Sectarian Revolution or Irregular Warfare? Interrogating the Proliferation of Violent New Religious Movements as Impetus to insurgency in West Africa

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Abstract

There is no gain-saying the fact that terrorism has increasingly become widespread criminal violence as different countries/actors across the globe have their own unique ways of perpetrating the act. West Africa, in particular, has seen an increase in terrorism especially in the Sahel region. Religious extremism, particularly its violent radicalization, has become the fault line used by terrorist groups to garner support and sympathy for their actions, as well as to guarantee recruitment. For instance, the Boko Haram insurgents regard the Nigerian State as being run by non-believers. Thus, its political goal is to create an Islamic state. Terror in the Maghreb is nonetheless on the rise, and has been shown to have intimate links with violence in other regions of the Islamic world such as Iraq. Despite the efforts being made to prevent and end violent conflicts in Africa, the Continent continues to experience sporadic violence and volatile security challenges. Of particular academic interest is the major challenge to curbing conflict in West Africa which can be attributed to the poor understanding of the fundamental causes of conflicts- a gap which this article seeks to interrogate. An understanding of this and other complex dimensions of the continent's security architecture is necessary for placing any analysis of state and non-state

actors in the proper context. In general terms, the article seeks to understand the nature and dynamics of insurgency and the upsurge of violent new religious movements in West Africa while contributing to the understanding of the ideological underpinnings and geographical locations of terrorism on the continent.

Key words

Revolution, Warfare, Religious Movements, Insurgency, Terrorism

1. Introduction and problem statement

Since the end of the Cold War and the advent of globalization, states- and more broadly international organizations- have expanded their focus from state-centric security threats to those emanating from non-state actors (Hübschle, 2011). Over the past two decades, the threat posed by violent extremist groups that espouse fundamentalist religious narratives has grown substantially across Africa (Hallowanger, 2014 cited in Buchanan-Clarke and Lekalake, 2016). The colonial era and the undemocratic rule that characterized many post-independence governments generated anti-Western and jihadist movements across the Middle East and the wider Islamic world (Moore, 2016). These movements advocate conservative religious rule as a cure for modern societies' social ills (Buchanan-Clarke and Lekalake, 2016). In Africa, as elsewhere, armed struggles are in a constant state of flux. As new technologies, strategies, and ideas about the state, the life people live and pathways to resistance emerge, existing insurgencies adapt while new ones emerge. Global and regional forces – be they political, economic, or social – impact on the context of the armed struggles in multiple, and often unpredictable, ways.

In western and eastern Africa, religious extremism has become an increasingly serious problem (Dowd, 2016). Christianity and Islam have interacted extensively with traditional African faiths to engender innovative religious developments known as 'New Religious Movements in Africa'. Although the majority of these movements have arisen out of the interaction with Christianity, a number of them have been inspired by Islam (Turner, 2010). The easy spread of the jihadist ideology, the jihadist movements' success in massively recruiting followers among

local populations as well as their ability to conquer and administer territories, are unprecedented in the region's contemporary history (Ibrahim, 2017). Despite these efforts which have achieved some appreciable success, the cradle of peace and stability in the sub-region remains brittle and the possibility of a resurgence of seemingly ended conflicts is high (Obi, 2012). Indeed, with the rising spate of terror attacks in West African countries, the threat of terrorism has become a real and present danger in the sub-region (This Day, 2016).

A variety of socio-economic and political conditions in Africa – too many to recount here –produce grievances that have been used by militant groups to justify their recourse to violent actions. While generalizations are risky, some comparisons can be made in the way that physical terrain is used and the violent methods are employed (Forest and Giroux, 2011). Fall (2009) argues that greater attention to the insurgencies taking place in Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Casamance is critical to the maintenance of stability, good governance and peace in the West Africa region and that if no appropriate measures are taken by the respective governments, the Economic Community of the West African States (ECOWAS), the African Union (AU) and/or the United Nations (UN), the level of violence might increase, spread and escalate into regional wars. Thus, this paper seeks to unravel the strategic relevance and implications of the emerging religious new movements in West Africa sub-region.

This study contends that while urgent efforts are being made to improve the counter-terrorist capacities of region's security architecture, and similar initiatives pursued in this band of insecurity, it is important to develop a more comprehensive response because "it is becoming increasingly clear that efforts which merely respond to immediate threats, which rely almost exclusively on force, and which do not engage religious civil society are ineffective and even counter-productive" (Dowd, 2016). In general terms- with analytical tool of social movement theory -the research seeks to understand the nature and dynamics of insurgency and the upsurge of violent new religious movements in West Africa while contributing to the understanding of the ideological underpinnings and geographical locations of terrorism on the continent. The major argument of this paper is that new religious movements that are prone to violence usually metamorphose into armed insurgent groups

with devastating consequences for the West African sub-region, as in other regions of the world.

2. A Conceptual Analysis: Probing the concept of (Violent) New Religious Movements

With the end of the Cold War and the resulting ideological and economic implosion of the Soviet Union, post-Cold War insurgency typologies began to emerge because a need existed to understand where this component of the new global security environment was heading. Over 2 decades of research and writing have been focused on this endeavour by what is a relatively small number of insurgency practitioners and/or theorists (Bunker, 2016). One of the features of modern society which sociologists of religion, such as Durkheim, Weber and Wilson, have frequently pointed out is that organised religion no longer has the kind of hold over social institutions that it has enjoyed in earlier periods. Religion has become increasingly a leisure pursuit that may be `privatised', `individualised' or even, to borrow Luckmann's term, `invisible'. Mainstream religious organisations have suffered significant losses of membership in most of Europe and, according to some, though not all, commentators, in the United States (Barker, 1999).

