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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Revolt, Navigation and Resistance. A Glimpse on the «Boko Haram» Conflict on Lake Chad

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ABSTRACT (max 150 words)

Purpose of this article is to analyse the role of civilians within the "Boko Haram" terrorism and counter-terrorism dynamics, with special focus on the strategies individually and collectively pursued to navigate between opportunities and constraints of a conflict scenario. Here we will focus on the faction linked to both the Islamic State and to the original founder of the core "Boko Haram" group. The article will discuss the socio-economic landscape of Lake Chad in the years immediately preceding the conflict's outbreak, providing insights on the precarious governance balance regulating access to lands, fishing areas, farming and cattle driving. The analysis will outline the relational dynamic of mobilization among local youth, bringing to light the economic and political rationality of joining an armed insurrection; a special focus will be dedicated to the importance of ideological commitment and pan-Islamic solidarity in driving individuals towards collective violent actions.

KEYWORDS: "Boko Haram"; Lake Chad; armed mobilization ; insurgency

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1. Introduction: Investigating the Drivers of Armed Mobilization in Lake Chad

This contribution will analyse the role of civilians in the terrorism and counter-terrorism dynamics taking place on the shores of Lake Chad, specifically in the Lac region of Chad, in relation to the jihadi insurgency commonly referred to as the "Boko Haram" conflict. The designation "Boko Haram" has been introduced as a derogatory moniker by mainstream Northern Nigerian Salafis in the early 2000s, with the aim to mock some ideological aspects of a group of young teachers centred around the figure of Maiduguri-based Salafi scholar (*ustaẓ*), Muhammad Yusuf. "Boko Haram" is here employed functionally as a label to designate a set of jihadist factions that shared forms of loose coordination in an earlier configuration but that nowadays operate separately, employing diverging tactics, relying on different ideological tenets and with different goals. Here, we will focus on the faction linked both to the Islamic State and to *ustaẓ* Yusuf, whose public face is Abu Mus'ab al-Barnawi, *nom de guerre* of Habib Yusuf, Yusuf's youngest surviving son, and the faction's official denomination is al-Dawlah al-Islāmiyah - Wilāyat Gharb Ifrīqīyyah (Islamic State - West Africa Province, ISWAP).[1] A "Boko Haram" Lake Chad 'franchise' officially marked its debut in a video, sent to Reuters on September 2014. Mimicking the posture of "Boko Haram"'s renowned Abu Bakr Shekau, local *amir* Abdel Aziz, speaking Buduma (the most spread language in the inner lake), welcomes the execution of a group of herdsmen (Farge 2014). Thereafter, the presence of armed groups, collectively referred to as "Boko Haram" on the lake's shores, has been increasingly higher and, on 12 February 2015, the first violent attack was conducted by the local faction in Ngouboua, on the North-Eastern shore of the lake.[2] Between 2015 and 2018, the group, that would be later known as ISWAP, capital-

[1] In March 2019, according to the investigative journalist Ahmed Salkida, al-Barnawi was apparently sacked by the IS leadership and replaced with Abu Abdullah ibn Umar al-Barnawi.

[2] An unclaimed attack was already purported in August 2014 in Dubuwa claiming 6 fatalities, it was attributed to ISWAP, see Idris (2014). The majority of respondents in Lake Chad referred to the armed group as "al-Dawla", "Boko Haram" or interchangeably as "Barnawi's" or "Nur's group". Muhammad (Mamman) Nur was the highly respected military mastermind of ISWAP between 2016 and 2018, year of his murder. The evolution of the Islamic State-linked "Boko Haram" group has been analysed by Brigaglia (2018) drawing on an IS-issued publication entitled "Slicing Off the Tumour" which details the development of Barnawi's cell after disputes with Abu Bakr Shekau.

ized on the grievances related to the lake's resources access and governance while further strengthening its military assets and capability to strike, progressively merging into local informal economic networks which dominate the smoked fish, pepper and livestock trade (Iocchi forthcoming). In the same period a number of sites in the Lac region were hit by "Boko Haram", marking the expansion of the group's operations in the area, including incidents in the island of Choua (May 2015; 37 fatalities), the Kaiga Ngouboua military post (October 2015; 11 soldiers killed), the October 2015 double-bombing in Baga Sola, the May 2017 battle between the faction and Chad's army in Kaiga; also three different attacks were operated in distant capital city of N'Djamena in June and July 2015 collectively claiming 53 fatalities and 181 injured. The rise in attacks draws for the first time attention to an area which was not included in the security priorities of national and international policy-makers. Although the causes and opportunities of Jihadism in the Sahel had already been widely explored by researchers and policy-makers (Harmon 2014; Sandor 2017), scholars' engagement about the drivers towards armed mobilization in the Lake Chad region remains relatively puzzling. The present work aims to complement scholarship about civilians' agency in time of conflicts, and specifically the role of Lake Chad's people vis-à-vis a jihadi insurgency. Employing a micro-level approach aimed to identify concrete modes through which the relationship between combatants and non-combatants is carried out in conflict-affected zones, this work tentatively moves beyond efforts to clear the origin (Perouse de Montclos 2014), detail the history (Thurston 2018) and trace the intellectual roots of "Boko Haram" (Brigaglia 2015), by focusing on situational factors in explaining violent enlistment and following Kalyvas' ground-breaking suggestion to understand violence's own logic, organizational modes and social outcomes and influences (Kalyvas 2006).

