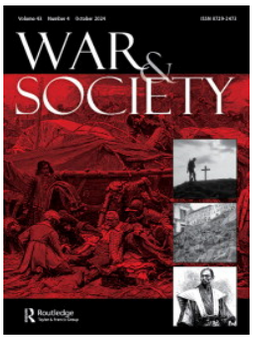

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Boko Haram's 'playground': Exploring the role of fun among children associated with armed groups in Nigeria

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This article addresses child recruitment by Boko Haram, exploring the unexpected role of 'fun' in children's enduring association with the group. It posits that 'fun', along with associated positive emotions, influences children's experiences, blurring the victim–perpetrator boundary and contributing to group perpetuation. Data is gathered from semi-structured interviews conducted in 2022 with individuals formerly associated with Boko Haram, practitioners, and law enforcement. This article underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of child recruitment within contexts of protracted vulnerability and precarity.

KEYWORDS Children; Boko Haram; fun; violence; agency

On the night of 14 April 2014, in the north-eastern Nigerian town of Chibok, a group of militants from the insurgent group Boko Haram abducted students from a government secondary school. A total of 276 schoolgirls were forcibly taken from their school, marking one of the most notorious acts of the group. The assailants, under the cover of darkness, breached the school's premises and coerced the girls onto trucks, taking them into Sambisa Forest – Boko Haram's well-known stronghold located south of the town.[1]

The abduction shone a spotlight on Boko Haram, a group infamous for its extensive reliance on child recruitment. It also sparked international condemnation and a social media campaign under the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls, putting

[1] Helon Habila, *The Chibok Girls: The Boko Haram Kidnappings and Islamist Militancy in Nigeria* (New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2016).

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unprecedented pressure on the Nigerian government and international bodies to act. Yet the complex political landscape and the heavily fortified hideouts of Boko Haram posed significant challenges to rescue operations. After a protracted ordeal, some of the girls began to regain their freedom. The first of these instances occurred in May 2016, when one of the abducted girls was found by a vigilante group. Subsequently, more girls were released following negotiations between Boko Haram and the Nigerian government. Yet, as of now, nearly one hundred of the Chibok girls remain in captivity, their whereabouts uncertain.[2] Significantly, many have chosen to remain with Boko Haram.[3]

The Chibok kidnapping underlines the complex nature of children's experiences in Boko Haram and the multifaceted challenges they face, even after release. Academic discussions about children in armed conflicts are primarily focused on violence, suffering, brutality, and harm. Scholarly research over time has shed light on factors pushing children towards association with armed factions.[4] Furthermore, the academic discourse, particularly in the field of psychology on emotions in warfare, tends to disproportionately highlight specific emotions. These frequently include feelings such as anger, humiliation, shame, fear, rage, and trauma.[5] The assumption often is that negative emotions such as animosity or contempt for an opposing group are pivotal to involvement with armed factions. The notions of revenge and anger are frequently brought up as motivators for joining an armed group.[6] The majority of these studies frame the narrative around coercion, impoverishment, and survival, painting a grim picture of brainwashing and abduction with an emphasis on the manipulative and terrifying tactics used to recruit and keep children.

Nevertheless, amid the chaos and aftermath of violence, individuals do experience joy, fall in love, and exhibit compassion.[7] The situation of the Chibok girls within the ambit of groups such as Boko Haram is complex and sensitive, reflecting

[2] UNICEF, '"Devastating Reality": 9 Years after Chibok Abductions, Children in Northeast Nigeria Continue to Suffer the Brutal Consequences of Conflict', (2023) <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/devastating-reality-9-years-after-chibok-abductions-children-northeast-nigeria> [accessed 22 March 2024].

[3] BBC, 'Nigeria Chibok Girls: "One Refused to Be Released"', (2017) <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-39857474; Independent, 'Nigeria: More than 100 Chibok Schoolgirls "Don't Want to Be Freed from Boko Haram"', (2016) <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/nigeria-boko-haram-chibok-schoolgirls-100-do-not-want-to-leave-a7368026.html> [accessed 22 March 2024].