It is debatable how 'new' a tradition has to be to qualify as a New Religious Movement (NRM). Some scholars say that any development since Protestant Christianity qualifies. Others say the term should only apply to groups that have arisen in the last 200 years. Yet others say that the term should only apply to groups originating after WWII (the last 60 years) (Gerlach, n.d). Needless to say, there is a wide variety of NRMs across the globe. Some NRMs arise from major world religions that we have studied such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, Christianity and Islam (examples include Mormonism and the Nation of Islam). Other NRMs take bits and pieces from many religions and see themselves as part or fulfilment of the older traditions (examples include Unitarianism, Baha'i, 5 Percent Nation, and Rastafarianism). Still others do not see themselves as a part of any older religious tradition (examples include Scientology and the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster) (Gerlach, n.d). However, such new religious movements differ from each other so far as their origins, their beliefs, their practices, their organisation, their leadership, their finances, their life-styles and their attitudes to women,

children, education, moral questions and the rest of society are concerned (Barker, 1999).

A useful NRM definition includes supernaturalism, adherence to societal norms, and some form of ethics. William Bainbridge and Rodney Stark (1996) define a sect as an offshoot of a religion that is attempting to restore the religion to some previous state of purity. They differentiate from a sect as one introducing something new (Stark, 1996). NRMs are characterized by a number of shared traits. These religions are, by definition, "new"; they offer innovative religious responses to the conditions of the modern world, despite the fact that most NRMs represent themselves as rooted in ancient traditions. NRMs are also usually regarded as "countercultural"; that is, they are perceived (by others and by themselves) to be alternatives to the mainstream religions of Western society, especially Christianity in its normative forms. These movements are often highly eclectic, pluralistic, and syncretistic; they freely combine doctrines and practices from diverse sources within their belief systems (Rubinstein, 2018).

Academic literature, policy papers, media reports and even works of fiction have one thing in common when they address issues of terrorism and radicalization. The words Islam or Muslim have feature frequently as a subject at the centre of many of the discussions/debates. This follows the prevailing pattern of terrorist profiles that have mostly been Muslims and enlisted terrorist networks such as AL Qaeda, Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab also Muslim. In addition to this, pro-Muslim ideology that condemns Western civilization and seeks to forcefully engrain Muslim law among citizens of particular nations has also constituted to the association of terrorism with Islam (Karegi, 2012).

In customary parlance, the term "new religious movements" has four related meanings: (1) independence; (2) a territory not under the control of any other power; (3) in ecclesiastical usage, the principles that individual congregation or church is an autonomous and equalitarian society free from any external ecclesiastical control; and (4) the polity based on this principle (Barrett, 1970). The "new religious movements" here refers to a new development arising in the course of the interaction of a tribal or primal society and its religion with one of the more powerful and sophisticated cultures and its major religion, involving

some substantial departure from the classical religious traditions of both the cultures concerned, in order to find renewal by reworking the contributing traditions into a different religious system (Turner, 1978).

Modern African movements vary greatly doctrinally, structurally, and liturgically, and Bryan R. Wilson's (1973) system of classification is possibly the most suitable for dealing with this variety, primarily because it is free of theological, organizational, historical, and cultural bias. Wilson's typology is based on movements' responses to the world and interpretations of the sources of evil and how it is to be overcome (Encyclopedia of Religion, 2005). From this perspective, modern African religious movements can be fit with one or a combination of Wilson's seven types of modern or new religious movements: These are: (1) the conversionist response, which insists that individual and collective salvation can only come about through a profound, supernaturally wrought transformation of the self; (2) the revolutionist response, which believes that evil can only be overcome and salvation assured by divine action, thus no subjective change however profound will affect the state of the world for the better; (3) the introversionist response, which seeks salvation by withdrawing to a separate, purified community set apart from what is perceived to be an irredeemably evil world; (4) the manipulationist or gnostic response, which seeks salvation and the conquest of evil though the acquisition of the right means and techniques to deal with the problems of life; (5) the thaumaturgical response, which relies chiefly on miracles and oracles to attain salvation, which is identified as something specific such as the relief from a particular illness; (6) the reformist response, which aspires under divine guidance to overcome evil and save the world by transforming existing social structures and arrangements; and (7) the utopian response, which aims to reconstruct the world according to a set of divine principles that, if correctly applied, will result in the establishment of a world without evil. The main limitations of Wilson's typology are its inability to capture the dynamics of religious change and development movements undergo and their espousal of more than one orientation simultaneously (Encyclopedia of Religion, 2005).

New religious movements are based on charismatic authority: what the leader says is "the source of authority" for the group (McGuire 1997: 136). New religious movements may claim to be completely new, in

terms of belief and practice, while others claim to be much older than the historical religions of the world. What makes them "new" is that they characteristically are formed from a plurality of prevailing cultural values. NRMs put forward alternate worldviews and practices: they stress "real social change will emerge through their movement by the transformation of individuals" (McGuire 1997: 182).

