

The motorcycle Sallah durbars of Zaria 2012

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Violence linked to Boko Haram's insurgency in northern and central Nigeria, including killings by security forces, is believed to have left more than 2,800 people dead since 2009. Boko Haram has said that it is seeking to establish an Islamic state in Nigeria, though its demands have repeatedly shifted. The sect is believed to include a number of factions, and imitators and criminal groups carry out violence under its guise. (Agence France-Presse, *New York Times*, 20 October 2012)

A newspaper vendor, Suleiman Sani, 23, was whisked away by some operatives of the Joint Task Force (JTF) in Maiduguri penultimate Monday for allegedly disallowing some soldiers to read newspapers free... Chairman of the Newspapers' Vendors in Borno State Monday Arewa Abuji confirmed the incident, saying 'We moved from one police station to the other without success... It was today (yesterday) that we traced him at the 21 Armoured Brigade Giwa Barracks'. (Hamza Idris, *Daily Trust*, 20 October 2011)

Newspaper accounts of recent violence in northern Nigeria report shootings of police officers, soldiers, customs officials, and political leaders as well as the bombing of schools, newspaper offices, and churches. In their attempts to address this violence, military officers and security officials of the federal Joint Task Force have ordered massive house-to-house searches, road-blocks, and arrests, which at times result in retaliatory attacks, particularly when fellow soldiers or police officers are killed.

These attacks and counterattacks have been documented in a November 2012 Amnesty International report (Amnesty International 2012). Readers of these accounts may be puzzled about the reasons for, let alone the sources of, these actions. Indeed, northern Nigerians are themselves uncertain as to who is to blame for the many bombings which have occurred mainly in Borno and Yobe states in the northeast corner of the country, but elsewhere in the north as well. Many of the attacks are attributed to Jama'atu Ahlis-Sunnah Lidda'awati Wal Jihad (JASLWJ), popularly known as Boko Haram (literally, 'Western education is forbidden'; Anon. 2012). The group's leader, Malam Muhammad Yusuf, and his followers supported Shari'a law, a return to Islamic moral values, and the rejection of Western values in northern Nigeria (Last 2008). This group attracted national and international attention after the extrajudicial killing of Muhammad Yusuf on 29 July 2009, when group members began a series of violent attacks on government officials (both state politicians and traditional rulers), along with demands for an investigation into Yusuf's death, the release of jailed group members, and the state-wide enforcement of Shari'a law (Lubeck 2011).

While some believe that force is the best strategy against the group, others have called for a negotiated settlement. The government's response has generally followed the strategy of force, with warrantless house-to-house and roadblock searches (Adesoji 2011). Although an amnesty committee, established by President Jonathan in April 2013, promises the possibility of an end to the violence (Wakili & Mukhtar 2013), the following month President Jonathan declared a state of emergency in three north-eastern states – Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa (Wakili et al. 2013), which would appear to undermine negotiations.

Yet many northern Nigerians suspect that actions blamed on Boko Haram cover a range of individuals and groups acting in their own interests – particularly politicians who use this insecure situation to enhance their

political standing in the north. But robbers, kidnappers, and those with personal vendettas also are believed to be involved. Even confidence men have taken advantage of the situation; in a recent case, one man was arrested for taking payments from worried families anxious to get their relatives released from police custody.

This insecurity has led to many arrests, which have tended to focus on young men as they most closely resemble the youthful followers of the late Boko Haram leader, Muhammad Yusuf, and furthermore are the group – the *talakawa*, which translates as commoners, working-class – who have the least to lose and are thus the most likely to challenge the prevailing status quo (Honwana & de Boeck 2005).

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The significance for the Nigerian state of this violence and counter-violence – between those advocating a religious regime and those supporting a secular state, between youth and elders, between rich and poor – may be understood more clearly by examining the micro-politics of an extraordinary event that took place in the Tudun Wada and Zaria City areas of the city of Zaria, in Kaduna State, northern Nigeria.