[4] Susan Shepler, *Childhood Deployed: Remaking Child Soldiers in Sierra Leone* (New York: New York University Press, 2014); Myriam Denov and Richard Maclure, 'Engaging the Voices of Girls in the Aftermath of Sierra Leone's Conflict: Experiences and Perspectives in a Culture of Violence', *Anthropologica* 48, no. 1 (2006), 73–85; Fionna Klasen et al., 'Multiple Trauma and Mental Health in Former Ugandan Child Soldiers', *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 23, no. 5 (2010), 573–81.

[5] Arie W. Kruglanski et al., 'Fully Committed: Suicide Bombers' Motivation and the Quest for Personal Significance', *Political Psychology* 30, no. 3 (2009), 331–57; Anne Speckhard and Khapta Akhmedova, 'Talking to Terrorists', *Journal of Psychohistory* 33, no. 2 (2005), 125.

[6] Assaf Moghadam, 'Palestinian Suicide Terrorism in the Second Intifada: Motivations and Organizational Aspects', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 26, no. 2 (2003), 65–92; Skye Wheeler, *'We Can Die Too': Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers in South Sudan* (Human Rights Watch, 2015).

[7] Roxani Krystalli and Philipp Schulz, 'Taking Love and Care Seriously: An Emergent Research Agenda for Remaking Worlds in the Wake of Violence', *International Studies Review* 24, no. 1 (2022), 1–25.

a marked difference from the experiences of many boys associated with the same group.[8] This divergence reveals the potential for what may be described as 'choiceless decisions' and highlights their unique vulnerabilities. The very ambiguity surrounding the Chibok girls' case was not unintentional, though. Instead, their predicament amplifies the primary argument of this study: the intricate interplay between emotions such as fun, joy, and love, juxtaposed against the stark backdrop of violence, submission, and exploitation. While love, joy, and compassion are not synonymous, their presence, even in conditions of duress, highlights the complex emotional tapestries within human experiences. It is imperative to consider that emotions typically perceived as 'positive', such as fun or love, may not always be intrinsically positive in nature. For instance, when associated with phenomena such as Stockholm Syndrome, the ostensibly positive connotations of these feelings can be challenging. In the Chibok girls' case, for example, it is plausible (though not definitively proven) that the girls who chose to remain with Boko Haram might be operating from a psychological and physical stance of subordination. Nonetheless, this elides neither the potential presence of fun or other affirmative emotions in their lives nor the significant role these feelings could have in reinforcing their subordinate position. A central aim of this article is to delve into the complex and often ambivalent dimension of these affective states in children's lives.

Despite the extensive and insightful body of research, a crucial issue remains: the role of fun and other positive aspects of children associated with armed groups, especially those dubbed as 'terrorist' or 'violent extremist', has been often overlooked by the relevant scholarship.[9] Thus, in line with recent calls in anthropology, I propose to explore beyond suffering even in scenarios heavily tainted by violence and oppression, without, however, neglecting the overarching contexts of power and inequality.[10]

[8] Mats Utas, 'West-African Warscapes: Victimcy, Girlfriending, Soldiering: Tactic Agency in a Young Woman's Social Navigation of the Liberian War Zone', *Anthropological Quarterly* 78, no. 2 (2005), 403–30.