Much of the research literature studying new religious movements and violence comes from a sociological perspective (Skrumedi, 2017). Much has been studied and written about the link between religious belief and practice, on the one hand, and a propensity for violence, on the other. Since the New York City terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, interest in these theories and attention to religion and violence has increased. Themes of violence can often be found in religious narratives and symbols (Wilkinson, 2009). The argument that violence stems from a more basic root in human existence than ideologies of any category is used by some scholars to create a demarcation between cults and religions, whereby religions are based on doctrine or teachings and cults are based on power and greed (Ooms, 1993). These ideas are useful in that they help to create a demarcation between similar religions when one of them chooses violence. They encourage taking a closer look at how similar new religious movements or individuals are in fact distinct and how these distinctions are essential in understanding why one group or individual chooses violence. Taking a deeper and more complete look at the social context or background of religious groups that choose violence often reveals distinctive interpretations of common creeds, beliefs, or practices and explains their violence in a unique way that is difficult to generalize to other religions (Wilkinson, 2009).

Studying religious movements carefully in their own terms is essential to informed military and political analysis. Understanding armed religious movements and their approach to violence needs to focus on two main areas of enquiry – a general appreciation of religious mentality and a particular understanding of the distinct religious vision and intent of the group in question (Slim, 2005). Numerous studies have endeavoured to unravel the puzzling complexities behind new religious movements that erupt in violence. This foundational research has invariably had to address the most persistent of questions - why do certain new religious movements become violent while others do not? In

the area of NRM violence, David Bromley (2011) is best known for his analysis of such violence in terms of what he refers to as "dramatic denouements," whose core structure is a four-stage processual model of interactive conflict amplification: (1) latent tension, (2) nascent conflict, (3) intensified conflict, and (4) dramatic denouement.

The Canadian Security Intelligence Service (2002) estimates that there are roughly twelve hundred active new religious movements throughout the world and that four hundred of these groups subscribe to an apocalyptic worldview. Not all religious groups who uphold an apocalyptic vision become violent, yet all groups that have become violent, whether that violence was directed internally, interpersonally or externally, upheld an apocalyptic belief structure. Moreover, the same thing can be said for the role of charismatic authority and social withdrawal: all three features are necessary but not sufficient enough to predict violence. Other notable cases of NRMs that have been mobilized to violence include: the Peoples' Temple, The Order of the Solar Temple, Aum Shinrikyo, the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments, the Branch Davidians, Rajneeshpuaram, The Church of the Lamb of God, Heaven's Gate and Scientology (Skrumedi, 2017).

The likelihood that religious cleavages will lead to political violence may depend on many factors, including the size of religious minorities, their geographic distribution, the history of conflict, external support, capacity for mobilization, and whether religious groups are internally divided (Aoun et al, 2012). In many cases, violence or conflict tends to consolidate religious belief or identity, as, for example, a coping mechanism in the face of deprivation, or as a protective measure, a flag to rally around in the face of attack (Aoun et al, 2012). In the final analysis, new religious movements are being established from within all the great faith traditions on a daily basis. Most of them will lead a mainly quiet and peaceful existence. But a few will develop as armed movements while others will offer ideological support to dangerous political ideas.

3. Insurgency in West Africa: An Overview

Since the 80s, no part of the world has been insulated from terror attacks, Africa inclusive. Many of these attacks had been followed with huge press coverage, with the list growing by the day. But particularly disturbing, Africa appears to be getting more than its fair share of terror (This Day, 2016). West Africa has been grappling with violent conflicts and civil strife for decades, however, the periods between the 1980s and the 1990s leading to the new millennium presented more violent and protracted conflicts which destabilized many of its economies (Aning and Bah 2009; UNSC Report 2011). Despite its remarkable progress, the sub-region still faces formidable challenges from various quarters. The emergence of new threats, such as narco-trafficking, maritime piracy, and religious extremism, as seen in Mali and northern Nigeria, presents a significant test for the institutions and capacities of the worst affected countries (Diop, 2015).

Extremist groups in West Africa move with ease between states. The fighting forces resemble "mobile armed bands" with bases in numerous territories rather than traditional, organized armies (Straus 2012). From the rise of extremist movements in the Sahel—such as Ansar Dine (Defenders of the Faith) and MUJAO—to the escalating violence of Nigeria's Boko Haram, the emergence of religious extremism across West Africa has presented a growing threat, helping cast it as the new frontline in the "global war" against extremism (Marc, Verjee and Mogaka, 2015). Jihadist groups in the Sahel are highly fragmented, mobile and fluid and operate in various militant and smuggling networks in the "smooth space" of the Sahel where borders are porous, (Strazzari, 2015). Despite claims to shared ideology, these rival groups often have highly localised goals of securing access to and control of territories they use for various forms of illicit trafficking. They often break up, and change names due to internal disputes and over merging leaderships and their strategic name changing can seem to be the most stable of their characteristics (Strazzari, 2015).

Between 2002 and 2017, sixteen African countries have been affected by Jihadist attacks, ranging from the kidnapping and abduction of civilians to sporadic assaults on military barracks, suicide bombings in churches, mosques, schools and markets, as well as the occupation and

attempts to set up jihadist administration of territories (Ibrahim, 2017). For instance, in Nigeria since 2009, the Boko Haram sect has continued its reign of terror, bombing, kidnapping and destroying property and subsequently coasting from Nigeria to Cameroon, Kenya, Mali, Chad and several other African countries, with gradual penetration and increased presence from country to country.

The region has a history of instability. Since the first post-independence coup in West Africa that toppled Togo's founding president in 1963, it has seen a string of coups, some of which have sparked civil wars. West Africa is also one of the world's most impoverished regions despite its natural resources. Seven West African countries occupy the bottom 10 places in the UN Human Development Index (IRIN, 2013). Poor political and resource governance have often led to explosions of violence by disgruntled segments of society, and a number of studies have linked bad governance to insecurity in West Africa (IRIN, 2013). Religious extremism in West Africa remains largely home-grown and driven by local dynamics, even if foreign actors have provided doctrinal influence, financial support, and training. Although the triggers of radicalization are complex, manifold, and unique to each context, the threat has implications for regional stability and therefore necessitates a regional response, which enables West Africa to benefit from the successful experiences of other countries (Marc, Verjee and Mogaka, 2015).

