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Fun, Violence, and Survival in Boko Haram

While often framed as either victims or perpetrators, children within Boko Haram navigate a far more complex reality – one where violence coexists with moments of camaraderie and fun.

The 2014 abduction of the Chibok schoolgirls brought global attention to Boko Haram's systematic recruitment of children (BBC, 2017). Estimates suggest that between 2009 and 2016, Boko Haram enlisted approximately 8,000 children across northeastern Nigeria. From 2017 to 2019, the UN confirmed that the group had recruited and utilised 1,385 children (UN, 2020).¹ Studies and firsthand accounts depict a grim reality of abduction and indoctrination, highlighting the manipulative and coercive tactics used to recruit and retain children (Mustapha, 2014). Yet, while these narratives expose Boko Haram's brutality, they only scratch the surface of the layered and often paradoxical experiences of children within the group. Beyond the headlines emphasising violence and suffering, the stories of these children reveal moments of unexpected joy, camaraderie, and resilience amidst hardship.

This apparent paradox becomes clearer during a broader study conducted between 2021 and 2023, which included extensive interviews with former children associated with Boko Haram, their families, community leaders, and practitioners across northeastern Nigeria (Achilli, 2024; Achilli & Melotti, 2024). The "children"² interviewed – boys and girls between thirteen and seventeen – had been recruited by Boko Haram and exploited in various roles, ranging from combat operations to logistical support. While they described enduring severe violence and harsh conditions, they also recounted moments of shared laughter, connection, and belonging through interactions with peers. These accounts complicate traditional portrayals of such children as solely victims or willing perpetrators, urging us to consider their experiences as multifaceted.

To explore these contradictions, this article draws on Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnival (Bakhtin, 1984) – a framework that examines the inversion of social hierarchies and norms in liminal spaces. Within Boko Haram, children's experiences are shaped by the duality of extreme violence and fleeting moments of joy, revealing a reality that is profoundly oppressive yet momentarily empowering.

Through this lens, the study argues that moments of fun and positive emotions are not incidental but integral to how children experience life within Boko Haram. These moments create bonds of loyalty, blur distinctions between coercion and agency, and highlight

the social dimensions of survival within the group. By exploring these dynamics, the article seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of children's lived realities under Boko Haram and offer insights into reintegration strategies that address these complexities.

Background: Boko Haram's Recruitment and Operations

Boko Haram, formally known as Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad, emerged in the early 2000s as an Islamist sect advocating for the implementation of Sharia law in Nigeria. Its roots lie in the socio-economic and political marginalisation of Nigeria's northeastern region, which created fertile ground for its ideology to flourish (Matfess et al., 2018). Under the leadership of Mohammed Yusuf, Boko Haram initially presented itself as a populist movement, railing against corruption and poor governance (Onuoha, 2014). However, Yusuf's extrajudicial killing in 2009 catalysed the group's shift into a violent insurgency, marking the beginning of its systematic campaign of terror.

Since then, Boko Haram has fragmented into factions, the most prominent being the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) and the Shekau-led faction until his death in 2021 (Ajiboye, 2022; Tochukwu Omenma et al., 2020). These divisions highlight internal conflicts over ideology, governance, and tactics. ISWAP has attempted to portray itself as a more disciplined faction, emphasising community engagement to gain local support. In contrast, the Shekau-led group maintained a reputation for extreme brutality, with an indiscriminate use of child soldiers being one of its defining traits.

Children are central to Boko Haram's operations, recruited through tactics that range from mass abductions to monetary and socio-economic manipulation. As one former recruit described, "They came to our village at night, gathered us all, and said we had to go with them or they would burn down everything." Promises of protection, food, or money are often used to exploit the insecurity and poverty that dominate many children's lives.

Once recruited, boys are often trained as fighters, deployed on the frontlines, or used as spies, while girls are forced into marriage, domestic servitude, or roles as couriers and bombers. However, these roles are not strictly fixed; some girls report participating in combat

1 Nevertheless, these figures are likely to be significantly higher given the limitations in available data (Matfess et al., 2018).

2 In this article, I employ the international definition of "children" as all persons under eighteen (CRC, 1989), purely for practical purposes. Nevertheless, I have factored in the dissonance with local perspectives of childhood during data gathering and analysis phases. It is noteworthy, indeed, that among my research participants, these "children" were substantially different compared to pre-adolescents. Unlike the latter, who are largely dependent on adults, the former were seen as capable of making informed, independent decisions – such as joining the workforce, marrying, or even enlisting in the armed forces.

or attacks, while boys may take on domestic tasks. The use of children as suicide bombers – with over 400 cases reported between 2014 and 2017 (UNICEF 2017) – stands as a stark example of Boko Haram’s indiscriminate exploitation of both boys and girls (Matfess et al., 2018).