In mid-August 2012, the Emir of Zaria, Alhaji Shehu Idris, cancelled the Sallah durbar processions. People throughout Zaria were disappointed as many annually come out to watch this exciting spectacle, with its horse riders (on their decorated horses) and their followers on foot, all wearing dazzling new clothes (Figs 1-3).

In Zaria, the Sallah durbars (Hawan Daushe, in Hausa, literally, horse riding after a religious festival) consist of elaborate processions that are associated with the Muslim holidays of Eid-el-Fitr, which marks the end of the month-long Ramadan fast and the beginning of Sallah (Apter 2005), and Eid-el-Kabir (also known as Eid al-Adha elsewhere in the Muslim world) which celebrates Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son (the Hausa term, Sallah, also is used to refer to Eid-el-Fitr and Eid-el-Kabir; Newman 2007). Men spend months preparing new outfits for themselves which consist of elaborately embroidered robes and capes, with turbans. Horses may be 'dressed' in matching materials, with newly decorated harnesses and saddles (Fig. 4).

People from Zaria and surrounding communities come out to view the riders and their entourages, with important invited guests seated in special viewing stands attached to the palace. According to the secretary to the Emir, the Dokajen Zazzau, who was interviewed in 2008, 'Without the traditional durbar the atmosphere would be dull. In order to keep the residents in festive spirit the emir usually goes round the city on horseback to meet them. This usually keeps the city alive. Our people like it, and that is why it has been maintained for the past hundreds of years' (Sa'idu 2008).

Considering the historical importance of the Sallah durbar procession in the cultural life of Zaria, its cancellation was an extraordinary event (Moore 1987). However, what was even more remarkable was the spectacle that replaced it. A group of young men from Zaria City decided to ride their motorcycles in their own version of the Sallah durbar, doing so without the permission of the police or the emir's council (Fig. 5). Their initial procession through

(From above to below, left to right)
Fig. 1. Sallah durbar riders, the man in the middle wears a white turban with kunne biyu (two ears), which indicates his royal status, Zaria City, 2003.
Fig. 2. Sallah procession riders, wearing hand woven-strip cloth babban riga robes and turbans, Zaria City, 2003.

Fig. 3. Rider approaching viewing stand, emir of Zaria's palace, Zaria City, 2003.
Fig. 4. Rider in Sallah procession, with matching turban and horse decoration, GRA, Zaria, 1998.



Zaria City and through Tudun Wada attracted many people. When the emir once again cancelled the Sallah procession that was to take place during Eid-el-Kabir in late October 2012, they performed their motorcycle version of the procession again to an even larger audience.

Not everyone appreciated their version, which consisted of dare-devil motorcycle stunts with riders wearing their own styles of Sallah dress – outfits of tee-shirts and special blue jeans (Miller & Woodward 2012). Yet many youthful spectators were wildly enthusiastic. They approved of these young men who were challenging the moral disorder represented by the emir's cancellation, which many viewed as a shirking of his official duty. This challenge to what is seen as the failure of responsibility of political leaders – be they traditional rulers, state governors, or federal officials – parallels the more violent acts of Boko Haram militants who seek redress for the killing of their leader, Muhammad Yusuf, and advocate what they see as a return to an Islamic moral order.

This is not to say that the durbar motorcyclists are members of Boko Haram – they are not – nor that what they are doing is comparable in terms of the physical destruction and fear that Boko Haram has wrought. Indeed, the main danger associated with the motorcycle durbar riders is to themselves, either through falling down while doing dangerous stunts or through police violence and arrest. Yet, as the background to the cancellation of the Sallah durbars in 2012 makes clear, young people – mainly young men but also some young women – like some young men to the northeast, have reason for taking the performance of the Sallah durbars into their own hands and for questioning the authority of their elders.