[9] The Nigerian government and the United Nations Security Council have categorised Boko Haram as a terrorist organisation. Nevertheless, several studies caution about the perils associated with using labels such as 'terrorist' or 'violent extremist': Harmonie Toros, 'We Don't Negotiate with Terrorists!': Legitimacy and Complexity in Terrorist Conflicts', *Security Dialogue* 39, no. 4 (2008), 407–26. These studies stress the challenges in gauging phenomena that lack internationally accepted definitions or legal foundations, such as terrorism. They also raise awareness about numerous ethical dilemmas and policy issues related to this subject, such as the misuse of terrorism labels by governments to quash dissent and limit civic freedoms: Richard Jackson et al., *Terrorism: A Critical Introduction* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011). In view of these considerations, Boko Haram will be referred to as an insurgent group. It should be added, however, that due to the authoritative weight of labels such as 'terrorist' and 'violent extremist', it becomes crucial to delve into how children associated with these groups navigate these categorisations, shedding light on their lived experiences of these labels: UNODC, *Targeted by Terrorists: Child Recruitment, Exploitation and Reintegration in Indonesia, Iraq and Nigeria* (Vienna: UNODC, 2024).

[10] Sherry B. Ortner, 'Dark Anthropology and Its Others: Theory since the Eighties', *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 6, no. 1 (2016), 47–73; compare with Joel Robbins, 'Beyond the Suffering Subject: Toward an Anthropology of the Good', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19, no. 3 (2013), 447–62.

Examining 'fun' as a mechanism through which my research participants reshape their social realities poses challenging inquiries regarding the ambiguous borders of this elusive concept. How can we precisely define 'fun'? What range of experiences and emotions does it envelop? Although the narratives and rituals revolving around 'fun' form the crux of my study, they do not entirely encompass my investigative scope. For my participants, 'fun' often implies an experiential category rather than a single discrete emotion. It is commonly connected with a spectrum of positive sentiments such as joy, amusement, exhilaration, happiness, and even, at times, love, all arising from engaging in enjoyable pursuits or interactions inciting such affirmative states. Deliberately, I refrain from proposing a strict delineation of 'fun' as my ensuing analysis is primarily guided by the participants' personal interpretations of this term, interpretations that may fluctuate and evolve over time also within the same individual.

To carry out this examination, this article anchors itself on prior research in social sciences that questions the lack of focus on often ignored experiences and emotions in armed conflict scenarios.[11] This body of studies has highlighted how people try to regain a sense of normality by engaging in joyful activities in the context of conflict. The pursuit of fun happens amid the daunting impacts of conflict, and it helps reframe the link between ordinary and extraordinary experiences. In other words, fun serves as an outlet to recreate normalcy amid despair and destruction. Ivana Maček, in her study of Sarajevo, notes that fun becomes an important way for people to regain normality and create new values during times of political and social instability.[12] Similarly, Sharif Kanaana talks about 'intifada humour' – funny stories that highlight the difference between the harsh reality of occupation and the better reality depicted in the jokes.[13] Here, fun is more than an escape – it is a way to generate new possibilities and responses.

Following Veena Das, Arthur Kleinman, and Margaret Lock,[14] I hence focus on the ways in which people rebuild their social world during and after violence. I contend here that fun plays a crucial role in this process.[15]

Simultaneously, however, I want to push this debate further and look at the mirroring process through which fun not only 'does' but also 'undoes' our social word. To do so, this article also draws upon the work of scholars from various fields, particularly anthropology and feminist studies, who have pointed out the complexities

[11] Krystalli and Schulz.

[12] Donna M. Goldstein, *Laughter Out of Place: Race, Class, Violence, and Sexuality in a Rio Shantytown* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Ivana Maček, *Sarajevo Under Siege: Anthropology in Wartime* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

[13] Sharif Kanaana, 'Humor of the Palestinian "Intifada"', *Journal of Folklore Research* 27, no. 3 (1990), 231–40.