Bakhtin and Boko Haram

Despite the violence and exploitation they endure, many children find themselves drawn into Boko Haram’s social structures. Through shared rituals, communal living, and basic provisions, the group fosters a sense of belonging. For children facing neglect or marginalisation in their communities, these dynamics can be profoundly compelling. As one former member described, “In the bush, we were all the same. We shared everything – the food, the work, the punishment. It made us feel like a family”

Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the carnival offers a valuable lens to explore the paradoxical experiences of children within Boko Haram. In his work, Bakhtin describes the carnival as a temporary inversion of social hierarchies, where traditional norms and roles are suspended, allowing opposites – fun and suffering, order and chaos – to coexist (Bakhtin 1984, p. 10). This inversion challenges societal conventions, creating a space where power structures are reimagined. In the carnival, rigid social ranks – such as nobles, clergy, and peasants – are momentarily dissolved, creating a “world upside down” where traditional hierarchies blur (Bakhtin, 1984).

Boko Haram mirrors this dynamic by offering children roles that invert their societal realities in ways unattainable within the traditional hierarchies of their patriarchal communities. In North Eastern Nigeria, like in other Sub-Saharan communities (Masquelier, 2005), youth unable to afford the costs of marriage or other rites of passage remain socially classified as “children,” with little hope of walking into full social adulthood and advancing their status. Boko Haram exploits this societal stagnation by offering children opportunities to transcend their marginalised positions.

The carnival disrupts the established order, opening pathways for new roles and ways of being. For children within Boko Haram, this inversion of norms offers a temporary escape from poverty and marginalisation, allowing them to reimagine their place in society.

Of course, the analogy to Bakhtin’s carnival has its limits. Unlike the carnival’s spontaneous and decentralised nature, where no single authority governs the event, Boko Haram operates within a strict hierarchy, tightly controlling these “new possibilities.” Even so, the carnival framework helps shed light on how traditional roles and norms within Boko Haram are intertwined with moments of joy and suffering. By subverting societal expectations and offering an alternative structure, Boko

Haram entangles children and young men in a complex web of subordination and emancipation, blurring the lines between victimhood and agency and revealing why its appeal endures amidst violence and exploitation.

The Complex Role of Fun

Four aspects of Bakhtin’s carnival – collective participation, suspension and inversion of hierarchies, grotesque realism, and inversion and parody – are reflected in the lived experiences of children within Boko Haram. These elements highlight the group’s ability to sway emotions and social norms, creating a world where fun and violence coexist to sustain loyalty and control.

Bakhtin emphasises the carnival as a space for collective participation, where individuals share in communal experiences. Similarly, within Boko Haram, children frequently recount moments of camaraderie and shared purpose. These bonds were not merely incidental but central to group cohesion. For instance, Abdu, who joined Boko Haram in his mid-teens, described how his friends’ passion for the group’s mission drew him in:

“I wanted that. I wanted to be part of something bigger, to have a purpose, to feel like I was making a difference. So, I made a decision. I told my friends, ‘I want to fight for a good cause. I want to be part of this.’ (...) And just like that, I found myself in the bush, surrounded by strangers, now my companions. I was scared, but I also felt a sense of excitement, a sense of purpose. I was part of something bigger now. I had joined Boko Haram.”

This sense of belonging was reinforced through rituals like communal meals, shared prayers, and moments of mutual care. A young woman who had been abducted in her early teens reflected on how these collective experiences created a sense of solidarity amid adversity:

“We were all bunched up together, living under the same roof. When the food came round, we shared. When the work piled up, we shared. And when one of us fell sick, or was heavy with child, or struggling with the men, we helped each other. God knows, it was tough. It was a struggle just to keep going. But in those moments, when we were huddled together, looking after one another, we found a kind of joy, a kind of happiness.”

This communal ethos tied directly into the carnival’s suspension and inversion of hierarchies. Children, often relegated to powerless positions in their communities, were elevated to roles of authority and recognition within Boko Haram. Akbar, a young recruit, recounted how the promises of wealth, status, and marriage made

joining the group an appealing opportunity to escape the stagnation of his life: “I was interested in what my friends told me about the good things of joining the group, such as getting money, making a name for myself, and find [sic] a wife. I thought that it was probably my best opportunity [to accomplish these goals] in my situation.”

Grotesque realism, another characteristic of the carnival, was reflected in Boko Haram’s practices that blended horror with fun. Training exercises, public executions, and extreme punishments desensitised recruits and normalised the grotesque. Zainab, a young woman who was abducted when she was 16 years old, described how children as young as three were brought to a space referred to as the “gallery” to witness executions: “The idea was to harden us, transform us into something else.” And yet, despite this brutality, moments of laughter and camaraderie often emerged. As one boy recalled, “We would laugh to hide our fear. If we didn’t laugh, we couldn’t get through it.”

