subjected to analysis. The particular activists were selected based on interaction with Mubarak Bala and other members of the humanist movement. The goal was to analyse the nature of the movement's activity and to extract the critical themes shaping its activism.

IV. FINDINGS

A. Constructing the Humanist Narrative

While there is little quantitative or far reaching qualitative study to ascertain the growing influence of humanist activists, conditions within Northern Nigerian Society seem to complement the humanist argument, the appeal stemming from which might give even their detractors, the impression of humanist success. This posture of victory, which the activists also deliberately encourage might be part of a publicity effort to promote mobilization. Prominent themes in the narrative strategy of the activists include:

1) Diagnosing Social Ills- Blaming Religion:

“Blame Religion for Everything”

Northern Nigeria and perhaps even the larger Nigerian society has been saturated with uninspiring news. Sad stories of horrific killings and mass murders and a general perception of a political class that has rogue is prevalent. The movements attempt to harness this mass disillusionment has taken the form of an open and straight forward assault on religion. By blaming religion for every ill that has befallen the society, the movement is presenting an alternative diagnosis to that of conventional religion which has seemingly failed 50 years of trails.

The movement's effort takes varying directions but is mostly centered on publicizing hadiths and biblical verses that seemingly allow for or justify the social ills prevalent in the society. Hadiths interpreted as violent are presented as the inspirations behind Boko Haram, verses that favor patriarchy are presented as the foundations that favor patriarchal abuse etc. And by attempting to show the inconsistency behind Muslim and Christian religious thought they challenge the moral and ethical foundations of the multi religious state, which has claimed to check moral excesses through these religions.

As stated earlier, history in this regard does not favor the religious argument, decades with religion at the fore front of regional consciousness has witnessed only excuses for a seemingly exponential decline in moral and ethical behavior. The normal argument that calls for more religion can easily be portrayed as a failure, but the movement seems to go further by blaming the decline exclusively on religion and its moral code. Even corruption which has been a very challenging issue for Nigerians is presented as a symptom of the shaky ethical foundations of Islam and Christianity. In the absence of another more novel theory, humanists are able to leave their religious counterparts with a much older narrative of social diagnosis which can easily be dismissed as a failure, but by framing this new diagnostic hypothesis with religion in the center, they place the religious on the defensive which to an observer, invariably grants the humanists an advantage.

2) *Curing the Ills- The Nordic Argument*

"Atheist countries are not corrupt, why are religious one corrupt"

By presenting a new solution to an old and seemingly intractable problem, humanist activists are not only presenting novelty in a society that is almost hysterically looking for answers to its problem, but pointing to an example of success as "proof" that irreligion is the answer to the region's problem. Such a radical solution which contravenes so much of the core beliefs of the society might seem repulsive to a great majority, but religion, and Islam in particular has always pointed at its earthly success as proof of its divine origins. For years, the decline of that success in the fall of the Sokoto Caliphate has been tempered by a near virile Mahadist expectation (Last, 2013) which hints at the end of times. But Mahadism has since waned from the public's consciousness and the society hungers for that proven answer that will restore peace and prosperity. As later sections will argue, some liberal extrapolations of Islam are finding it advantageous to advance this theory of proven cure, while they on the other hand point to stories about the Golden Age of Islamic Science which they argue is more tolerant (Personal Interviews with Maimu Jemaare, October 3rd, 2017) the humanists focus on the much more visible successes of Scandinavian and other European secularists and Atheists. This appeal to a European Solution is not novel to Islam, reformers like Jalaluddin Al Afghani and Muhammad Abduh have advanced such ideas which even though with much disdain, find appeal even amongst

conservative Muslim clerics in the Region (Friday Khutbah of Sheikh Muhammad Ibn Usman, 2014). This only advances the humanist argument for secular and perhaps even atheist transformation as a solution to the region's social ills. This unique situation has left the religious with little room but to present a counter argument which they have so far done with little novelty. The erstwhile call for Saudi style shariah transformation is summarily dismissed by the humanists as a proven failure. They point to Saudi's own effort to liberalize and the region's own traumatic experiences with Boko Haram and Sharia implementation as examples. This failure by Shariah to provide the much needed social change has created a void that has so far remained unfilled, even at the face of growing evangelism. In the Christian areas of the region, Pentecostal Evangelism which has once enjoyed unrestrained growth can now be checked by the example of America. Whether through internet penetration or perhaps the growing internal fractures within American politics, sad stories about America are presently far more visible than they were a few years ago. Even America's entertainment media, which has served as the main pipeline for advancing the American appeal has not only diminished in its potential to do so but has arguably in many instances served to campaign against it. This has perhaps made the prevalent humanist narrative seemingly attractive with the argument of "proof" replacing the prophetic argument.