[14] Veena Das et al., *Remaking a World: Violence, Social Suffering, and Recovery* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

[15] This perspective has been validated by scholars studying emotions in conflict zones. For example, Catherine Bolten, while studying the Sierra Leonean civil war, underlined the importance of understanding love to grasp the dynamics of the war fully. For the author, love is a fundamental aspect of social identity that provides the base upon which individuals rebuilt a meaningful world: Catherine Bolten, *I Did It to Save My Life: Love and Survival in Sierra Leone*, California Series in Public Anthropology (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 5; Krystalli and Schulz.

of people's emotional worlds, and their disruptive power.[16] I take here inspiration from the detailed studies of violent groups and militant organisations that have highlighted the thrill and excitement that group members feel when engaging in violent actions. In these cases, fun – exemplified through, for example, vandalism, exaggeration, and norm transgression – forms the basis of group identity. These studies offer valuable insights into the inner workings of these groups, without ignoring the grim backdrop of violence and destruction.[17]

Building on these two bodies of studies, this article delves deeper into the experiences of children associated with armed groups, going beyond just suffering and loss. It considers fun (and related emotions) not just as a passive experience, but as action and practice that deeply affect people's social worlds. Fun – and its corollary of various positive emotions such as joy, amusement, excitement, and happiness – is seen as a factor that can both create and upset people's social world. My central argument is that the notion of 'fun' is a crucial component in shaping children's interactions with Boko Haram. This seemingly paradoxical element not only helps children endure the brutal realities of their circumstance but also becomes instrumental in blurring the victim–perpetrator boundary,[18] contributing to the group's reproduction and continued existence. Acknowledging the group's severe violence and manipulation strategies, I assert that children's choices to engage, persist, or disengage from Boko Haram form a complex interplay where coercive aspects and positive experiences reciprocally influence each other. Recognising this intricate cohabitation is crucial for comprehending how children remake their social world (even an oppressive one) amid violence.

[16] Catherine Lutz and Geoffrey M. White, 'The Anthropology of Emotions', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 15, no. 1 (1986), 405–36; Andrew Beatty, *Emotional Worlds* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

[17] Allen Feldman, *Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Joseba Zulaika, *Basque Violence: Metaphor and Sacrament* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2000); Oskar Verkaaik, *Migrants and Militants: Fun and Urban Violence in Pakistan, vol. 13, Princeton Studies in Muslim Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); Margaret Trawick, *Enemy Lines: Warfare, Childhood, and Play in Batticaloa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

[18] The traditional portrayal of children in armed groups in binary terms as victims/perpetrators or kidnapped/volunteers is overly simplistic. For a critique: Alcinda Honwana, 'Innocent and Guilty: Child Soldiers as Interstitial and Tactical Agents', *Politique Africaine* 80, no. 4 (2000), 58–78. Recent research advocates for a more nuanced understanding, suggesting that coercion and agency exist on a continuum; Siobhan O'Neil and Kato Van Broeckhoven, *Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict* (New York: United Nations University, 2018). Applying this perspective to children in violent, militarised contexts is challenging, however, as it aligns with a liberal view of agency – individual action free from societal structures: Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969). In contexts where children are extremely dependent, this notion implies their agency is nearly non-existent, ignoring evidence of their agency even amid exploitation. Instead, I argue for a reimagined theoretical framework that embeds voluntariness within refined agency theories – see, among others, Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011). While a full analysis exceeds this article's scope, I further explore this concept in Luigi Achilli, 'Caught in the Crossfire: Unravelling the complex interplay of exploitation and agency in children associated with Boko Haram', *Anti-Trafficking Review* 22, (April 2024), 12–33.

By seriously considering elements of joy and amusement within the framework of warfare and violent conflict, we can craft an alternate narrative of war,[19] a narrative that provides a nuanced portrayal of individual and collective experiences, breaking away from a universalised story that solely emphasises violence, misery, and brutality. It is, however, crucial to clarify that I am not establishing a binary hierarchy, nor am I implying that documenting fun is more significant than detailing violence.[20] Rather, I advocate for the acknowledgement of the existence of positive experiences and emotions within environments marred by violence and oppression.

Research notes

The 'children' I interviewed for this study were boys and girls who had previously been associated with Boko Haram. These are individuals below the age of eighteen years, mostly in their teens (thirteen to seventeen), who have been recruited by Boko Haram and exploited to carry out a variety of roles that serve the purposes of the groups, whether they are combat (or operational) roles or support roles. The term 'children', aligning with Article 1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), pertains to all persons under eighteen, regardless of their maturity level. Studies have, however, made abundantly clear how international parameters for defining childhood often substantially diverge from local and community-based understandings.[21] In this article, I employ the universally acknowledged definition of 'child' 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.