In the six years since a separatist rebellion broke out in northern Mali in January 2012, armed groups in West Africa's Sahel region have grown considerably in both number and the complexity of their ever-evolving relationships with one another (Offner, 2018). The two main Islamic militant movements operating in northern Mali are Ansar al Din ("Defenders of the Faith") and Jama'at Tawhid Wal Jihad fi Garbi Afriqqiya ("Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa," or MUJWA). Ansar al Din was formed at the end of 2011 by Iyad Ag Ghali, a former Tuareg rebel leader, who is often described as a pragmatic opportunist (Østeb, 2012). Mali's Tuareg have been fighting perceived marginalization by the central government and demanded an autonomous homeland in the country's north. Following the March 2012 coup in the capital Bamako, the Tuareg National Movement for the

Liberation of Azawad seized towns from government troops in the north, but was soon driven out by militant Islamist groups (IRIN, 2013).

Nigeria is also a country where Islamist rebellion and insurgency have historical precedence. It has a rich tradition as a centre of Islamist thought, including fundamentalist and rejectionist strands of Islam (Asfura-Heim and McQuaid, 2015). Since 2002, the militant group Boko Haram has embarked on a violent insurgent campaign in North-eastern Nigeria. The group's goal is to expel the prevailing political establishment, remove all Western influences, and eventually overthrow the national government and establish an Islamic state in its place. Since 2010, this group has been responsible for more terrorist attacks in Nigeria than all other militant groups combined (Asfura-Heim and McQuaid, 2015). According to the Council on Foreign Relations (2015), Nigeria's increasingly violent Boko Haram militia should be seen as a reaction to the government's entrenched corruption, abusive security forces, strife between the disaffected Muslim north and Christian south, and widening regional economic disparity.

While it is difficult to trace the exact origins of Boko Haram and Al Shabaab, both groups began as Islamist revivalist movements intended to establish a Shari'ah-based society in Nigeria and Somalia, respectively (Campbell 2014; Smith 2015). Momentarily putting aside the worrying growth of support – both in terms of 'foot soldiers' and financial backing for Boko Haram, Al Shabaab and the various affiliations of Al-Qaeda - which are relatively well known both regionally and globally - the rise of other groups with similar ideological leanings and violent manifestations is alarming (UNDP, 2015). Also, there is the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS, or French EIGS) which was formed in 2015 by the spokesman for the now-defunct Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest (Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa, or MUJAO) and the following year gained recognition from the self-styled Islamic State group as its official branch in the Sahel. The group is active in the region where the borders of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso meet. It has fought international forces and some local armed groups. It gained considerable publicity with its October 2017 attack on a unit of US and Nigerien special forces in which five Nigeriens and four Americans were killed (Offner, 2018). Diverse in form, funding sources, political leanings, capacity and reach, all these groups are united by radical forms

of Islamist ideology (ICG, 2015), political aspirations that go beyond national borders, and the unrelenting use of violence to achieve their goals.

Given assertions of a proclivity to violence by new religions, the five major episodes of collective violence that occurred between 1993 and 2000 produced an impetus to investigate the relationship between new religions and violence. The result has been theoretical explorations of specific factors thought to be linked to violence, as well as general models that propose sets of factors that, in combination, yield violent outcomes. A central concern in both types of explanation has been the extent to which violent episodes are the product of the internal organization of the religious movements involved, external pressures, and interaction between movements and societal control agencies. There is vigorous ongoing debate over this issue (Encyclopedia of Religion, 2005). According to Arnby-Machata (2013) the root causes of these movements—like those of Hamas, the Naxalites, al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya, the Lord's Resistance Army, even degenerated narco-guerrillas like Shining Path and FARC—are primarily domestic and political. While the exact circumstances of each have their own unique trajectories, they can be narrowed down to one general theme: the failure of the modern, secular state to deliver inclusive socio-economic development and improved standards of living.

Generally, attacks as a result of religiously-inspired violent extremism have reached unprecedented levels, and the impacts are far reaching; from 2011 to 2015, over 21,245 fatalities are estimated to have been caused by religiously inspired extremism in Africa. The presence and operations of Boko Haram, for example, have displaced 1.2 million people internally and forced more than 200,000 Nigerians to flee to Cameroon Chad and Niger (UNDP, 2015). The dramatic increase in security checks and controls in public places is also transforming day-to-day life, with significant psychological impact on populations across the region. The phenomenon shows every sign of growing, unless steps are taken now to address the drivers and enablers of violent extremism (UNDP, 2015).

4. The Upsurge of Violent Religious Movements and Fundamentalist Tendencies

Evolutionarily, since the 1990s, the deadly activities of religious extremists and other violent fundamentalists seem to have increased in West Africa and throughout the world (Pinker, 2011). Obviously, the problem is substantial and has the potential to vehemently grow. Regarding violent religious movements and fundamentalist, countries with mixed religious populations in coastal and geographical hotspots of theological fundamentalism in West Africa are at risk of having tendencies of an escalation into violence, as has been the case of Mali, Nigeria, and Somalia. The Islamist rebels in these countries have ties to global groups like al-Qaida and the Islamic State (IS) (Basedau, Matthias, Birte, & Vüllers, 2016). In the main, Violent Religious Movements and Fundamentalist have been weakening the economic growth of West African countries specifically Mali and Nigeria in recent years and months, these violent religious activities have spilled over into neighbouring countries, such as Niger, Chad and Cameroon. The Sahel region as a whole is constantly under threat: Nigeria's Boko Haram (officially called Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad) has staged attacks in Cameroon, Chad, and Niger, while terrorists tied to the Somali group Al-Shabaab have attacked civilian targets in Kenya and Uganda (Basedau et al, 2016). This violence has resulted in substantial bloodshed.