3) *The Urgency of the period- a motivation for change.*

"We share bad news, apocalyptic news, which they also share, but unlike them we have a new solution and they don't"

A sense of social urgency has been an underlying theme in political messages throughout the region. "Nigerian-must kill corruption or corruption will kill it" was the rallying mantra of Muhammadu Buhari who managed to unseat a serving President in 2015. Spurned by the surprising and unimaginable victories of Boko Haram, the region is perhaps arguably being thrust into a season of deep existential introspection which, although haven been and still being, exploited by some politicians, is serving to create the sort of social urgency that fuels mass mobilization. Religions in Northern Nigeria are no strangers to this scenario, Muslim clerics have been preaching about the need to return to God before the end of times, but unfortunately, even the clerics who publicly indulge in extravagance have not heeded their own call, and while the threat of impending damnation in the hereafter is a strong motivation, the threat of impending death is an even stronger one. In this instance, humanists in the Nigerian North have managed to exploit the urgency with existential themes and thereby make some of their more radical arguments, that would ordinarily been rejected outright, less revolting.

By persistently focusing on the negative, which ironically, the religious clerics also do, the humanist argument is given the upper hand as the more novel, radical and therefore more likely to present a lasting solution to the impending peril.

Themes about Nigeria's break up, or the collapse of the oil based economy, which are ordinarily non religious, are easily given religious connotations as part of the long continuum of religious and moral ethics which although once used to the advantage of the religious are now being used against them by humanist activists.

4) *Regionalism- The search for a trans religious identity*

Since the 1950s political discourse in Northern Nigeria has been typified by a yearning for a common political identity that transcends the religious boundaries of the region (Kukah, 1993). In the wake of the 2011 elections which saw for the first time, a President elected despite a clear rejection by the Muslim areas of the region, the yearning for a trans religious Northern identity has only increased.

This might have created the apprehension to directly criticize humanist activists which our participants observed.

“the easiest way to de-legitimize you was if they portray you as a christian agent or vice versa, an impostor trying to destroy the North, now they cannot do that” observed a participant.

With new found sensitivities embedded into the consciousness of a political class that is inherently linked to religion, the actors that would have erstwhile challenged the legitimacy of humanist activism can no longer exploit the religious competition between Muslims and Christians. This self censorship means that exclusivist framing which has been previously successful is now severely limited .

B. *Emergent Frameworks of Activism*

The different attempts at framing humanist activism is one of its advantages. Possibly a property of its non centralized evolution from dispersed networks, this diffused streams of information activism makes it harder to locate a focal theme, making it harder to research or criticize. It also gives the impression of a large and coordinated structure even when there is no evidence of one.

1) *Alliance building- appealing to the moderates*

“the enemy of my enemy is my enemy, at least for the time being”

Given the relatively little resources at their disposal, it is conceivable that the broadcast of most humanist arguments on social media is being channeled through the alliances established by humanists. By building bridges with other disgruntled groups, members of the movement are able to bridge their arguments with those of other minority groups such as some secularists and reformist Muslims. Reformist Muslims are by far the most common “friends” highlighted by our participants. Educated and willing to challenge ancient interpretations, they are often too willing to propagate humanist arguments without deeply analysing the implication of doing so. Views constructed around liberalism, while enticing for reformists also serve to undermine their own religious foundation. By such emphasis on liberal ideas, reformists are often made to believe that a humanist region is a

better alternative to the norm, even if some humanists have little intention of tolerating non-humanistic views. Other groups like religious feminists are motivated by the promise of economic liberation, which of course is also always framed to give advantage to humanism. Arguments for the emancipation of women as a means to solving the poverty problem in the region finds strong support within the feminists class, which are surprisingly not always women. Some of our participants see feminism feature strongly in men who have been raised by single or strong mothers. Often, stories and arguments that reflect on the sufferings of women (their mothers) is effective in getting them to join a bandwagon. By amplifying emotional messages of human suffering, the arguments for Godlessness are easily tolerated and sometimes even shared.