To track the experiences of these Nigerian youths, I employed a multi-sited research methodology with the help of three research assistants. Data collection was carried out intermittently throughout 2023 in Abuja, the capital of Nigeria, and in the states of Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe. Traditional single-sited fieldwork falls short in capturing the multifaceted nature of the children's experiences. Thus, we conducted qualitative research in selected communities within these locations. In these sites, we carried out open-ended interviews and informal conversations

[19] Carolyn Nordstrom, *A Different Kind of War Story* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), xvi.

[20] Krystalli and Schulz is a comparable study exploring the significance of love and care in environments characterised by violence and conflict.

[21] For instance, Hashim and Thorsen have indicated that the Western concept of 'childhood' often holds little relevance in many African societies where the notion of adulthood is more intricately linked to social relationships and generational structures than to age or cognitive progression: Iman Hashim and Dorte Thorsen, *Child Migration in Africa* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2011).

with twenty-nine former child associates of Boko Haram (fifteen boys and fourteen girls) and nine adults who had previously been associated with the group.

My interviewees included a diverse group in terms of age, gender, role within the group, and length of association with Boko Haram. This diversity allowed me to capture a wide array of experiences and narratives. The majority of the interviewees were accessed in youth facilities and accommodation centres managed by non-governmental organisations and were interviewed in the presence of specialised staff.

In addition to these interviews, we also conducted thirty-nine semi-structured conversations with key informants, including law enforcement personnel and practitioners from various organisations. These informants were critical for obtaining a comprehensive understanding of the socio-political context and the intricacies of the reintegration process. I also supplemented the data from interviews with a review of relevant literature and policy documents to provide additional context for the data analysis process. The inclusion of these diverse perspectives and data sources was crucial in understanding this complex social phenomenon from multiple angles.

Subject recruitment was facilitated through gatekeepers – mostly humanitarian workers and individuals met during previous field research in the region.[22] By utilising my contacts in the field, I was able to reach potential interviewees. Upon completion of each interview, research participants' social networks served as referral sources for additional subjects, allowing me to expand my network of participants.

Between the devil and the deep blue sea: children in Boko Haram

The genesis of modern-day Islamist extremism in north-eastern Nigeria can be attributed to the Maitatsine movement, led by Muhammadu Marwa.[23] This group challenged the Nigerian state in the early 1980s, advocating Islamic governance and exhibiting antagonism towards Western imperialism. Mohammed Yusuf drew inspiration from this movement, founding Boko Haram in 2002 to propagate a similar vision of Salafist rule.[24] A sequence of escalating violent conflicts with state authorities across north-eastern states culminated in the arrest of Yusuf by the Nigerian security forces in Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State, in 2009, where he later died while in police custody.[25]

Members of the group who survived went into hiding and reappeared under new leadership, led by Abubakar Shekau. They embarked on an extended and violent campaign against the Nigerian state, terrorising the north-eastern population, waging a guerrilla war against the Nigerian security forces, and committing a series of

[22] UNODC.

[23] Wisdom Oghosa Iyekekpolo, 'Boko Haram: Understanding the Context', *Third World Quarterly* 37, no. 12 (2016), 2211–28; J. Tochukwu Omenma, Ifeanyichukwu M. Abada, and Z. Onyinyechi Omenma, 'Boko Haram Insurgency: A Decade of Dynamic Evolution and Struggle for a Caliphate', *Security Journal* 33, no. 3 (2020), 376–400; Andrew Walker, *What Is Boko Haram?* (Washington, DC: US Institute of Peace, 2012).

[24] Walker, *What Is Boko Haram?*, 7.