According to the United Nations (UN, 2017), the religious violence in Nigeria involving Boko Haram has claimed the lives of more than 20,000 people since 2009. In Somalia, more than 30,000 have perished since the early 1990s. The number of people killed in clashes between Muslim herders and Christian farmers in Nigeria's middle belt exceeds 10,000. Thousands have also been killed in the CAR. These numbers only include direct battle-related deaths and not indirect deaths that result from worsened living conditions. Millions have become internally displaced persons (IDPs) or have fled to neighbouring or Western countries because of this religious violence. On the whole, violent conflict – whether religious or not – always severely hinders sound economic, political, and social development.

Violent religious extremism has ramped in West Africa and gets relatively eagle-eye media coverage (Dorsey, 2017) and international concerns. So serious is the situation in Sub-Sahara Africa especially in Nigeria, which was reportedly described as a country as "the Road to Lebanon" (Pew Research Center, 2017). The situation is tense in West Africa because the bloc is almost equally divided between Muslims on the one hand, and Christians and members of African traditional religions on the other. Furthermore, both Muslims and Christians live in every single country, though Muslims are dominant in some while Christians form the majority in some other countries as well.

At the heart and soul of this religious polarisation, violent religious movements and fundamentalists are seeking to obtrude Islamic law known as the Sharia law. Systematically, Sharia means, "the road to the watering place, the clear path to be followed" (Ansorg, Nadine, and Sabine, 2017). Although called "law" it is actually "an inerrable doctrine of obligations" and therefore quite unlike Western concepts of law. Rather it is something that has to be accepted "without criticism" although some leeside is allowed for its correct interpretation. As such, it is very applicable to all Muslims and, in a more circumscribed sense, to non-Muslims living under Muslim control. Thus, personal profession and territorial government as well as specific circumstances and local modes of interpretation limit its application. When the imposition of Sharia law is discussed in places like the northern states of Nigeria the focus is usually on the "atrociousness" of its punishments.

In other parts of West Africa countries, violent religious Fundamentalism is also on the rise. Recently, Muslims have demonstrated against alleged persecution in Liberia where violence has broken out between the Muslim and Christian faithful. Attacks on churches in Sierra Leone have also taken place with Muslim leaders describing Christians as "crusaders" (Svensson & Isak, 2017). Equally serious in terms of human rights is the fact that under Sharia law in the Gambia "a male child inherits twice what a female child inherits irrespective of their age and a widow inherits only one eighth of the deceased's estate" (Svensson & Isak, 2017).

West Africa has been experiencing many forms of violent religious extremism that exacerbated the problems and challenges of the weak

states. New forms of religious movements and violence have germinated with the emergence of Boko Haram. These include suicide bombing and lethal indiscriminate attacks on multiple targets. In the advent of the Libyan crisis, the sub-region is awash with small arms and light weapons and with the threat of further spread of religious extremism across the Sahel region, religious extremism poses a serious threat to the sub-region.

However, the emergence of Boko Haram in 2009 has been the most dramatic and virulent in the history of both Nigeria and West Africa. The rise and occupation of northern Mali by the Ansar Dine militant group in 2012 and the violent turn taken by Nigeria's Boko Haram since 2009 have been the most imperative point of religious violence in the sub-region. Boko Haram's extremism and violence, is unexampled in modern West Africa and has engendered thousands of deaths and stupendous destruction of property as well as implanting fear and precariousness both in governments and the citizens (Poushter, & Jacob, 2015). The rise and occupation of northern Mali by the Ansar Dine militant group and the new threat of radical Islam being posed by the activities of ISIL pose serious questions for West Africa. The sub-region's vulnerability religious threat is particularly persuasive given the structural and economic weaknesses of the countries in the sub-region.

In the main, inference from the violence that exists between the egalitarian message of the Qu'ran and the exploitation and iniquity of the real world, between the demands of virtuous existence made on the believer by the Sharia and the actuality of life surrounded by temptation and vice. Fundamentalists present it as a religion of justice and equity and measure the current system strictly in terms of these ideals. However, having understood the upsurge of violent religious movements and fundamentalist tendencies, it is very pertinent to bring into lime light the strategic objectives and logic of religious extremism in West Africa.

Furthermore, there are other local factors in West African countries that have contributed to violent religious extremism and fundamentalism. The rise of global jihad in the wake of the US-led "war on terror" since 9/11 has also played a part in spreading violent religious extremism and fundamentalism in the region. "In the West African nations, there is a

combination of bad governance, poverty, insecurity as well as several internal and external factors that contribute to extremist violence.

West Africa as a bloc is also one of the world's most impoverished regions despite its natural resources. Seven West African countries occupy the bottom 10 places in the UN Human Development Index (UNDP, 2017). Basically, poor political and resource governance have often led to explosions of violence by disgruntled segments of society, and a number of studies have linked bad governance to violent religious extremism and some other violence in West Africa. For example, Mali's Tuareg have been fighting perceived marginalization by the central government and demanded an autonomous homeland in the country's north (Svensson & Isak, 2017). Following the March 2012 coup in the capital Bamako, the Tuareg National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad seized towns from government troops in the north, but was soon driven out by militant Islamist groups.