a) *Pitting them against each other*

Surprisingly, Shiites and some christian groups feature strongly as allies in our interviews with humanists. Shiites, seeing themselves as natural enemies of the Saudi strain of Islam might also encourage this alliance in the hopes of destroying Saudi influence in the region, but by doing so, they inadvertently weaken their own religious position. For christian groups, an alliance with humanists might be viewed as an extension of the long struggle for numbers with Muslims throughout the region. The cultural arguments being propagated by humanist which for example argues against viewing all non hijabi women as *Karuwai* or prostitutes might sound enticing to christian groups, which have often faced discrimination on such subtle cultural grounds, these subtle arguments allows the movement to construct a bridge between different religious narratives with a surprising effect, that each of these religious groups at some point often see's the others as an extension of the humanist argument while also in numerous other times, serving to propagate and share arguments framed in a humanist perspective .

b) *The Estranged*

Social and familial estrangement is a popular response against social dissidents in Northern Nigeria, as Last (2013) pointed out, even in the Sokoto period, social dissidents are often forced into social seclusion and even exiled. This is perhaps viewed a society's own method of self correction. Parents who choose estrangement from their children for social crimes such as immoral dressing or lifestyle often do so with the belief that the estrangement will force the child to correct at a latter time. While such a strategy has reportedly worked against some closet dissidents (like Gays, transgenders, inter religious couples etc) those strong enough to resist are still often vulnerable to arguments framed around universal love, which diminish the importance of the religious norms that are responsible for their estrangement from family or friends. These individuals are according to our participants, often the most productive activists outside of the mainstream humanist community. Earlier attempts at such bridge building have had to be refined, there is the example of a lesbian activist who manages an pro LGBT Facebook page in Hausa

who launched a vehement campaign against the humanist activists “because she felt trapped” between them and other conservatives. But by finding a subtle way of advancing mutually advantageous causes, which came about through a compromise that saw some arguments embracing an undefined form of spirituality, the call for more religious liberalism is easily subsumed under the more threatening call for godlessness.

c) The Political Liberals

As suggested by Last (2013), political power and religion often go together in Northern Nigeria. Dissent within political camps is easily amplified into dissent within religious ideas, especially if doing so comes with the promise of political capital. Perhaps the best example of such bridge building was during the crisis instigated by the reformist calls of the Emir of Kano. In February 2017 the Emir of Kano called for reforms into the family laws of Northern Nigeria which would have seen restrictions imposed on polygamy. Ironically, such a call has been made several times in the last decade by conservative religious clerics, which include the powerful head of the Kano religious police (Hisbah), but while the calls made by the clerics had been simply ignored, the Emir being the spiritual leader of Kano (and until the 1970s also the head of all administration in the area) his call carried enough weight to reinvigorate the political rivalry between Saudi backed Wahabbi clerics and the Sufi Emirate Council. The rivalry degenerated into open political confrontation when on April 14, 2017, the Emir broke a 500 year tradition by having a woman (albeit his own daughter) represent him at an official function. This soon led to an attempt by conservative politicians to force the Emir's abdication. According to our participants, during the whole episode, longing for all the support they could get, Political liberals on social media were openly sharing and endorsing humanist propaganda even when unveiled as a clear polemic against religion. By framing their propaganda as an argument for liberty and social reform, the yearning for political capital simply outweighed any difference in religious beliefs.