In this sense, this contribution needs to be better situated in the broader scholarly literature on the topic, given that many competing and politically-charged narratives are increasingly enabling misleading considerations about the nature and character of Sahel's social context represented as an unstable political periphery of the international system. Literature about processes of radicalisation can be summa-

rily divided into two main clusters: one engaging the reasons behind the shift to political violence and the other engaging the modalities through which this process manifests itself. 'Radicalisation' is an inherently difficult notion to assess by academia (Neumann 2013), given the term's intimate linkage with the post-9/11 political scenario which has normatively defined radicalisation according to Western policymakers' political priorities. As the term will always be contested, in this work, radicalisation will be employed heuristically to define a behavioural process leading social actors into an action pathway (Borum 2011), therefore using it in substantial continuity with the notion of 'armed mobilization'. Identifying the root and facilitative causes behind contentious episodes, such as socio-economic and political grievances, violent ideologies and the bargain between incentives and constraints, is an essential aspect for the investigation of armed mobilization (Collier & Hoeffler 1999; Moghaddam 2005; Braun & Genkin 2014). Nonetheless environmental and root causes, although necessary, rarely appear as sufficient conditions to explain how and when such elements are activated to unfold radicalisation. The role of social interactions has been stressed to explain the emergence of contentious mobilization and violent strategies, thereby showing how root and facilitative causes, values and norms are manipulated, created and transformed in the course of mobilization (Della Porta & Tarrow 1986; Wieviorka 1993; Della Porta 1995; Kalyvas 2006; Weinstein 2006). A "relational perspective" about interactions occurring in radicalisation processes has added further nuances to understand "contentious politics" (Tilly 2003; Diani & McAdam 2003; Alimi, Demetriou & Bosi 2015), allowing to frame the role of social mechanisms and their content (contacts, ties, exchanges, negotiations, mediations) as primary for the unfolding of armed mobilizations. The present work, therefore, connects to the broader scholar debate on contentious episodes analysed as parts of wider social processes, specifically adhering to the Relational Perspective approach, the general theoretical approach that underpins this contribution's hypothesis. McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly's (2001) *Dynamics of Contention* paved the way, posing the epistemological and conceptual basis for the analysis of social phenomena as inter-connected fragments of a far-reaching dynamic, or a

concatenation of mechanisms leading to the development of a wider process. Such an interplay gives rise to processual and multi-dimensional phenomena constituting the set of beliefs and practises social actors interpret and employ as responses to multi-layered crises and resulting in the activation of contentious performances (Steiner & Önnerfors 2018). The non-exhaustive context analysis of Lake Chad's socio-political, religious and resource management issues presented in this work fits in this larger research programme. Moreover, this work tentatively expands the definitional usefulness of "contentious mobilization" as an analytical concept employing a qualitative analysis of some drivers towards militancy in an African Muslim society: such approach attempts to move beyond the rigidified intellectual debate about rebellions, or contentious episodes, as semi-criminal activities purported by disenfranchised "loose molecules" (Kaplan 2000) mainly driven by greed. Instead, drawing on first-hand empirical data collected in the hard-to-reach Lake Chad field, this essay aims to present an interpretation of violent engagement that takes into account the complexity of social realities, including but not limited to greed or grievance models.

ISWAP's presence in Lake Chad represents an off-shoot of the escalation of political violence in Northern Nigeria, namely in Borno State. Two interconnected events mark its origin: first, the split occurred within the ranks of Abu Bakr Shekau-led Jamāʿat Ahl al-Sunna li-daʿwa wa l-Jihād organization in the aftermath of the Caliphate declaration by al-Baghadi and the Islamic State (IS) in Syria in June 2014 (al-Barnawi 2018); and second, Nigerian Army's 'Lafiya Dole' operation in 2015 which progressively pushed insurgents from rural Borno State to rural areas in Eastern Diffa region (Niger), the Extreme-North province (Cameroon) and the Lac region (Chad). ISWAP's targets included military and governmental sites and persons (selective violence), as well as inadvertent harm of civilians - hit while targeting enemy (collateral violence), in a radically different strategy vis-à-vis the indiscriminate use of violence against civilians employed by Jamāʿat Ahl al-Sunna li-daʿwa wa l-Jihād from its Sambisa Forest safe-haven (Borno state) (Brigaglia & Iocchi 2018). The birth and success of ISWAP in Lake Chad challenge usually accepted

over-deterministic views about radicalisation and militant contention, which tend to presume that the rise of violence is mechanically linked to a quality inherent to, or developed by, a militant radical actor. Instead, ISWAP's history shows how armed mobilization results from a complex interplay between the set of different actors involved in contention and the ever-evolving nature of events, circumstances and contingencies occurring during the contention. ISWAP was set up in the aftermath of the Caliphate declaration, as a reaction to the indiscriminate use of violence against fellow Muslims (serial excommunication or *takfir musalsal*), employed by Shekau since his rise as sole leader and *imam*, following *ustaẓ* Yusuf's death in 2009. They interpreted Islamic State's declaration of Caliphate ("the issue of the *Dawla*") as the 'cut-point' to explicitly severe connections with Shekau, to reject his leadership and to establish themselves as the only legitimate advocate of global Jihad in West and Central Africa (Brigaglia 2018). Integration in the informal economic networks which dominate trade and exchanges on Lake Chad provided the group with sufficient capital to engage in operations against regional armies and the competing Shekau faction: exploitation of pre-existing grievances, lack of social mobility and persisting negligence towards local concerns at the hand of the state in the Lac region represented some of the tools employed by ISWAP in its strategy "to win hearts and souls". An important process of ideological mobilization coupled with rather convenient alliances with some Buduma clans in the inner lake enabled the group to activate a dormant claim-making dynamic among (mostly) dispossessed young people and to present a popular narrative of social justice in the name of a presumed version of "pure Islam".

2. Theoretical Framework and Data

The hypothesis discussed in this contribution revolves on the idea that the correlation between terrorism and counter-terrorism, as well as between grievances and radicalisation, is more nuanced than usually assumed. The concept of radicalisation is problematized from the understanding that multiple webs of relational dynamics are at work during contentious politics and that terrorism evolves in a dia-

lectic way with counter-terrorism responses. Critical scholars have already brought to light how notions of terrorism and counter-terrorism, radicalisation and counter-radicalisation, insurgency and counter-insurgency shall not be understood as essentialized entities, but rather as ever evolving processes: as "acts" to be employed, activated or unfolded according to changing circumstances. The aforementioned notions are not inherent features of individuals, ideas or worldviews (Rich & Duyvesteyn 2012). The content and form of social interactions – notions of legitimacy, negotiation and contestation – appear in a continuously shifting relationship of production and re-production: environmental causes, structures, culture, rationality, cognition and relationships are not to be assumed as autonomous entities but rather as active sites of creation that mutually influence each other. Content and form of social interactions are especially enmeshed in a dialectic relation in times of contestation and distress. Borrowing the framework from the toolbox of the mostly anthropological studies on social condition during wartime (Lourenço-Lindell 2002; Nordstrom 2004; Utas 2005; Lubkemann 2008; Vigh 2009; Utas 2012), this study examines organized violence and social existence in war scenarios as a social project that is culturally shaped and embedded in the Lake Chad historical region. Richards (1996) for Sierra Leone, Ellis (1999) for Liberia and Hutchinson (1996) for Sudan have each contributed to unfold how organization of violence is culturally and historically embedded in a given social context. Behrend's fascinating ethnography about the origin of Lord's Resistance Army in Northern Uganda (2000) has showed how specific local histories and interpretations of specific events and ideas reinforce popular perceptions about what the war "is about", i.e. which is the geometry of power and how it comes to be framed: interrelated grievances (spiritual confusion; state abuse\neglect; climatic variations, famines; economic recession) are framed within a moral order which, in turn, forges the claim-making process. Ethnographies about contemporary armed insurgencies demonstrate how these struggles are drawn from a various set of different cultural and social idioms, being able to mobilize both global and local symbols, merging them in unprecedented ways that