In furtherance, increasingly incessant of violent Boko Haram militia in Nigeria's, which wants an Islamic state, is not unconnected with of the reaction of the government's entrenched corruption, abusive security forces, strife between the disaffected Muslim north and Christian south, and widening regional economic disparity (Vüllers, Johannes, Birte Pfeiffer & Basedau, 2015). Militant Islam in Africa, while linked to broader ideological currents, is mainly driven by the local context, with Islamist groups emerging, evolving and reacting to immediate local concerns. Beyond doubt, West African states have provided an ideal ground for tendencies of violent religious extremism to take root and spread beyond coast.

5. Strategic Objectives and Logic of Religious Extremism

It is no more a gain saying that activities of the violent religious movements and fundamentalists in West African countries have been a huge concern to the national governments in particular and the international community at large. The activities of religious extremists in West Africa especially in Nigeria since 2009 have ingrained a major security threat and made the country especially the North-East, a very dangerous region to live. The violent acts of extremists have always been targeting mainly the government, academic institutions and its staff,

churches, motor parks, mosques; and countless number of innocent Nigerians (Duruji & Oviasogie, 2013).

The mordacious nature of violent religious fundamentalism launched by the group members has lurched Muslim and Christian faithful against each other as a result of the unremitting blowing up of churches especially in the northern Nigeria and particularly the most affected states of Borno, Yobe and Adamawa and the neighbouring countries such as Chad, Niger and Cameroon. The brutality of the violent activities, which include merciless killings of many innocent persons, bombings (including suicide), kidnapping of persons especially women and students (like the 276 Chibok girls kidnapped on April 14, 2014 and 105 girls kidnapped in Dapchi school in Yobe in February, 2018), shooting victims at close ranges, and throat-slitting of the religious extremists are now a global concern (Awojobi, 2014, Punch, 2108). It is against this background that the paper focuses on the sectarian revolution or irregular warfare? an interrogation of violent new religious movements as impetus to insurgency in West Africa and offers recommendations on how to tackle violent new religious movements' activities in West Africa particularly in Northern Nigeria and the country at large.

Unhealthy statement by Osama Bin Laden before his death that Muslims in African states specially Nigerians should rise up in rebellion against the West, made it an important nation in the discourse on violent religious movement and fundamentalist (Joseph, 2000). Albeit, the Nigerian Muslims are mostly implicit Sunnite, which exist divergent submissions on interpretation of the requisite of being a Muslim are an exponent for revenant religious violence in the West Africa and specifically in North-eastern Nigeria.

Consequently, these varied renditions have lurched many Muslim sects against Christians in unending violent conflicts. The origin of the religious fanaticisms and its stance on modernization and Westernization contributes significantly to the recorded religious violence and eruption of new religious movements and fundamentalists in West African countries especially in post-independent Nigeria (Adeniyi, 2017). The religious passion and unslakeable desire for the advancement of their religious purity has led to the establishment of many elementary Islamic

schools with the objectives of promoting different backgrounds and beliefs, which have resulted in various religious movements and ideologies across West Africa especially in the Muslim-dominated environments.

In the main, many Islamic religious scholars have infused various mythological messages, which have created conflicts among other religions in West Africa. In most West African countries including Nigeria, the Qadriyya and the Tijaniyya fundamentalists were the two main groups in the twentieth century (Wahab, 2015). The Sufi Islamic interpretations, practices and mystical movements have rejected materialism and engrossed spiritual development in individual members. In spite of its historical violence records, the Sufi variant of Islamic observation in Northern Nigeria has transmuted into a liberal, unbigoted, and peaceful religion (Wahab, 2015). Fundamentally, due to contacts with the newly founded Islamic schools and the abilities to study in Egypt, Yemen, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, and other Muslim countries across the world, the Salafi, Shia, and other versions of Islam, often with more radical ideologies, gained acceptance in the Northern region.

There are signs, however, that this might be changing. Religious violence has apparently become a widespread phenomenon in sub-Saharan Africa, while terrorist attacks have killed many civilians in Burkina Faso, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, Mali, Nigeria, and Somalia. In Mali, Nigeria, and Somalia jihadist organisations have staged rebellions and managed to at least temporarily control large parts of the territory of these states. In the Central African Republic (CAR), a Muslim rebellion ousted a Christian-dominated government; the ensuing turmoil escalated into bloody confrontations between Muslim and Christian militias and left thousands of civilians dead.

Basically, without mincing words, factors responsible for the menace and the spread of the activities of the violent religious extremists are multifaceted such as unemployment, poverty, illiteracy and ignorance in West Africa. Specifically, violent extremism in the Northern Nigeria is worsened by the high level of unemployment illiteracy and poverty, which are dominantly prevalent in Nigeria (Awoyemi 2012:24 cited in Akinbi, 2015). It is factual that when a young man is illiterate, poor, and unemployed, he would definitely become tabula rasa for absorption of

any brainwashing element especially when backed up by religious and cultural proof. This is so because these categories of people would lack the intellectual capability and enablement to ask any logical question or criticize what they are instructed to do. Eventually, as they are brainwashed and hypnotized, they see their new engagement as an employment opportunity, and as well feel engaged in acting out what they have been brainwashed on. According to Danjibo (2009), the movement has large and committed followers among the Almajiris—Quran trainees who depend on their Mallam—teacher for knowledge, inspiration and their daily survival. The low reasoning capacity of these recruits also manifests in why they believe suicide bombings and violent extremism grant automatic access to Aljana (heaven where 72 virgins will be ready to welcome them).