When the attempt to replace the Emir was eventually thwarted, the activists conveniently played the Emir's success as a success for humanism which their grateful religious but liberal friends simply refused to challenge and by doing so gave the movement an “assumed” political clout even though it had none

d) Manjism- the fifth column

“There are reformists and then there are manjites who take reform to such extremes that it borders anarchy”

The above quote from a participant sums up the difference between Manjites and normal Muslim liberals. One of our participants named this class of reformist after Irshad Manji (a reformist Muslim lesbian who was once called Osama Bin Laden's worse nightmare) but the theme features strongly in interviews with other participants. Characterized by calls for religious reform, often multi dimensional and therefore extremely radical, this class of reformist Muslims

are easily indistinguishable from the average humanist, but with the “deadly” threatening difference that unlike the humanist, the Manjite presents their arguments in a religious framework. The Manjites accomplish this by radically reinterpreting religious texts, rejection of the authority of the Sunnah etc. According to our participants, these radical reformers are often deemed more dangerous by the larger society and often “steal the show” from humanists. It then became prudent for humanist activists to frame their arguments in a way that will invoke the participation of such reformists while making sure not to alienate them. While such Manjites are seen as the nemesis of religious conservatives, they also, ironically viewed as dangerous by humanist activists. This stems from the manner of Manjite reform and their own strategies of framing. Their arguments somehow seeks to appropriate not only religious authority from the clerics (which makes them enemies of the conservatives) but also attempts to appropriate reason and the “reasonable argument” from the humanist activists, thus potentially rendering them irrelevant. This threat is quite visible such that a participants claimed for a very long time, her guiding principle was to “never argue with a Manjite” Finding bridges with Manjite argument was probably an accident resulting from the distinct sensitivities of Northern Nigerian society. In a society that is deeply homophobic, arguments for LGBT rights might seem more palatable to arguments which attempt to show a Quranic justification for LGBT rights, but due to the nature of topic assessment by social media platforms, controversial topics, which invoke horror and a powerful need to condemn are often more visible. Manjites thus serve as the convenient channels of making humanist arguments in ways that invokes a powerful emotional response from social media users. The popularity of such threads which is often amplified by monosyllabic comments of horror from shocked Muslims (like 'subhanallah') is often construed as the popularity of Humanist Activism even though the activists are often merely hijackers of the reformist call. And when such popular Manjite accounts often show agreement with atheists, the agreement is incorrectly construed as proof of the popular Manjite's atheism.

2) Blasphemy – A means of amplification

By blasphemy, humanist activists openly declare war on religion and by doing so, create offense, the sort of offense which the religious find irresistible to ignore. The corresponding interactions with trolls and genuine campaigners creates likes and reactions which feeds a circle of publicity, adding to the allure of humanist activism. The publicity discovered by accident by many humanist activists has evolved into a conscience strategy. Our participants all reported to have used it consciously to elicit response. Blasphemy in the community of humanist activists is now a tool for publicity, and when framed around a certain issue or topic that is within the public's consciousness, the activists ingeniously appropriates all logic and sensibility in a discussion or thread thereby allowing them to make much

more logical and cohesive arguments while the religious are often left making threats or trolling the thread. Blasphemy serves as the point of clarification for most humanist ideas, taking different forms, it attempts to convict religion in the court of public opinion which often tragically succeeds because those who would have erstwhile challenged the activist's claims are left blindsided by the singular act of blasphemy that they suspended all reasonable effort to approach debate with a sense of strategy. Most participants report of enjoying how hundreds of religious people will simply resort to a string of insults and shares often at the slight use of a few words within a post which has hundreds of words. Our participants perhaps rightly view the success of blasphemy as a tool of amplification because it declares religion the enemy and leaves no one to defend it.

a) Prophetic Blasphemy

By attacking a venerated religious personality humanist activists are able to identify and frame their arguments in a way that not only identifies the religion with that personality (Prophet Muhammad PBUH, or Jesus or A Saint) but also, according to our participants succeeds in convicting the religion by shattering the charisma of the venerated individual. These venerated personalities are unfortunately common in all the prominent religions in the region. Even aside from the venerated Prophet and his Companions (shabats) the long history of Sufism in the region has created a number of local saints, each with his own blessing *Baraka*. And while newer interpretations of Islam like Wahabism would like to claim a break from such tradition, they too unfortunately find success more in the presence of charismatic personalities each with his own followers (called students) who hold him in such high esteem that the religion becomes identified with the person's own interpretation of things rather than any objective system. Charismatic fellowships are even more common in Pentecostal Christianity. Imported from America, the religion and the leader of the church are hardly distinguishable which becomes a problem if the human failings of such religious leaders is ever to become public. This tradition of charismatic worship leaves "open targets" which our participants gladly exploit. According to one of our participants, by spreading lesser known hadiths interpreted and presented in such a way that they cast doubts about the moral standing prophets or their companions, such "prophetic blasphemy" "succinctly sows the seeds of doubt into the heart of believers"

