

# BOOK REVIEW

**Alexander Thurston. *Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement*.**

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018. viii + 333 pp. Bibliography. Index. \$19.95. Paper. ISBN: 9780691197081.

*Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement* by Alexander Thurston traces the creation and development in northern Nigeria of the group colloquially known as Boko Haram. At 330-plus pages, it is a remarkably compact book, given its temporal scope and the depth and complexity of the issues it discusses. Its five chapters focus, in sequence, on the lifeworld of Mohammed Yusuf, the founder of the movement, its early beginnings, its radical transition, its strategies of violence, and the range of actors involved. Thurston's analytical frame consists of religion and politics with an emphasis on agency (7–13), though he acknowledges that Boko Haram is a complex phenomenon that defies simple explanations (4).

Among the book's strengths is that it confronts and deconstructs certain narratives about Boko Haram that have become hegemonic. Thurston first establishes that the name Boko Haram, considered "derisive" by the group, is "a nickname given by outsiders" (14). Citing group members and using Hausa linguistic analysis, he also points out the inaccuracy of the popular translation, "Western education is forbidden" (14), against the more nuanced "Western elites and their ways of doing things contradict Islam" (16). This corrigendum is important because the continued use of Boko Haram amounts to a dismissal of the group's agency and a misrepresentation of its motives and ideology.

A second important attribute of this book is its construction of Boko Haram as a local movement, albeit one with transnational linkages and implications. As Thurston shows, various actors, including the Nigerian government, have had vested interests in framing Boko Haram as the product of transnational jihadi influences from outside Nigeria and groups such as Al Qaeda and the Islamic State (178), thereby dismissing the agency of Boko Haram as local. Thurston's emphasis on locality is crucial, because it forces attention back to Nigeria and the grounded context and ideas that fed Boko Haram's emergence and growth, highlighting the need for Nigeria to own and reorient its responses to a problem it helped to create.

Having taken the pains to clarify its roots and erroneous meaning, Thurston's failure to justify his own use of Boko Haram is puzzling. Though he acknowledges several factions that emerged at various points in Boko Haram's trajectory, his use of Boko Haram throughout the book sometimes makes it difficult to distinguish among the different factions. In one example, Thurston writes, "With its affiliation to the Islamic State in 2015, Boko Haram's name became Wilayat Gharb Ifriqiya, or Islamic State West Africa Province" (17–18). This contradicts opposing claims that the latter name belonged to a distinct arm that emerged when Boko Haram split decisively in 2016, which has since employed specific violent tactics (Edward Stoddard, *Revolutionary Warfare? Assessing the Character of Competing Factions within the Boko Haram Insurgency* [African Security, 2019]).

Thurston's deliberate excision of women on grounds of space (6) is disappointing, not least because it foregoes the opportunity to historicize women's engagement with Boko Haram as a contribution to knowledge on the roles of women in jihadi groups with a focus on Africa—a persistent gap in scholarship. References to women in this book are fleeting, from its mention of "opportunities that Boko Haram gave young women for increasing their religious learning and social status" (192) to the Chibok abductions (2, 220–21, 303). This contributes, possibly inadvertently, to perpetuating stereotypes of women principally as victims of violence, which critical feminist scholars have fought to dissipate.

A final puzzle, and one that counteracts Thurston's admitted situation of Boko Haram within Nigeria, is the "African" descriptor in the book's title.

I first encountered Thurston's book on a friend's bookshelf during fieldwork in northern Nigeria in late 2018 while looking for authoritative background material on Boko Haram. I felt about it then as I do now, that it is a painstakingly rich, informative, insightful, and indispensable resource for anyone studying not just Boko Haram, but the broader phenomenon of jihadism. The book constitutes an important academic contribution to understanding how Boko Haram emerged and how this intersects with existing discourses on violent extremism. But it also has vital policy implications. Read against the Nigerian government's inability to defeat Boko Haram, as evidenced by continuing attacks and abductions, the book's pluridimensional analytical emphasis on religion, politics, and locality offers useful guidance on alternative response strategies that may prove more productive.

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**For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:**

- Castryck, Geert. 2019. "Living Islam in Colonial Bujumbura – The Historical Translocality of Muslim Life between East and Central Africa." *History in Africa* 46: 263–98. doi:[10.1017/hia.2019.2](https://doi.org/10.1017/hia.2019.2).
- Coates, Oliver. 2018. "'The War, like the Wicked Wand of a Wizard, Strikes Me and Carry Away All That I Have Loved:’ Soldiers’ Family Lives and Petition Writing in Ijebu, Southwestern Nigeria, 1943–1945." *History in Africa* 45: 71–97. doi:[10.1017/hia.2018.3](https://doi.org/10.1017/hia.2018.3).
- Meagher, Kate. 2013. "ASR FORUM: ENGAGING WITH AFRICAN INFORMAL ECONOMIES: Informality, Religious Conflict, and Governance in Northern Nigeria: Economic Inclusion in Divided Societies." *African Studies Review* 56 (3): 209–34. doi:[10.1017/asr.2013.86](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2013.86).