openly debunk any claim about a presumed "primordialism" in Africa's 21st century wars.

My argument is that the "Boko Haram" conflict on Lake Chad rather than be interpreted as violent expression of an obscurantist worldview developed at the core of the most ancient Islamic kingdom of Sahelian Africa, should be viewed as the outcome of a «malcontent modernity» (Comaroff & Comaroff 1999), arising from conflicting tensions and pressures. If understood in this way, the "Boko Haram" conflict reveals its complex reality as a "device" to cope with religious volatility, economic insecurity, violence, political immobilism and expectations dashed by a series of predatory authorities.

A preliminary assessment in support of the empirical data provided in the following sections appears helpful in sustaining the hypothesis here advanced. First of all, the author wishes to stress that, despite several efforts to clarify the issue, the overwhelming majority of respondents (being they internally-displaced persons, local dwellers, local traditional authorities or military personnel) provided very different quantitative data about ISWAP's capacity of mobilization in terms of combatants, sympathizers or indirect supporters. Such a confusion about numbers was intensified by the concomitant demobilization and disarmament programmes launched by the Chadian state from the Summer of 2016, that provided some very fragmentary data about local participation in terrorism or terrorism-supporting activities. Moreover, a neat juridical definition of terrorist and combatant was far from being achieved by the set of local, national and international actors engaged on the field. The emergence of such a confounding quantitative frame pushed the author to consider as the most trustworthy assessment the provisional one, conducted by six Army trackers engaged in patrol operations in the inner lake in November 2016, which delivered a figure of combatants estimated between 500 and 800 exclusively in their area of responsibility, i.e. the marshes and open waters between Bol, Baga Sola and Baga Kawa (Nigeria).[3] Such an assessment brings to light the circum-

[3] Interviewed in different facilities, six Army trackers provided the following figures: 500-750; 600-800; 700-800; 500-650; 600-665; 680-780. Interviews conducted between Baga Sola and Bol, 10-20 December 2016.

scribed nature of ISWAP's enlistment dynamic and strategy "to win hearts and souls" on Lake Chad, as the majority of civilians with no real age or social ratio stated indirect support for the Chadian armed forces, although was rare to hear open condemnations of "Boko Haram"'s doctrine or practices –acts of brutality apart. Nonetheless, the majority of Lake Chad's society showed to dispose of sufficient antibodies to detect and avoid attempts to get them directly involved, both on the side of the insurgents and on that of counter-insurgents.

As the radicalisation process appears more nuanced than usually assumed, in order to understand the relational drivers towards mobilization, an effort to partially unpack the degree, intensity and quality of the interplay between different kinds of factors is required. The resurge of religious vitality in turn-of-the-century wider Lake Chad Basin directly questioned how Islam would be professed and sparked a rich and buoyant debate about the role of religious scholars, state and community of believers (*ummah*) in the modern world, investing virtually any aspect of public life. The "Boko Haram" conflict directly arises from the 1990s and early 2000s intra-Salafi debate in Northern Nigeria, that unfolded in conjunction with the much-awaited 1999 'democratic turn'.[4] A process of progressive «objectification» of the Islamic tradition (Eickelmann & Piscatori 1996) – very common in Muslim-majority multi-party political arenas – has been developing in Nigeria and Lake Chad since late 1960s and early 1970s through (mostly) Saudi-sponsored Salafi private and institutional initiatives: an active public engagement vis-à-vis the issue of shari'a was built thereon, while increasingly powerful associations spread the Salafi *da'wa* (missionary call) in the region. The 1999 multi-party turn in Nigeria coincided with the development of a «shari'a politics» (Hefner 2011), which polarised the debate and gave rise to increasingly aggressive forms of contestation and support. Salafi teachings resonated massively among local populations which sought in this doctrine a social project for an uncertain present and an attempt to come together in the aftermath of an emotionally charged post-9/11 religious scenario and formed

[4] After many years of authoritarian regimes and the contested annulment of the 1993 elections, Nigeria held its first multi-party election in 1999, after Sani Abacha's death. See Akinterinwa (1997) and Suberu (1997).

a broad movement in support of shari'a. Popular legitimacy of shari'a is mostly connected to the rise in prominence of Saudi-educated Muslim Nigerian scholars who, despite drawing inspirations from a variety of traditional sources, were largely inspired by Salafi and Wahhabi interpretations of Islam and discourses originated in Saudi Arabia and in Gulf States (Thurston 2016). The weight and value of this kind of discourses have deeply resonated among people who intensely wondered how to live an intellectually vibrant and emotionally significant life as Muslims in their region and in the world: the wish to be engaged in rewarding activities and committed to community-sanctioned notions of piousness, licit and righteous acted as important drivers in shaping the content of popular claim-making and intertwined with interpretations accorded to local as well as global events, such as the 9/11.