The Sallah durbar cancellations and their antecedents

Instead of holding the annual durbars, we feel it would be better to allow residents to use the Sallah period to pray for the Zazzau Emirate, Kaduna State and the country at large. Nigeria needs our prayers and this is why we want to use a blessed period like that of Sallah to present our needs to Almighty for Him to proffer solutions to our challenges. (Statement released by Zazzau Emirate council. Sa'idu, *Weekly Trust*, 25 August 2012a)

When the Wazirin Zazzau, representing the Zazzau Emirate Council, announced the cancellation of the Sallah durbars, he asked instead that the people of Zaria pray for the well-being of the Emirate, Kaduna State, and Nigeria. It was also reported that the elderly emir was too ill to participate in the procession. However, it was widely believed that fear of violence – against him and within the community – was the real reason for the cancellation.

One of the principal responsibilities of the emir of Zaria (Zazzau) in contemporary Nigeria is to intercede with the federal government for the interests of his subjects associated with the precolonial Emirate of Zazzau (Smith 1960). Yet the lack of water and electricity in Zaria City, the old walled section of Zaria where the emir's palace is located, has been a constant source of complaints and protests against the federal government and indirectly, against the emir, who is seen by some as using his position to gain wealth for himself while leaving Zaria City residents without running water or regular light.

I was told that in late March 2009, young men, their bodies covered with sand, marched through the streets of Zaria City, chanting, 'Ba ruwa, ba wuta (no water, no light)'. When they arrived at the emir's palace, the emir counselled them to have patience. The next day, another protest was led by young men in another section of Zaria, which became violent, with police throwing tear-gas canisters and the young men maintaining their ground and throwing stones. Four deaths were reported following this

incident. Two years later, on 28 February 2011, this protest was repeated in front of the main gate to Zaria City, with young men chanting, 'No water, no light for over one year, we demand our rights!' (Fig. 6) This demonstration was dispersed by the police, while some young men were arrested (Liman 2011a).

During the 2011 demonstration, protesters also called for the support of the presidential candidate, Mohamadu Buhari, for the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC), one of the main political parties of the north, (Fig. 7) and the defeat of the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP), the party which has ruled Nigeria since 1999. Yet the emir supported PDP candidates. Indeed, as an official receiving funds from the federal government, he and other traditional rulers in the north were constrained to do so.

Consequently after the presidential and gubernatorial victories for the PDP in Kaduna State in April 2011, some of his angry subjects destroyed his palace in Kaduna, while the main palace in Zaria City was stoned. When he called for an ending to the violence, two comments published in the *Daily Trust* on 21 April 2011 give a sense of the anger people felt towards him (Liman 2011b):

'mr. emir. i thought they burnt your palace? how come u still talking? na wayo [cunning] be this ooo'

'I don't blame you (Oga Shehu Idris). You are saying this after you have collected Millions of naira from Jonathan [the President of Nigeria]. Please fear God as cheating does not pay.'

Yet the damage to the palace was subsequently repaired (some say with government funds), although its beautiful facade is now surrounded by stone barricades and barbed wire.

This disorder in the polity is mirrored in the illness of the emir, much as the disorder in the realm and illness of King Lear are famously portrayed by Shakespeare. The emir's frequent absences from the palace are attributed to the need for medical treatment, both overseas and in the national capital, Abuja, although skeptics believe that he has stayed away on account of fear.

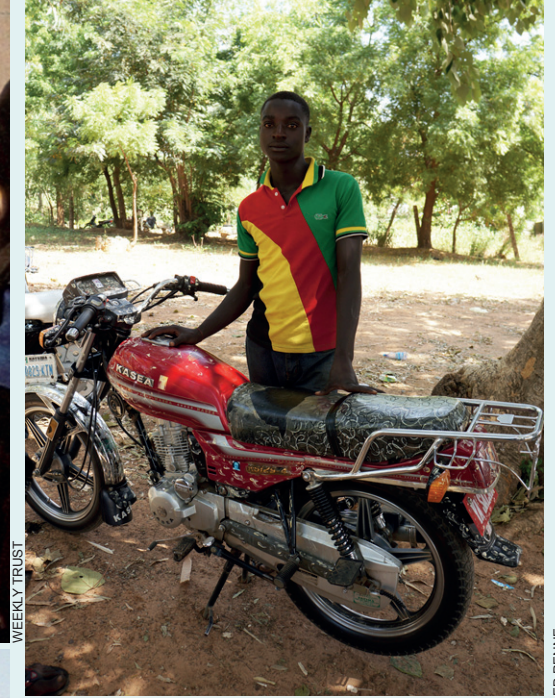
On 24 October 2012, the official statement given for the cancellation of the 2012 Eid-el-Kabir Sallah durbars was the same as that of August – that the community should use Sallah to pray for peace. However, the emir had been out of the country for 20 days when this statement was issued. At the time, it was widely believed he had left for medical treatment; when he returned to the palace on 17 November 2012, it was reported that he was 'in a sound state of health'.