Finally, inversion and parody were central to Boko Haram’s rhetoric and practices, enabling recruits to justify and even take pleasure in violence. The group dehumanised its enemies through mockery and derogatory language, fostering an “us vs. them” dichotomy. One boy described how such narratives shaped his perception of state authorities:

“They kept telling us, again and again, about the wickedness of the government, how it brought suffering to us, the faithful Muslims. We soaked up their words, until our minds were filled with the certainty that the government was the enemy, that it was our holy responsibility to make jihad. The security forces, the police, they were animals, in our eyes, creatures that needed to be killed. (...) We found amusement in the suffering of our enemies. We laughed and cheered at their pain, at their death. In our minds, they weren’t just our enemies, they were less than human.”

Through practices of inversion and parody, Boko Haram turned violence into an acceptable and even humorous act, reinforcing its recruits’ loyalty and shared identity.

Ambiguity and Reintegration Challenges

The sense of “fun” within Boko Haram, while providing moments of camaraderie and relief, serves multiple purposes. On the one hand, it allows children to temporarily escape the harsh realities of violence and deprivation, offering fleeting emotional solace. On the other, it ensnares them further within the group’s mechanisms, forging bonds that prove difficult to break. Communal laughter, shared moments of triumph, and fleeting levity amidst brutality create a sense of solidarity that blurs the lines between coercion and voluntary

participation. As one young woman abducted at 14 reflects: “The atrocities I was made to commit were so bad, but I found a family. We were all pulled together by circumstance.” These moments of connection, albeit distorted, are instrumental in maintaining the group’s cohesion and control.

Over time, however, these experiences often lead to what can be seen as post-carnival disillusionment. Just as Bakhtin’s carnival ends, returning participants to their everyday hierarchies, the fun and camaraderie within Boko Haram eventually reach a point of exhaustion for many children. As the violence escalates, the moments of fun and joy are overshadowed by the profound psychological and physical toll of the atrocities committed and endured. A boy who spent years with Boko Haram describes the emotional breaking point: “At first, I thought I was part of something good, something meaningful. But the things I saw, the things I did – they broke me. The laughter stopped. All I wanted was to leave, to get out of that nightmare.” For many, the saturation of violence and trauma becomes unbearable, spurring a desperate desire to escape and reclaim a sense of humanity.

Disengaging from Boko Haram is rarely straightforward (Matfess et al., 2018). Many take advantage of moments of chaos, such as during battles or raids, to slip away unnoticed. Some are rescued during military operations, while others are aided by humanitarian organisations operating in the region. The fear of punishment acts as a significant barrier to escape. Children worry about retribution not only from Boko Haram but also from state authorities or even their own communities, who often regard them with suspicion. A representative from a Yobe humanitarian organisation observed, “Many children remain in the group because they fear retribution for their actions. Yet, given the opportunity, the majority would leave, including those in leadership roles.”

For those who do manage to leave, the journey to safety is still fraught with social, psychological, and emotional challenges. The challenges of reintegration into civilian life are multifaceted. Many former recruits grapple with the profound loss of status and identity tied to their roles within the group. For boys, the authority and recognition they once held as fighters or leaders are stripped away, leaving them feeling invisible or inconsequential within their communities. One former recruit explained: “I went from being someone important, someone people respected, to being just another boy in the village. Nobody cared about me anymore.”

For girls, the challenges are equally, if not more, severe. Many return to their communities with the stigma of having been “Boko Haram wives,” a label that alienates them socially and limits their opportunities for reintegration. As one young girl shared, “I thought escaping would mean freedom, but back home, they only

see what I was forced to be, not who I am.” Another young girl recounted her return to her village: “They looked at me like I was a monster. They whispered behind my back, calling me a murderer, a Boko Haram wife. I didn’t belong anymore.”

These difficulties are compounded by the lack of structured support systems to facilitate their transition back into civilian life. Educational and vocational opportunities are often inaccessible, leaving many former recruits trapped in cycles of poverty and exclusion. Without meaningful pathways to rebuild their lives, the risk of re-recruitment or further marginalisation remains high, perpetuating their vulnerability. This exclusion not only deepens their emotional scars but also increases their vulnerability to re-recruitment or further marginalisation.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

This analysis highlights the ambivalent role of carnivalesque “fun” in shaping the experiences of children within Boko Haram. Moments of camaraderie, shared laughter, and fun serve to create a distorted sense of belonging and purpose, binding children to the group’s mechanisms. However, these experiences also lead to profound disillusionment as the violence and exploitation inherent in the group’s practices escalate, leaving many children seeking escape. The dynamics challenge simplistic narratives, illustrating the complex interplay of agency, exploitation, and fun.

Rather than framing these children solely as victims or perpetrators, this perspective underscores the importance of recognising the complexity of their experiences – an interplay of agency and coercion. Understanding these dynamics allows us to move beyond oversimplified narratives, offering a deeper appreciation of their challenges and resilience.

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