b) Presentism or Moral Relativism? When history judges

By emphasizing on personalities and moral norms of the past, religious narratives are left in a perpetual frame of defense, making it easier to identify the religion as the enemy which serves to amplify the humanists message. By presentism, the judging of religious figures by modern moral and ethical standards, even popular religious narratives that have portrayed Islam as a radically emancipating religion are easily

eclipsed thus leaving the religious with little room to counter humanist arguments. While arguments of moral relativism might sound plausible in an academic setting, it becomes discouraging in the court of public opinion, where clerics have proclaimed the universal applicability of interpretations. Humanists who employ this use instances like Aisha's age at marriage to blame religion for sanctioning pedophilia etc. Such a framing leaves religious narrative in a hopeless situation which according to our respondents often ends with the religious "attempting to desperately avoid the issue". By reading history with such judgment, humanists are able to frame their arguments around a near incontrovertible proof of religion's failure and use it to dismantle the ethical and moral credentials of religion.

3) Nerve Centres of Adaptation – The brain of the movement adapting the humanist narrative

By forming unusual nerve centers of thought, humanist activists are able to transform and extend narratives around frames that continuously adjust to ideas based on their success and their logical cohesiveness. This creates a system best described as a distributed network of prominent and competing narratives that share the same objective. The result is a stream of narratives that adjust in what is inferred from the outside to be an orchestrated phenomena. This is apparent from the participants own understanding about the nature of frame evolution among humanist activists. The deep taboo nature of humanist ideas has helped to force a community that is deeply connected internally. These vast internal networks of communication mean ideas are often nurtured within the community and refined before they surface as narratives of activism. Different chunks of networks framing ideas in different ways serve not just as incubation hubs but also as hubs of activism. Interaction within such hubs serves to set the agenda for any given time.

The participation of "closet humanists", humanists who have not publicly acknowledged their humanism, in this exchange means they also contribute to the activism in some way. A recurring theme in the interviews is how some of the most intellectually vibrant humanists remain "in the closet", participating in secret groups. Secret discussion groups within the movement serve as the main centers of idea transformation, allowing the activism to adapt its narratives around frames that more easily resonate with the wider society.

a) Philosophical Groups as tools of extension

While secret groups that cater exclusively to humanists incubate ideas, groups that compose of humanists and other pressure groups seeking social transformation serve as the main vessels for extending the humanist narrative. Participants reported these groups as groups for intellectual exploration where "meaningful" or "sensible" debates are carried out, but a number of them have related stories about how they joined the wider humanist community through one of such intellectual groups.

Stacked with rules of conduct and behavior, these groups provide controlled environments where ideas are tested but also probably, refined to construct narratives that extend beyond core humanist ideas, encompassing a wider spectrum of people. Such people, often on the fringes of humanism could then be slowly incorporated into the movement.

C. Evolution of a Cyber Sect

“this revolution will be on facebook”

None of our humanist participants actually think of humanism as a sect, even those that actively promote it on social media think they are campaigning against religious sects without actually being part of one. It is important to point out here that the concept being used here differs from the some theist arguments which claim atheism to be a belief system. As pointed out by Last (2013), the conception of social activism in Northern Nigeria is intricately linked to religion, so why not irreligion? From the concepts presented by the activists themselves, our argument here is that humanist cyber activism has achieved all the main characteristic traits of a religious dissident movement (*Tawaye*) with the simple distinction that in the case of the humanists, they propound a value system that rejects the concept of a supernatural divine figure. This would not be the first time that an irreligious movement takes on the characteristics of a religion, the presence of several atheists such as Ibn Rushd among Muslim Neoplatonists might lead one to argue that Neoplatonism in the Muslim world was a separate religious movement. Expanding from that, we argue that humanist cyber activism here has satisfied the same criteria, whereby it has evolved or is evolving into a cohesive movement that provides meaning to its adherents. As an alternative to physical migration which is a prominent feature of earlier dissenting movements, Humanism has chosen to migrate to the digital, and using these digital platforms as a safe haven is now able to launch a campaign for political control in the region. Such a migration is keeping in line with the basic norms of *Tawaye*. Even the founder of the Sokoto Jihad as a dissenter employed migration (from Gobir to Gudu). But in the case of the humanism, the digital is providing a new terrain for political competition.