6. Regional Respons(es) to the Challenge of Insurgency

Generally, from the analysis of the upsurge of violent religious movements and fundamentalist tendencies and strategic objectives and logic of religious extremism, it emerges that finding a long-lasting solvent way requires an ecumenical, logically seamless, and adroit response from both regional and international communities. However, in addressing the activities of violent religious fundamentalists, and finding a lasting solution, the previous responses from government toward tackling the challenges is a necessity. Meanwhile, various upshots of the response by the government have been intemperately damned in various quarters (Ekereke, Aniefiok & Silas 2013).

Violent religious activities in the region during the past decade have demonstrated the seriousness of the threat of terrorism to West Africa and the need for firm and sustained countermeasures. A number of Community Members have experienced various acts such as kidnapping and hostage-taking, hijacking, explosive bombing, gruesome and senseless murder and assassination and other terrorist and mercenaries attacks that have deprived citizens of the Community basic human rights including the rights to life and freedom from fear.

Furthermore, the occurrence of violent religious extremism in West Africa has grown increasingly fractured and complex. The violent religious extremists, such as Boko Haram has devastated livelihoods in

West African countries such as Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, Republic of Benin and Niger. In the same vein, conflict in northern Mali has also appeared unmalleably increasingly, which has allowed violent religious extremists to operate with relative impunity and carry out attacks throughout the region. Fundamentally, the incessant violent in Libya imperils to create new breeds of violent religious fundamentalism and extremist tension to West Africa countries. Taking place against a background of persistent socio-economic vulnerability, this insecurity has triggered a heave in migration, smuggling and trafficking. The regional trade routes have increasingly alleviated the flux of guns, drugs, people, and violent religious ideologies and extremisms.

In the main, in the face of all these challenges, West African governments and civil society organizations are increasingly looking beyond military solutions towards a holistic approach to countering violent religious extremism (CVE). To that end, the region's historical and cultural traditions of tolerance and moderation remain a critical rampart against violent religious fundamentalist influence and a solid foundation for efforts to build peace. In tackling the violent religious extremism, USAID has sought to reduce vulnerability to violent religious extremism (VRE) by strengthening the capacity of West African institutions to counter violent religious extremism, magnifying credible moderate voices, and increasing community coherence in areas at greatest risk of violent religious extremist influence (Poushter & Jacob, 2015).

The regional nature of violent religious extremism in West Africa demands a regional response particularly in collaboration with international development partners. For instance, the mandate of USAID|West Africa promotes a regional perspective that facilitates trans-boundary analysis, fosters cross-border approaches, and leverages partnerships with regional institutions (Pew Research Center, 2017). USAID|West Africa's CVE programming responds to the Department of State and USAID's Joint Strategy on Countering Violent religious extremism as well as the objectives of the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP)

The West African as a bloc undoubtedly plays a role in the escalation of violent religious extremism s into violence. In recognition of the threat

posed by terrorism to their countries, Community Members have individually taken various national measures to prevent and combat terrorism. Some have adopted national legislations and others have strengthened relevant aspects of their penal law to criminalize terrorism. States in the community have also cooperated with the international community by signing, ratifying and/or acceding to regional, continental and international counter-terrorism legal instruments. To this end, all states in the region have ratified at least seven of the eighteen universal instruments, while a vast majority has ratified the OAU Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism. In addition, all states in the region have submitted at least one report to the UN Security Council Counter-terrorism Committee (CTC) pursuant to the Security Council resolution 1373 adopted in 2001.

In a few cases, ECOWAS Member States have established national mechanisms such as counter-terrorism units to coordinate national counter-terrorism measures. Financial institutions including central and commercial banks have taken measures to strengthen regulations on financial and economic activities to suppress or prevent the abuse of financial systems by terrorists (Pew Research Center, 2017). Despite these measures Community Members continue to face a growing threat of terrorism intertwined with other criminal acts, such as money laundering, illicit smuggling and proliferation of small arms, trafficking in drugs and human beings. The main challenge to counter-terrorism in the region, which indeed provides the raison d'être for this Strategy, is the need to harmonize the efforts of Community Members and to provide a framework within ECOWAS for the prevention and combating of terrorism. The Strategy lays out a strategic vision and the actions that Member States should take in order to prevent and combat the threat of terrorism in the region.

In addition, the Community has adopted various decisions and strategies to fight transnational organized crimes in the region, including the ECOWAS Political Declaration and Action Plan on the Prevention of Drug Abuse, Illicit Drug Trafficking and Organized Crime in West Africa, adopted in Abuja, Nigeria, in December 2008. The full and effective implementation of these instruments will contribute to minimizing the threat of terrorism to the region. In particular, Article 3 (d) of the Protocol relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention,

Peacekeeping and Security provides for the enhancement of cooperation in the areas of conflict prevention, early warning, peacekeeping operations and control of cross-border criminality and international terrorism and the proliferation of small arms. Community members are also bound by the OAU (Organization of African Unity) Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism and its Protocol thereto, the African Union Plan of African on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism in Africa, and all other decisions and measures taken by the AU including the Comprehensive African Anti-Terrorism Model Law (UNDP, 2017). The latter provides a holistic framework for enacting counter-terrorism legislation for the domestication of regional, continental and international counter-terrorism instruments.