In order to support such hypotheses a wide variety of interviews and focus groups conducted with a set of different local research targets is employed: the majority have been conducted in the Lac region of Chad, with internally-displaced persons (IDPs) hailing from the inner lake islands, relocated to the mainland by the Chadian government in the course of counter-terrorism operations against ISWAP. Research has been conducted in the following areas: Bol, Baga Sola, Kindjiria, Dabantchali, Darkani, Yakoua and Maar (Departments of Mamdi and Kaya). Where deemed necessary, names have been omitted in order to protect respondents' anonymity and safety. Interviews with selected public personalities, such as local authorities, religious figures, local councillors and administrators, custom and police enforcers added further value and helped to contextualise the volume of information delivered by IDPs. Fieldwork took place between October and December 2016 in Chad: the importance of qualitative data in conflict-afflicted areas results from the inherent shortcomings of quantitative data produced in such contexts, which often offers short-sighted perspective on drivers of mobilization, while qualitative research serves to recognise the complex web of elements that blend in insecure environments (Newman 2009).[5]

[5] Years of study and exposure to the "Boko Haram" dynamic form the basis to position the amount of data mobilised in Chad in relation to the wider Islamic landscape of Lake Chad Basin and North-

3. Lake Chad as a Backwater System

The remoteness of the Lake Chad region has historically fuelled a sense of marginalisation and isolation. The colonial decoupage turned what used to be the centre of a vibrant trade dynamic into a backwater system, regarded as lacking any economic attractiveness.[6] The major economic interests of colonial rulers and, later, of post-independence head of states focused on more attractive regions of their respective countries, the four riparian states emerged after de-colonization in 1960: Nigeria, Cameroon, Niger and Chad. The development of a colonial market economy stressed the importance of coastal sea-ports as primary hubs for the export of resources and agricultural products, while the Lake Chad region's subsistence farming, herding and fishing proved to be poorly rewarding in financial terms. Early post-independence development policies mostly focused on consolidating central authority neglecting apparently peripheral regions: drought in the 1970s and economic stagnation following the structural adjustment programmes sponsored by international financial institutions (World Bank, International Monetary Fund) in the 1980s dealt a fatal blow to development projects and, in turn, emphasized the role of informal economy as the main sector in the region. Downsizing of public sector and privatization of semi-public companies was partially tempered in early 2000s by a resurge of development investments fuelled by a new high in commodity prices (especially oil which, despite being a core resource for rentier states like Nigeria and Cameroon since the 1960, started to be exploited also in Chad and Niger, respectively in 2003 and 2011). Since the early 1980s, when the partial drying-up of the lake provided fertile soils for farming, agriculture-related activities have been object of special care. The Lac region of Chad, for instance, benefitted in 2000s by new investments by multi-lateral institutions, such as the African Development Bank,

ern Nigeria, which had been the stage of a previous stint of fieldwork in 2014 (conducted for the author's MA thesis), therefore allowing to better attune to the vernacular understanding of local conflict and power dynamics and to individual strategies pursued in the course of the contention.

[6] The first fatal blow was dealt in the immediate pre-colonial period (1800- 1880s) when the major trans-Saharan commercial route came to be semi-monopolised by the Sokoto Caliphate, a more consolidated political and economic power whose trading centre (Kano) replaced the areas of Borno and Kanem as main terminal of caravanserai routes. See Last (1985 [1971]).

mostly focused on polders (Ngaressem & Magrin 2014). Nonetheless the provision of jobs resulted largely inadequate to face the mounting demographic pressure consisting of waves of labour force reversing on the market each year and the wider 'back to the village' process among young people formally settled in larger urban centres of the South, such as N'Djamena. Supply of formal employment in the Lac region has historically been scarce and the situation has been further accentuated by 1980s structural adjustment programmes, thereby pushing large sections of workers to seek employment through trust and informal networks, especially at the crossroads between rural and urban economic landscapes. Roitman's research showed how economic transformations in the Lake Chad Basin pushed for the reconfiguration of sites of wealth creation, such as the *garnison-entrepôt* (Roitman 1998): often employing the colonial border outline as a device to extract profits, these spaces are mostly devoted to circulation of products and attest to a reciprocal dependence of urban sites on rural areas and vice-versa. A long-standing tradition of space-management through circulation has in fact allowed trust-networks to develop as the most prominent job-suppliers of the area: networks provide means to challenge economic marginalization or simply to protect oneself from food vulnerability.

The Chadian state, on the lake's shores, appears as intermittently functioning, one among many governance actors, having incorporated the historically-determined governance mechanisms of 'indirect rule', fostered in colonial times and reinforced in post-colonial period to maintain the 'peace deal' between the political centre and its periphery.[7] The post-colonial regime that ruled Chad right after the independence in 1960 attempted to enforce authoritative rule, increasingly pushing for an "ethnicization" of the state at the expense of Northern Muslim populations. Malcontent opposition organized and formed the Front de Libération Nationale du Tchad (Frolinat) in 1965: the Saharan and Lac regions backed Frolinat's struggle experiencing cycles of rebellion against the central government. During former

[7] In colonial era, the presence of French administrators in the area was extremely light, as the colonial rulers preferred to set up or maintain customary chiefs who were held accountable for the administration of day-to-day affairs on the territory, much along the same lines to the British 'indirect rule' in Northern Nigeria. See Chapelle (1982) about the colonial administration of the Sahelian regions of Chad.

Frolinat's leader Hissène Habré's rule (1982-1990) in N'Djamena, peace was brokered in the Lac region through the awarding of local authority posts to former combatants, nominating customary chiefs and *chefs de canton* – a practice reinforced by the following (and current) president Idriss Déby (1990-). The latter faced an imposing rebellion mounted by Kanembu fighters formerly organized in the so-called "FROLINAT's Troisième armée",[8] in the first half of 1990s which Déby crushed militarily, imposing a set of local clients and allies. In the same period Lake Chad, after some serious droughts that had begun in 1970s and lasted until early 1990s, was transitioning into a small dry lake composed of several inter-connected bodies of water. Consequently also resource management changed. Waves of migrants from West African countries (Mali, Burkina Faso) increased competition in the fishing industry, while the progressive dominant position acquired by a Borno-hailing Hausaphone community in the *banda* (dried fish) trade left many with precarious, underpaid or intermittent jobs.