1) Consolidation – Building the humanist Community

As suggested by Dawson *et al.* (2013), cyber communities are being used by some religious groups to rejuvenate religious experience. By forging cyber communities which are able to provide nearly the same support, humanist activists are able to replicate the same intra-communal bond thereby creating a support network that could replace a traditional religious community. These communal groups are usually on WhatsApp, a distinction from Facebook, the preferred activist platform. Secrecy is maintained by Group Admins who usually vet new members. Joining is usually through a referral system where members recruit new comers based on prior

interaction offline or online, in the many debate groups on WhatsApp and Facebook.

Personal and mundane issues are freely discussed on these groups thereby giving them “a homely feel”, with geographically close members meeting regularly. Described as a “sanctuary” by one participant, they provide a reliable way of communication even at periods of crisis. A participant described how they “retreated” to WhatsApp sometime in 2016 when religious activists launched an attempt to close down humanist activism by reporting humanist accounts to Facebook. With numerous accounts being anonymous, the community suffered losses and had to develop ingenious methods of bypassing Facebook's strict identity requirements. The rich activity of non activist humanists in these groups described our participants also shows the communal nature of these groups. Humanists who have no intention of participating in campaigns still find the relationships established through these groups important. According to one participant, “by letting them know that others are out there” these “closet humanists” are able to get the “psychological support needed”, these supportive structures are able to ensure the consolidation of humanist interests by forming the same intra-communal relationships that have sustained other groups of social dissent (*Tawaye*).

Rituals within the community seem to be an extract of the cultural dynamics of the region. Although not believing in God, they perform the ritual visiting of members who have lost a loved one and in some cases even participate in the ritual morning period known as *Zaman Makoki*. They also use the sympathy greeting “*Allah ya ji kan rai*” which loosely translates as “may God have mercy on his/her soul”. These practices point to some conscious attempt at spiritual humanism which may accommodate the yearnings of members who are open to such experiences.

2) *Tawaye*, political capital and web anonymity .

The political ambitions of humanist activists is apparent in our interviews with all of our participants. As a Northern Nigerian protest movement, such ambitions are the propellants of activism. The evolution of this yearning to change society is visible not only through cyberactivism, but through social compromises and trans regional alliances with humanists from the Southern regions of Nigeria.

Recently, an Atheist Association of Nigeria was registered with the support of many Northern Humanists, many of whom elected to remain anonymous. In appealing to disgruntled minority groups such as liberal Christians and Muslims, they satisfy a distinct characteristic of earlier movements of social dissent (*Tawaye*). Such support usually takes the form of campaigning for liberal candidates, policies or officials that are challenged by conservative candidates. The best examples of these being the movement's campaigning for Emir Muhammadu Sunusi II of Kano after he proposed reforms to Kano's family laws. While the movement also collaborated with Shiites who it deemed “more liberal” against other Islamists, it ironically also campaigned for Nasiru ElRufai, the

Governor of Kaduna State whom the Shiites accuse of collusion with the military to kill thousands of Shiites. This shows that the movement does remain conscious of its interests despite such alliances.

As suggested by Last (2013) Alliances among groups is a prominent feature of social protest in Northern Nigeria. By such alliances, a dissenting movement that is usually too small or remote to achieve its own political ambitions is able to attain political relevance thereby slowly attaining legitimacy. It is conceivable that with such alliances, the movement could evolve beyond a cyberspace and take on the characteristics of humanist movements in the west, a scenario that will undoubtedly upset social currents enough to see a more violent reprisal from the religious.

Like any cyberactivism in censored societies, Humanist activism is benefiting from the anonymity offered by the internet and social media. According to numerous participants, the efforts by Facebook to ensure true identity on all accounts is only marginally successful. Many reported that they are still able to register and operate multiple anonymous social media accounts, most of which are on Facebook. But this anonymity should not be overstated, many activists have gone public with their activism, even in perceived religious states such as Kano and Bornu, most prominent of which is Mubarak Bala. This is however not suggest that public humanism isn't dangerous, rather, the activists might be achieving a degree of success in pacifying the social violence which usually accompanies social dissent.