Sallah durbars with horses, Sallah durbars with motorcycles

Instead of the colourful regalia in which horse riders adorn themselves and the horses colourful and attention-grabbing attires, the motorcycle riders chose to act differently. Some of them appeared almost naked. Some of them had only pants to cover the groins with 'huge' goggle-eyeglass to match, suggesting they were acting under influence. The Ballotelli-like hair cut was the passion for almost all the cyclists who engaged in somewhat dangerous acts to entertain themselves and their spectators. (Isa Sa'idu, *Weekly Trust*, 25 August 2012a)

On hearing that the Sallah processions were cancelled in Zaria, a group of young men from Zaria City known as Aweezo (probably named after the American rap artist, Young Weezo) who performed dangerous motorcycle displays at weddings, decided to organize their own Sallah durbar procession. Their version mirrored the official horse riding processions. Like the horsemen who carefully prepared their own clothing and decorations for their horses, motorcyclists went to the market to purchase special clothing – tee-shirts and blue jeans – and decorated their motorcycles with labels depicting famous singers

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(From above to below and left to right)
Fig. 5. Photograph taken at first motorcycle Sallah darbar, Zaria City, 25 August 2012.
Fig. 6. 'No light and water We are fight our right No light water', curb painted during February 2011 demonstration at Kofar Doka gate roundabout, Zaria City, 2011.
Fig. 7. Campaign painting of Muhammadu Buhari, a candidate for the Congress for Progressive Change party during the 2007 presidential election, on the side of the Kaduna-Zaria expressway, 2007.

Figs 8 & 9. Members of the motorcycle group known as Aweezo, with their motorcycles, decorated with coloured wheel discs, labels, and patterned mud-guards, Zaria, November 2012.
Fig. 10. Members of Aweezo motorcycle group, wearing their uniform—blue jeans and tee-shirts ('I love my life'; 'Gucci'), with sunglasses and cell-phone accessories, with a young admirer, Zaria, November 2012.

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Fig. 11. Young girls wearing their Sallah finery, Zaria City, August 2012.



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(for example, the late African-American rap artist, Tupac Shakur, among others), soccer players, and movie stars, with coloured discs inserted into wheel spokes, and with customized painted designs (Figs 8-10).

Rather than the turbans worn by horse riders and their followers, they had their hair cut in particular styles including the Ballotelli cut (associated with the Ghanaian-Italian soccer star, Mario Ballotelli), afros, and 'three step' (a tiered hair style), all worn with sunglasses. During the traditional Sallah durbar, special sounds distinguished the event as palace guards announced the appearance of the emir and horse riders with long trumpets (*kakaki*). During the motorcycle Sallah durbar, there were no trumpets, but by removing the exhausts (mufflers) from their bikes, the noise of their engines reverberated throughout Zaria City. In both cases, the skill of the riders – of horses, of motorcycles – was an important aspect of these displays.

Yet aside from the very different styles of dressing and the use of motorcycles as opposed to horses which distinguished these performances, there were other, more significant, differences. While the horsemen of traditional Sallah durbar are members of the wealthy political elite, the motorcycle riders are young working-class, unmarried men. Equally striking was the inclusion of young women, girlfriends of the motorcyclists, who rode on the back of their machines and incited them to perform even more daring deeds.