4. Resource Access Governance in Mamdi Department

On the Chadian side of the lake a small-scale monopoly was developed by fishermen backed by local power-holders (state authorities, capital-endowed entrepreneurs). Households that rely exclusively on fishing and farming for subsistence have seen increasingly shrinking opportunities to extract profit from fish trade and have therefore rationalized production, employing fishing revenues to acquire cheaper food products. They are only rarely able to purchase fishing nets (seine net, dip-net, cast-net) to be employed in high water, where chances to get a bigger catch are higher. Moreover, outboard engines and fishing canoes are required to reach fishing sites in the interior of the lake, which only selected individuals can afford to buy. Affluent fishermen have increasingly started to employ large motorized pi-

[8] A Kanembu-majority armed group formed by Abu Bakr Abdel Rahmane in 1978 that re-grouped as Mouvement Populaire pour la Libération du Tchad after his death the later year. The militia later dissolved and merged with the Forces Armées Occidentales (FAO), another Kanembu-majority armed group led by Moussa Medela. After Déby's rise to power in 1990, FAO regrouped and merged with other Kanembu militias re-branding itself as the Mouvement pour la Démocratie et le Développement.

rogues to reach rich fishing sites in the inner lake's high waters and then move rapidly to market-islands (Kinasserom, Darak) or directly to market-towns on the mainland (Baga on the Nigerian side, Baga Sola and Bol in Chad) and so increase efficiency. The employment of large motorized pirogues has also benefitted small-scale informal cross-border trade between Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon: calabashes full of agricultural products and handmade packages with various goods bought in Nigeria make their way in apparently remote islands and floating islands (*kirta*) of the inner lake, while pirogues staffed with salt, pepper and fish travel the opposite route. Possession of means of transport not only provides the capability to accrue capital, but also social prestige. Long-standing customary regulatory mechanisms ensure the preservation of fishing rights, land usage and the redistribution of fees within the lake community. This resource governance system makes sure that only autochthonous actors are able to use collective fishing sites, although pressures from increasingly powerful foreign fishermen often lead to disputations and to non-compliance to customary law. The access, timetables and associated rituals for collective fishing sites and ponds is regulated by customarily-nominated 'masters', charged by the *chef de canton* (Mai or Bulama, or local government chief) in accordance with a sub-local chief (*chef de village*, *de polder*, *de ouaddi*): fishing with hook-lines or nets is in turn regulated by customarily-nominated *chefs de categorie*. Traditional local authorities have well-defined boundaries such as those between the Sultan of Bol, who exercises power in Mamdi department and the Buduma-populated islands, and that of the *alifa* of Mao, who rules from Kanem until Bol's polders. For young fishermen, during last decades, has become increasingly harder to find a chance to succeed in the fishing industry without the adequate endowment in financial and social capital. The customary regulation of fishing tends to favour boat or motorised pirogue-owners and, in general, those who can afford boats, pirogues and various types of fishing gear to employ according to the location and season.[9] Usually small-scale fishers, such as many of the young adults interviewed in Bol and Baga Sola, possess only one or two kind of hook and hook-lines and very rarely are able

[9] Interview with local authority representatives, Bol, Chad, 16 December 2016.

to rent a pirogue.[10] They usually find employment in the fishing industry as processors, performing one of the various jobs (descaling, degutting, processing) associated to fishing. As part of fishing families well-integrated in a fishing community, young people often begin to provide labour via informal contacts, family members or relatives.[11] Community elders have often explained that young men and women are considered more suitable for the processing job instead of their aged counterparts as the labour is particularly hard: a strenuous and demanding task to be performed several hours a day, no matter the season.[12] This dynamic, though, tends to reinforce a hierarchical structure both within the family and fishing community, translating into a lever to acquire cheap labour and to maintain social order through constraints. Young people often face great difficulties in tackling labour-related issues as it means to challenge the authority of family or clan members, or simply publicly expressing grievances, a practice that enjoys poor popular legitimacy among Buduma and Kanembu. Moreover, young people explain that is considered «almost useless»[13] to try to seek a better treatment as processors since fish merchants are extremely powerful and influential, related to other stakeholders in fishing industry (retailers, transporters, gear producers) by long-established trust and credit relations: everyone is mutually dependent on each other. For this reason, those who may threat the precarious balance are harshly condemned in public opinion. This kind of bond makes Buduma and Kanembu fishing communities extremely close, as every aspect of daily labour is first and foremost socially sanctioned. This dynamic is further reinforced by the concurrent shrinking of the economic viability of fishing as today appears less attractive vis-à-vis agricultural work. In recent years, the importance of traditional authorities (such as the Sultan of Bol) has come to increasingly lose part of its once extensive influence in the community, partially as a reaction to difficulties related to conflict management, to the multiplication of litigations and to the unavoidable impossibility to maintain that multi-functionality of space which

[10] Interviews with young fishermen, Bol and Baga Sola, 12-20 December 2016.
[11] Know-how and expertise in the job is deemed essential for recruitment and for this reason children and teenagers are often introduced to the job at a young age.
[12] Interviews with market elders, Bol, 18 December 2016.
[13] Author's interview, Bol, 14 December 2016.

has made Lake Chad a unique geographical entity (Bouquet 1990). Facing an increasing number of disputes and litigations among stakeholders, local traditional authorities usually end up with resorting to police or political authorities, outsourcing conflict management to actors which are often part of disputes. Local police, custom and forestry officers are known to apply discretionary rules in the allocation of fines and are well-known to rely on informal taxation for extra-income, targeting people involved in wood-cutting, wood-collecting, fishing and grazing.[14] While the biggest taxation targets motorised pirogue-possessors and employers of static gears (such as the fish-trap dam, or *doumba*), everyday money-collecting practices of customs or forestry officers (known as *oforé* in Chadian Arabic) target common users with very scarce financial possibilities.

5. "Becoming Boko Haram"

The success of "Boko Haram" on Lake Chad is closely related to the impossibility of a concerted and successful action towards resource access management. The superimposition between local traditional authorities, NGOs and administrative entities created after the early 2010s decentralisation process, in spite of having averted the possibility for larger conflicts, has out-stretched a set of small-scale conflicts and litigations related to minute issues. Since 2014 groups claiming membership to "Boko Haram" have installed themselves during the period of high waters and started to operate deadly attacks while attempting to control some towns. The weak process of institutionalisation through which Lake Chad underwent during last decades, with regards to the governance of resource access unfolded as one of the key drivers of lake users' grievances (Amadou *et al.* 2014). The political vacuum left by the decentralisation process appears as affecting everyday practices of many economically-dispossessed and non-capital endowed young people, leading to a reconsideration of the 'autochthony' notion. Especially with regards to the so-called *terres de décrue* (fertile lands leftover by the lake's shrinking) in Mamdi

[14] Interviews with local dwellers from Kinasserom and Darak, Bol and Baga Sola, 10-20 December 2016.