3) *Anglophilia- A means to stop social backlash?*

As indicated by Last (2013), overt display of violence is socially reprehensible in Northern Nigeria. A display of anger which is assumed to be a lack of self control is deeply shameful, this has made the use of violence against social dissidents an act reserved for the relatively young. This however has not stopped the elderly from giving tacit approval for such violence, indeed as Last (2013) pointed out, such violence is usually teleguided by the elders. Rationally, by pacifying such elders one may hope to escape any severe social backlash.

Curiously, much of northern Nigeria's humanist activists have adopted the happy human symbol, which is recognized as an international symbol of humanism, but in the case of Northern Nigeria's activists, the happy seemed to be raising the colonial standard of Northern Nigeria (a blue ensign defaced with the arms of colonial Northern Nigeria). A need to appeal to Northerners was the reason given for this curious choice by a number of our participants, however, most of the younger population of Northern Nigerians, which also happen to be the primary focus of humanist evangelism, at best share only a faint identity which such symbolism.

We thus suggest, such pro colonial symbols are actually designed to pacify the elderly by appealing to their widely acknowledged Anglophilia (Ladan, 2010).

According to Ladan (2010), the intense cultural transfer witnessed in post war colonial Nigeria created an educated class of Anglophiles. This educated class which went on to assume the leadership of the region was largely responsible for the pacification of nationalist tendencies in the Nigerian North (Vande, 2012). With this class of anglophiles created at colonial centers of learning, most prominently Barewa college, still at the helm of regional governance, appealing to their anglophilic tendencies could be a measure to charm them and preempt them from classifying humanist activism as a movement threatening enough to warrant orchestrated violence. Barewa, the fulcrum of Anglophilic activity, also known as the "eton of the north " (ladan, 2010) has produced five Nigerian presidents, the last of whom served between 2007 and 2010. And with numerous senators, governors, the Sultan of Sokoto and other high ranking officials being products of the same pro imperial institution, the influence of such anglophiles on the wider region could be strong.

V. LIMITATIONS, FUTURE RESEARCH AND CONCLUSION

Rather than the internet being responsible for Humanism and humanist activism, we argue here that there is substantial evidence (from an analysis of the activism) to suggest that the perceived success of the activism is actually a symptom of the success of humanist framing. This is however not an evidence of the success of humanist cyberactivism, rather this success which has been suggested by numerous prominent individuals might have been merely perceived due to the success of the movement in framing their arguments. Indeed, the use of multiple anonymous accounts alone could have inflated this perceived success and perhaps convinced some that the movement is larger than its actual size. Humanist Cyberactivism however has undoubtedly achieved some success in Northern Nigeria. By mere presence in a region which applies Shariah law alone could be an indication of such success. Also, the numerical strength of humanists within the region, provided by our participants which ranges within the tens of thousands suggests an alarming degree of success. Such figures are however not to be taken at face value. Indeed our participants being activists might have reason to inflate their numbers. A deeper and larger research may attempt to ascertain the actual success of movement. Also, from the reviews of interaction between the religious and humanist activists, there are indicators suggesting that Religious argument might be evolving. Although this evolution might not have yielded the same success as humanist activism, it could very well catch up. Further research might investigate this religious response to humanism.

Being the first of its kind, the goal of this research was to highlight the changing nature of social activism and social dissent in Northern Nigeria. The digital has obfuscated much of our assumptions about the nature of social dissent in the region. This presence of the digital could easily mislead us when assessing the true impact and success cyberactivism, especially if we rely on conventional sociological tools. While

some success in humanist activism is apparent, rather than it being an Era of Humanism in Northern Nigeria, we could be exaggerating its success by interpreting the information in an outmoded way. The digital, instead of being a cause of humanism, might merely be an amplifier of a historical tendency towards social dissent. By understanding this emergent movement, we could have a better understanding of cyberactivism as a whole and develop better strategies of assessing impact, even in places where censorship has been entrenched.

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