Furthermore, unlike the traditional durbar procession which was universally admired, not everyone approved of the motorcycle durbar display. Some older people were shocked at their clothing styles ('some of them appeared almost naked'), while others believed that the riders obtained their courage from drugs. Also, unlike the official Sallah durbar when policemen were present to control the crowds, in the case of the motorcycle procession, the police attempted to stop the motorcycle riders themselves. Some of these young men were arrested and had their motorcycles taken from them, while others openly challenged the police by threatening to run them down.

Because of accusations of police brutality during the earlier water and electricity protests, the police needed to be circumspect and as one rider noted, 'Because we are so many, they can't control us'. In fact, some riders said that the Joint Task Force soldiers guarding the entrance to Zaria City at the Kofar Doka gate were smiling and enjoying the performance. Some younger people said that they even preferred motorcycles to horses and gave riders gifts of money to thank them for their efforts.

The future of Zaria's Sallah durbar, the future of northern Nigeria

Since they didn't give people their rights [to view the durbar], we started doing this to make people happy.... So we will continue this play every Sallah, even if the police are stopping us. (Sallah durbar motorcyclist, Zaria, 11 November 2012)

Two gunmen who rode on a motorcycle yesterday attacked and killed Alhaji Abba Mukhtar Abba Tijjani, the district head of Mairari in Maiduguri. (Hamza Idris, *Daily Trust*, 13 May 2011)

It is uncertain whether and which type of durbar procession will take place during next year's Eid-el-Fitr festivities. If the emir's health has improved and actions have been taken to address residents' demands for electricity and water in Zaria, the traditional Sallah processions may be reinstated next year. Yet the durbar motorcyclists are insistent that they will ride again during Sallah and, barring police force being used against them, it is likely that they will attempt to do so. In this sense, their actions, along with the cancellation of the Sallah durbars themselves, represent a radical change from the past.

Furthermore, the fact that they ride motorcycles rather than horses relates their actions to the wider political inse-

curity of northern Nigeria, where motorcycles are associated with the ride-by shootings of government officials, traditional rulers, police, and military personnel associated with Boko Haram. Indeed, motorcycles, as a form of public (but not private) transport, have been banned in some communities and throughout the north, motorcyclists are compelled to dismount and walk with their motorcycles through military check-points.

Yet the violence continues in the north. Indeed, in early October 2012, a bomb was detonated in one area of Zaria, which led to Joint Task Force soldiers conducting house-to-house searches and arrests in this and several other areas of the town, including a neighbourhood in Zaria City near the emir's palace. While the emir was away at the time, when he returned to the palace on 17 November, one man was pleased, explaining that:

Had it been the emir was in town, the harassment we suffered in the hands of soldiers and police couldn't have taken place. Because of the fact that the emir was not around, these people (JTF) have been harassing us by going into our houses in the night in the name of house to house search. We pray to Allah to continue to give him good health (Sa'idu 2012b).

Yet such beliefs put the emir in an awkward position, for the very people – his subjects – whom he is expected to protect are suspected members of Boko Haram; they are also the people whom he fears himself. Indeed, recent events in Kano – the attack on the Emir of Kano's entourage on 19 January 2013 (Ross 2013) and the attempted bombing at the emir's palace on 17 April 2013 (Adamu 2013) – reinforce his trepidation.

When the head of the Christian Association of Nigeria, Ayo Oritsejafor, came to testify before the US House Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, and Human Rights on 10 July 2012, he advised that the US government classify Boko Haram as a terrorist organization. However, Johnnie Carson, the Assistant Secretary of State for Africa insisted that, with the exception of the three men believed to head Boko Haram – who have been officially designated as terrorists – the violence in northern Nigeria reflects local issues which must be addressed by Nigerian political leaders themselves (Mukhtar 2012).

According to the Nigerian National Bureau of Statistics report released in February 2012, the poverty rates in the northern part of the country are estimated to have ranged from 76 per cent to 86 per cent in 2010. Without a comprehensive government plan to address the problems of the north and the demands of young men – both those calling for the performance of the Sallah durbar and for the provision of basic services in Zaria and those associated with Boko Haram demanding Shari'a law and prisoner release – motorcycles and their riders will continue to challenge the moral authority of those who rule in Nigeria. ●