7. Way Forward

The war against extremism is a systematic war, which has to be accompanied with preventative measures. The following are some of the suggestions, which would in no measure, are of help for policymakers, religious actors and international communities to counter or prevent new violent religious extremism in West Africa;

As earlier posited, we do not need to rely only on military solutions to violent extremism. Recognition of civil society and religious actors are to be on the frontlines, embedded in these communities, and have an important role to play in preventing radicalization and violent extremism at early stages. The engagement of the religious actors from the beginning in identifying the problems and their solutions is paramount, rather than engaging them in solutions already devised by others in a way that can make them feels they're being used rather than consulted. The recognition of the religious actors will have a particular role to play in providing psycho-social support to those vulnerable to recruitment. Western and other international actors must understand that countering religious violence is a task to be undertaken by African governments and societies. If such efforts do not build on local knowledge, capacity, will, and passion, they will not be successful.

However, if it is only for the self-interest of all involved, African governments and societies can use and sometimes need support. This support should consist of both development and security – something

most International organisations and Western governments now understand. At the "Security, Peace and Development in Africa" conference in March 2017 – jointly organised by Germany's defence and development cooperation ministries – ministers and various speakers alike stressed that both security and development are part of the solution to violent religious extremism. The conference participants also discussed more specific challenges but were unable to present a sound one-size-fits all programme. Any response must be tailored to specific national and local challenges and has to be carefully implemented.

Besides this general imperative, a variety of concrete opportunities exist. Regarding prevention, Western countries can support research on the causes of violence, anti-radicalisation programmes, and interreligious networks as well as the spread of peaceful religious teachings. Conventional development cooperation also has a role, and Western countries should be ready to make sacrifices in this respect. In instances where economic growth will help, the European Union and the United States should reduce subsidies to their own farmers in order to boost the agricultural sector in African economies. Reducing development aid may make African governments turn to others, like Saudi Arabia or Qatar.

More narrow cooperation in the security sector makes sense when it is embedded in the broader context of development. Supporting countries like Mali or Nigeria in their fight against religious extremists is necessary. In the Pan-Sahel Initiative five Sahelian countries and the United States intend to fight terrorism. UN peacekeeping and EU missions in countries such as Mali and the Central African Republic are key to preventing conflict from re-escalating. International organisations and Western governments should also support efforts to increase regional cooperation in fighting religious violence. Within the scope of the EU–Sahel cooperation programme, the European Union recently pledged an additional EUR 50 million to support Sahelian government combat violent extremism and other security threats. It is important to recognise that violent religious extremists are international challenges. This is particularly true with regard to global jihadism, which is perpetrated by Islamist armed groups that are interlinked either directly or through the spirit of their cause.

International organisations and Western governments must also find a balance between development and secur-ity and integrate their efforts into a sound Africa strategy (Kappel, 2017). Some partner governments in Africa and elsewhere might be indispensable in terms of security operations but will hinder sound development in the long run. For example, Chad's Idriss Déby had shown great commitment in the fight against Malian and Nigerian Islamists, but the way he ran the country hardly created conditions conducive to development. Some leaders in Africa are partially creating the environments in which religious violence develops. Thus, International organisations and Western governments should look to support countries with credible governments, like Ghana, and press other partners to practice good governance. If international actors sacrifice long-term goals in favour of short-term necessities or pure self-interest, their efforts are likely to be in vain. There are no easy solutions. And there are no alternatives to commitment, patience, and a carefully designed, long-term approach.

Furthermore, the religious leaders are encourage to use education in many ways to counter violent extremism by promoting peace and tolerance through corrective interpretations of dogma, through both formal and informal religious curricula, and through preaching. Doing this, will effectively present counter-narrative within their own specific faith tradition, sect or group. It is as a matter of fact that Christian and Muslim devotees need to avoid extremism in their religious practice and that both religious leaders during the cause of preaching; need not be given sermon that will cause civil disturbances.

Economic empowerment for the purpose of this arena simply appear as putting the machineries in motion to restore the people's essential lacking at basic level so as to be in position of acquiring the basics materials needed such as foods and shelter, housing, health services, safe drinking water, clothing, sanitation facilities, education etc that will make them attain a minimum standard of living (Akinbi, 2015). It is the belief of this present writer that if basic need were provided for people coupled with employment; particularly for youth, it will minimise people's desperation and frustration that make them available for easy inducement for militancy and other social vices.

8. Conclusion

In the final analysis, to tackle and also prevent the spread of new violent religious movements and fundamentalism in West Africa and Nigeria specifically, governments at all levels must ensure that issues of fanatic religious messages, political marginalization, economic inequality, alienation, corruption, abject poverty, mass illiteracy, and unemployment are succinctly addressed. In a bid to actualize this, giant attempts and steps must be taken to fortify democratic institutions and structures in West African countries. There must be an assurance of heady and prudent use of national resources with hope of meliorating the living conditions of the citizens. Moreover, as it is conspicuously understood that an idle hand is the devil's workshop, West African governments must ensure that mechanisms are in place to support employment generation through industrialization in order to engage the immense population of the unemployed youths. In like manner, a portentous and monolithic proportion of our countries' resources should be imparted into monumental investment in agriculture. Sincerely, agriculture as a matter of necessity must become commercialized in order to achieve food security and provide employment for our teaming youths as a schema to save them from the instrumental brainwashing. If all these are addressed in West African nations, the current challenges of violent religious extremist and fundamentalists would be curbed while spring up of new religious movements would be prevented. Similarly, all hands must be on deck and efforts be made by both government and individuals to ensure that our citizens do not suffers the ills of subsequent activities of new violent religious movements and fundamentalists.

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