[25] Ibid., 4.

atrocities against civilians.[26] As the conflict escalated, the group used financial incentives, intimidation, peer and family pressure, and outright force for recruitment. Amid this rising violence, the Nigerian government implemented the 2011 Terrorism (Prevention) Act and outlawed Boko Haram as a terrorist organisation in 2013.[27] Boko Haram was subsequently added to the UN Security Council's Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee list in May 2014, invoking targeted financial sanctions and an arms embargo under Security Council Resolution 2083.[28]

In March 2015, Abubakar Shekau pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), resulting in Boko Haram being renamed as the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP).[29] In the following year, however, the ISIL leadership appointed Abu Musab al-Barnawi, Mohammed Yusuf's son, as ISWAP's leader in place of Shekau, causing a split within the organisation. This division resulted in two factions, with Barnawi heading ISWAP and Shekau leading *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'Awati wal-Jihad* (JAS). After this split, ISWAP relocated from the Sambisa Forest in Borno State to the Lake Chad Basin region, recruiting jihadists from the area.[30]

A third faction named 'Bakura', after its leader Ibrahim Bakura, appeared in 2019.[31] Active in the border regions of the Lake Chad Basin area, the group retains close ties with JAS. Competition between the two primary factions – JAS and ISWAP – intensified, culminating in Shekau's killing by ISWAP militants in May 2021 during a raid on his stronghold in the Sambisa Forest. Following Shekau's death, JAS seemed to decline drastically, with large-scale defections to government-controlled territories, while ISWAP appeared to strengthen, absorbing former JAS members and extending its operational footprint in north-eastern Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin area.[32]

As the power dynamics within the factions of JAS, ISWAP, and Bakura shifted, the extensive recruitment and use of child soldiers by these factions (hereafter referred to as 'Boko Haram') remained almost unchanged. Over the past decade, the group's extensive use of child recruitment has drawn substantial media attention. The infamous abduction of the Chibok girls in 2014 drew widespread global condemnation, cementing the group's reputation as a 'globally acknowledged terrorist organization'.[33] Estimations suggest that Boko Haram enlisted

[26] Ibid., 5.
[27] Virginia Comolli, *Boko Haram: Nigeria's Islamist Insurgency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Andrew Walker, *'Eat the Heart of the Infidel': The Harrowing of Nigeria and the Rise of Boko Haram* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 35.
[28] UN, 'Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee Adds Boko Haram to Its Sanctions List', 2014, <https://press.un.org/en/2014/sc11410.doc.htm>.
[29] BBC, 'Nigeria's Boko Haram pledges allegiance to Islamic State', 7 March 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-31784538> [accessed 17 July 2024].
[30] Omenma, Abada, and Omenma, 53.
[31] Vincent Foucher and Maman Inoua Elhadji Mahamadou Amadou, 'Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin: The Bakura Faction and its Resistance to the Rationalisation of Jihad', *HAL Sciences Humaines et Sociales* (2022) <https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03920297> [accessed 17 July 2024].
[32] Babatope Matthew Ajiboye, 'Boko Haram: Shekau's Demise – Halcyon or Nadir for Sub-Saharan Africa's Fight Against Terrorism?', *Conflict Studies Quarterly*, no. 41 (2022) 3–14.
[33] Emeka Okereke, 'From Obscurity to Global Visibility: Periscoping Abubakar Shekau', *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 6, no. 10 (2014), 17.

approximately 8000 children in north-east Nigeria between 2009 and 2016. From 2017 to 2019, the UN confirmed that Boko Haram had recruited and utilised 1385 children.[34] Nevertheless, these figures are likely to be significantly higher given the limitations in available data.