department, where the Societé de Développément du Lac Tchad (Sodelac) has financed the construction of cost-intensive infrastructures (dams, pumping systems), conflicts for the access have multiplied, connecting subtly to the progressive redefinition of the ethnic and cultural identity of lake's users in the very same terms of the 'indigenes' vs. 'settlers' dichotomy, which can be found elsewhere in Africa. Both in terms of conflicts related to resources' usage and "Boko Haram" presence, the inner archipelago of floating islands inhabited by Buduma appears the most-hit area. This appears evidently connected to the resource exploitation system customarily adopted by Buduma which envisages the reprise of activities on lands after three years of cessation (Bouquet 1990), an element of which the ISWAP faction of "Boko Haram" has took advantage between 2014 and 2018. Conflicts often arise from disputations among herders and fishermen about the usage of determined islands.[15] They have often translated into internecine clan accusations of reciprocal mistrust.[16] Violent actions have increased and in times of conflict the great majority of Buduma people residing in Bol have looked at the Sultan as the main dealbroker. Meanwhile, the mobilization process had already began, involving a limited yet significant number of young people from the main Buduma clans living in small villages (40-70 inhabitants on average) in the interior of the lake or on the coast. This new availability of workforce for ISWAP translated in the ability to dispossess herders transiting on the lake, claiming shares of catch from fishermen and extract money from agricultural communities on the coast: thanks to powerful outboards and expert trackers hailing from the maze-wise Buduma clans, ISWAP is able to reach any place in the inner archipelago, assault the targets, collect money or labour and return in its «sanctuary» (Seignobos 2014). In this sense, the interests of ISWAP and those of certain Buduma groups coincided. As underlined by Lubkemann in his ethnography about civil war in Mozambique (2008), collective violence develops opportunities to pursue social objectives under new means: generational-related is-

[15] Usually the islands positioned on the boards of the lake's inner waters are allocated for herding and grazing while those in the interior are for fishing.
[16] Interviews with market elders, Bol, 18 December 2016. Interview with Bol's *chef de canton*, Bol, 17 December 2016.

sues within and outside households are manifested in collective claim-making instances.

5.1. "Us-Them": Spiritual Renovation and ISWAP

Young people in Mamdi and Kaya departments are eager to contrast the oft-referred popular vision about "Boko Haram" as being only a new avatar of old *coupeurs de route* (road-cutters, or rural bandits) (Issa 2010). Many insisted on religious content rather than on profit-seeking practices and viewed ISWAP's literalist devotion to the Salafi canon as the main reason behind its popular legitimacy, echoing the perceived corruption of liberal democratic regimes and persistent victimization of Muslims both locally and globally. '*Devenir Boko Haram'* assumes then a different meaning, which young people associate to a sentiment of vindication and renovation, to the necessity of assuming an identity, often better suited to navigate in a world perceived as complex and twisted. Since Lake Chad is considered as an inherently transnational space, young dwellers appreciate ISWAP's simultaneous attachment to the local context and its claim to regions\institutions outside local settings, a feature that fosters transnational ties without losing the cultural-specific affiliation.[17] ISWAP's and, generally, "Boko Haram"'s rhetoric on Lake Chad invested massively on the role of boundary control as the main mechanism to activate mobilization. Boundary control, or defence of a group's interests from encroachment by outsiders, pushed for the simultaneous convergence of different features: ethnic-based (Buduma) perception of isolation and marginalisation vis-à-vis more powerful and organized groups, often "foreign" or "migrants" such as fishermen arrived between 1990s and 2000s; claims against the diminishing authority of established *mallam* and *goni* (Islamic teachers), deemed to be responsible for the socially-decaying situation; and the engagement in a transnational network defined by adherence to the Salafi canon and pursuing the promotion of a global Islamic project. Coherently with global trends of Salafi doctrines worldwide, "Boko Haram"'s Salafism embodies both fights against secular democracy and Muslim regimes deemed as apostates:

[17] Interview with young fishermen, Bol, 13 December 2016.

the importance of this claim for young Lake Chad dwellers is explained by the oft-referred desire of «being engaged in something more than everyday labour… something providing the occasion to see one's life»[18]. Many young people in Mamdi and Kaya departments feel deprived of the opportunity to seek an emotionally and socially significant life beyond the strict boundaries built around them by family, clan and community, boundaries that force them into those social and economic mechanisms of labour described earlier. Defiance vis-à-vis established *mallam* and *goni* is thereby deemed legitimate as they are blamed for the survival of non-canonical pre-Islamic practices which Salafi doctrine considers as *bid'a* (heretical innovation), such as charm and amulet-making (*laya*) or celebration of the Prophet's birthday (*mawlid*). «*Mallams* [Islamic scholars] teach us… to stay in the past»[19], while Salafi teachers - easily recognizable due to their outfit and defiant attitude - are young and sometimes master the Quran in Arabic, openly challenging the traditional and often poor scholarship of traditional *mallams*. Young people in Bol describe the first contacts occurred with "Boko Haram" members in 2014-2015 as a ground-breaking evidence that a life outside socially-constructed local boundaries could be pursued. They were adult professionals, often capable and successful in their own economic endeavour (butchers, tailors, moto-taxi and taxi drivers, small businessmen), who decided to quit their jobs and pursue a life according to Salafi canon.[20] Such actors appear not as a disenfranchised section of Lake Chad's society nor as a particularly politicized fringe of the youth: enlistment in armed politics results from unexpected circumstances and a commitment imbued with mixed emotions towards social reality as well as from the fragility of alternative allegiances, which forces actors to navigate and maximise feasibility of particular practices (Kalyvas 2006; Vigh 2006).

5.2 Opportunities, Constraints and Levers

[18] Author's interview, Baga Sola, 19 December 2016.
[19] Author's interview., Baga Sola, 19 December 2016.
[20] Interviews with local representatives of Bol's *mairie* (mayor). Bol, December 2016. These "Boko Haram" members are referred to as foreigners (i.e. non-Buduma or Kanembu), hailing from the Shuwa Arab and Kotoko communities at the border between Chad and Cameroon.

'*Devenir Boko Haram'* also happens at the intersection between personal issues and community-based dynamics, such as trust and credit relationships, therefore showing the fundamental relational aspect of armed mobilization (Alimi *et al.* 2015). As explained by a Chadian Army's tracker, many, among ISWAP's members in Lake Chad, are former businessmen and entrepreneurs, who have been able to broker deals with certain *chefs de marché* (market chiefs) in Doro Gowon (Borno), Kinasserom (Chad)[21] and, in recent times, in N'Guigmi and Diffa departments (Niger), where consequently clashes have multiplied. While many markets were formally closed, others maintained a clandestine existence, as they represent an important income-source for local authorities and economic élites. The shadowy nature of these markets allowed ISWAP to keep channels open with traders fearing financial loss. A Baga Sola-hailing Kanembu entrepreneur who run a small-scale family-based trade in *banda*, pepper and other items (cigarettes, telephone cards), after months of decline in business activities and repeated extortion attempts, was forced to look for a compromise between the survival of his business (and, thereby, of his extended family) and pressure from ISWAP.[22] On the other hand, some Buduma clans who felt deprived of their primacy role in fishing and herding at the hand of Gouran, Tubu and, especially, Fulani herders brokered informal deals with ISWAP in order to re-gain portions of fertile territory nearby Ngouboua, a vast area that they deserted in the aftermath of the 1990s droughts and lake's shrinking. In a similar way Kanem-hailing herders have showed some support for ISWAP, at least in the initial stages, being interested in maintaining Buduma clans out of pastor farming areas, as happened in the environs of Liwa in 2016. The communal clashes in the inner lake area at the border between Chad and Niger between Buduma and Fulani acutely involved "Boko Haram"'s armed factions until the *chef de canton* of N'Guigmi (Niger), pushed by Fulani élite, decided to arm a Fulani militia and counter-attack the Buduma-supported ISWAP faction. Off the coast of Baga Kawa (Borno), on the other hand, local Kanuri and Kanembu fishing communities are reported as having

[21] Author's interview, Bol, 11 December 2016.
[22] Author's interview, Bol, 12 December 2016.

indirectly supported a local "Boko Haram" faction that mostly targeted the capital-endowed Hausaphone fish-trading network.[23] The reason behind this support, according to respondents, resides in the convenient tax-regime accorded by "Boko Haram" to fishermen aiming to operate in their controlled areas. Considered cheaper vis-à-vis the informal taxation racket operated by police, custom and forestry officers from the Nigerian side, "Boko Haram"'s low-prized fee-collection allows also to less endowed Kanuri, Kanembu and Buduma fishermen to continue their activity. Moreover, while Nigerian police's racket is regarded as pure arbitrariness and corruption, "Boko Haram" clothes its money-collecting practice as a form of *zakat* (purifying alms-giving),[24] a popularly licit and welcomed conduct. ISWAP's embroilment in local Lake Chad affairs proved veritably to be a double-edged blade: its claims as local power-holder were seriously challenged by conflicting interests between local dwellers and stakeholders, each one concerned in turning the "Boko Haram" card to its benefit. A mechanism of "coalition formation" between factions of "Boko Haram" and selected groups seeking for determined objectives (Fulani herders, Buduma fishermen, Kanuri-Kanembu trading networks) took place when an unequivocal coordination of claims between actors previously unconnected unfolded between 2014 and 2016. Such groups had heterogeneous objectives but, given aforementioned structural constraints, decided to act together. At the same time a relational and cognitional event, "coalition formation" envisages actors' shared understanding of a specific situation and a process of collective meaning-making of events, discourses, practices and experiences resulting in an explicit change, embodied by a successful mobilization process. Such situations are identified as path-breaking, leading social actors to fluidly navigate constraints and opportunities, engage in armed politics as a temporary liberation from routine labour and, thereby, to seek for that «pleasure of agency» described by Wood (2003) and constituting the pattern to amend one's life.

[23] Interview with local customs officers, Bol, 15 December 2016.
[24] Idem

To navigate constraints and opportunities implies to recognize the possibility of defection as a concrete option and part of the «pleasure of agency». While this contribution has focused mostly on the reasons why and how ISWAP and, *latu sensu*, "Boko Haram" have been successful in their enlistment endeavour of potential combatants on Lake Chad, the demobilization and disarmament programmes launched by the Chadian Army with mixed success shows that the circumstantial and situational nature of the engagement to contentious episodes translates also into loose loyalties and fluid allegiances. Moving away from Weinstein's deterministic framing of an 'opportunistic' versus 'activist' participation in violent contention (2006), adherence and engagement shall be seen as acts of navigation strategically instrumental to the achievement of one's goals according to self-perception, motivations and time-horizons. The ISWAP case shows that engagement to violent contention may be represented as a *bricolage* of mutually-reinforcing interests, aspirations and opportunities, coherently with the analyses carried out by Debos in Chad (2008) and Guichaoua in Niger (2012) about armed mobilisation and instrumental loyalties. Support for the Chadian armed forces and for civilian-led vigilante-styled self-protection groups, claimed at various intensity by different respondents, appears as part of the navigation strategy pursued by social actors, according to shifting circumstances.

6. Militancy and Navigation

We have seen how and why sizeable portions of Lake Chad's society had come to partially support ISWAP. But why should we consider ISWAP and, *latu sensu*, "Boko Haram" militancies also in terms of global politics? In short, because not doing so would conceal greatly influential factors in the understanding of the intersection between violence, religion, politics and institutions. Jihadi-Salafi militancy occurs within the contexts of the post-Cold War scenario and the post-9/11 War on Terror. Failing to consider global antagonisms in the development of local struggles translates in a short-sighted exploration of the notions of trans-national claim-making and, quoting Tarrow, «rooted pan-Islamism» (2005, p. 28). Local ac-

tors' agency in developing and shaping notions and modes of contestation should not in fact imply downplaying the relationship occurring with events and discursive antagonisms taking place on the global stage. Supported by the Foucaldian notion of counter-conduct we may argue that certain specific arrangements of power in fact produce their own resistance. The growing popularity of Salafi-driven efforts to redefine the boundaries and identities of Muslims in Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin from the late 1960s onwards found a match with the political space to pursue claim-making occasioned by the 1999 'democratic turn' in Nigeria. Thereon, the broad-based popular movement for the implementation of shari'a made active use of mass demonstrations, strikes, marches, petitions and vigilante-styled groups succeeding in establishing a legal model and a discourse originated in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. Governance crisis, endemic corruption, cyclical communal conflicts and the neo-liberal failure to mobilise resources for public benefit could be easily employed to define political arenas in Nigeria, Chad, Niger and Cameroon. In this same period, *ustaz* Yusuf and the early "Boko Haram" group, drawing techniques from the local history of contention, relied intensively on the outbidding mechanism in shaping mobilization processes. In importing around Lake Chad a largely Saudi-approved Islamic canon, Yusuf and its group initially enjoyed material and intellectual support from the broadly-spread Nigerian Salafi network, which spearheaded the shari'a movement. This network, however, was undergoing a process of progressive institutionalisation, occupying important positions within local administrations, and started to despise potentially-subversive narratives. Unable to restrain the genuine popular wave of support and growing popularity of Yusuf's ideas around Lake Chad, shari'a-supporting élite bargainers (or mainstream Salafis) pointed out to Yusuf's contradictions, de-legitimised his and his group's claims and largely adhered to the Saudi and US-promoted War on Terror narrative. Criminalising Yusuf's increasingly defiant and daring activities, mainstream Salafis attempted to restrain spaces of contestation and to push opponents towards a strategic shift from pro-active political violence to the inclusion of collateral and indiscriminate violence as part of their tactics. The series of recurring Western-led military de-

ployments and interventions in Muslim-populated countries as part of post-9/11 War on Terror and the active backing received by Muslim rulers has entailed acts of incursion and repression against Salafi-Jihadis, deepening the sense of threat and marginalisation popularised among Lake Chad Basin's Muslims by mainstream Salafis during the 1990s and, chiefly, during the 1999-2002 Nigerian multi-party transition. "Boko Haram"'s intensification of outbidding brought to the surface the discordances between factions with regard to goals, techniques and tactics. Concurrently, the need to keep and expand material resources sharpened existing tensions and discord among Salafi-Jihadi actors culminating in the activation of identity boundaries and, in ISWAP's case, in a rift between local and global Jihadi fighters regarding a fundamental event occurred on the global stage: "the *Dawla* issue". Despite strong ideological and military offensives deployed by both mainstream Salafis and regional states, ISWAP seems able to undermine local political actors, overrun armies and military posts and capture massive military hardware and ammunitions (Salkida 2019). ISWAP is not interested in directly holding territories, apparently downplaying the importance of territorial control, but rather seeks to increase popular legitimacy and perception of a secured space among local dwellers. Repelling military presence and ensuring viability for local traders, ISWAP is posing as a legitimate and popular governance actor in contrast to local police and army forces, at which targeted population attributes corruptive practices. The success of many of ISWAP's operations and strenuous defence of a "pure" version of Islam was refreshing and uplifting for all those who couldn't take any more of the crippling injustice faced every day at the hand of local authorities, élites and scholars. ISWAP also acknowledged the importance to avoid alienating general Muslim public, rejecting the *takfiri* worldviews endorsed by Shekau's Jamāʿat Ahl al-Sunna li-daʿwa wa l-Jihād. People generally well-reacted to ISWAP's capacity to broker deals between conflicting parts and protect business environment, although the group's embroilment in local disputes leaves ISWAP vulnerable to local stakeholders' shifting interests and side-switching, that had become increasingly common in the wake of the Nigerian and Chadian's armies demobilization programmes.

7. Conclusion

The form and direction of interactions between different contending actors play a prominent role in the understanding of the "Boko Haram" insurgency. This contribution has sought to discuss the particular role played by civilians' agency in shaping insurgency. "Boko Haram"'s fortunes on Lake Chad would have been thwarted by the multi-sided military effort of regional states unless local economic groups and dispossessed youth decided to support and, partially, hijack the group's striking capability, using it for their interests and to pursue their own agenda. ISWAP's resilience on Lake Chad derives from its increased capacity to operate as a governance actor as well as to its ability to mobilise an imagery of success that points towards the re-making of the world. ISWAP benefitted from its capacity in brokering deals between conflicting parts and limiting interference in existing economic practices while thwarting local police and authorities' presence in the trading realm. State-led counter-insurgency operations have acutely aggravated the socio-economic context, blurring the lines between insurgents and civilians at the expense of humanitarian responsibilities, thereby contributing in legitimating ISWAP's claim as a fair governance actor. Civilians' selective support for ISWAP's acts on Lake Chad are readable as attempts to realise certain narratives, although it is not self-evident to brand this support as a 'choice': individual militants likewise to civilians do not 'choose' the conditions of their situation (contentious political situation, re-definition of religious identity, crisis in resource governance) any more that one can choose the conditions of his or her own birth. The broader narration propagated by "Boko Haram" and embodied by ISWAP in Lake Chad delivered the space of authorisation for alternative social discourses. In this contribution, we have tentatively tried to discuss how an innovative proposition drawn from militant Salafism secured social endorsement to become a legitimate position.

The narrative power of "Boko Haram" as social agent functioned to capture social imagination, while its power as a governance actor capital-endowed enough to redress existing political and economic grievances succeeded in accessing

local credit-based networks. The study of armed politics and radicalisation dynamic in Lake Chad brought to light a nuanced landscape. "Boko Haram" and, specifically, ISWAP's insurgency, far from enjoying overwhelming popular support, nonetheless seems to receive backing from key social actors, trust-based trading groups and dispossessed youth, which for different rationales are investing ISWAP's discourse and practical activity with some authority. Drawing "discourse authorisation" from the works of Feierman (1990) and Lubkemann (2008), we can suggest that the plausibility of ISWAP's framing results from the combined action of two factors: the shrinking attractiveness and seriousness of neo-liberal national states' claimed project to re-engineer economic and political dimensions of local social relations; and the shifting relationship between local stakeholders, who implicitly agreed that ISWAP's innovative frame would deserve direct or indirect engagement. Current counter-insurgency policies adopted short-sightedly by Chad and Nigeria against ISWAP deliberately fail to recognise the «epistemic power» (Mageo & Knauft 2002) held by insurgents while instead focusing almost exclusively on physical coercion. "Boko Haram"'s discursive framing succeeds in the bid for social support, or in purchasing social imagination, because its practice is inscribed in a social discourse on claim-making and «objectification of Islam» (Eickelmann & Piscatori 1996) equally influenced by the local and international power system.

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