Boko Haram employs varied recruitment tactics, ranging from abduction and physical threats to deception and socio-economic incentives. Existing literature on violent extremism suggests that emotional factors such as revenge, hatred, anger towards other groups, the need to belong, the desire for self-worth, and peer influence can significantly influence some children to associate with non-state armed groups.[35] Studies have also increasingly started to dispute the formerly accepted motives behind children's choices to align with organisations such as Boko Haram.[36] These evolving perspectives downplay the impact of religious fervour, instead bringing to light political, societal, and economic frustrations as key determinants in recruitment paths. A recent report by the United Nations Development Programme, for instance, encapsulates these dynamics within the concept of a 'social contract breach'.[37] The notion is that deep-rooted societal failings in north-eastern Nigeria have resulted in widespread disempowerment and poverty. These challenging conditions make the narratives advanced by Boko Haram's propaganda particularly persuasive to vulnerable segments of the population, most notably children. The propaganda put out by the group chiefly focuses on the rejection of the Nigerian state, offering itself as a credible substitute for those disillusioned by the existing political and economic structures. Importantly, the socio-economic appeal of Boko Haram not only draws in the impoverished but also attracts disaffected children from middle-class backgrounds, who view the group as a potential avenue for socio-economic advancement and opportunity.[38]

This narrative deeply resonates with the words of a researcher from Nigeria's National Judicial Institute who observed how feelings of alienation and dispossession play a pivotal role in the attraction exerted by Boko Haram over children:

> Security should be ensured by the government, but what happens often is the other way round: the counter-terrorist policies and practices implemented by the government expose children to serious risks. These policies are creating a monster. These children find themselves between the devil and the deep blue sea. By joining Boko Haram, what they try to obtain is security for themselves.

On a larger scale, though, the nature of affiliation to Boko Haram seems to be deeply personal, multifaceted, and not strictly linear for each individual. While multiple factors contribute to the vulnerability of children to recruitment, there is not a specific set of factors that invariably leads to association.

[34] UN, 'Children and Armed Conflict in Nigeria: Report of the Secretary-General (S/2020/652), Para 22', 2020.
[35] O'Neil and Van Broeckhoven; UNODC, 57.
[36] Ibid., 16.
[37] UNDP, 'United Nations Development Programme: Journey to Extremism in Africa. New York 2017', *SIRIUS–Zeitschrift Für Strategische Analysen* 2, no. 2 (2018), 202–3.
[38] Daniel E. Agbiboa, *Mobility, Mobilization, and Counter/Insurgency: The Routes of Terror in an African Context* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2022).

Children are entrusted with a range of roles within JAS, ISWAP, and Bakura, such as scouting, espionage or sabotage, or acting as decoys and messengers at military checkpoints. They also participate at the front lines, providing supplies to the combat units, procuring ammunition and equipment, creating trails or discovering routes, working on checkpoints, and serving as bodyguards or guards at strategic locations. Children can further be exploited as human shields, fighters, and 'suicide' bombers.[39]

Whether or not children actively participate in violent roles, they are inextricably engulfed in violence throughout their involvement with the group. When children associate with Boko Haram, they are often exposed to perilous labour, forced into substance abuse, and even subjected to severe pain and injury. Sexual violence is inflicted upon children, including boys. The cruel realities children have to face and actions they are forced to undertake have been extensively documented. These include witnessing and participating in the murder or kidnapping of family members; physical punishment such as lashings, canings, and amputations; and the execution of captives through stoning, shooting, and decapitation. Attempts to escape from Boko Haram are met with severe retribution, often leading to execution of both civilians and fighters. The long-term physical and psychosocial effects of enduring such rampant violence and abuse can be profoundly damaging for the children.[40]

Girls and young women returning with children conceived as a result of forced marriages or sexual exploitation or violence (and especially their children) face marginalisation, discrimination, and rejection by their communities due to sociocultural perceptions of sexual violence.[41] These children are often viewed as having inherited the violent tendencies of their fathers by the communities and are seen as potential future combatants by Boko Haram.[42]

The 'joy' of joining

The horrors associated with Boko Haram are widely recognised, painting a grim picture of a group that has wreaked havoc on thousands of lives. Amid the backdrop of terror, however, many children associated with the group experience a paradoxical experiential and emotional landscape, often punctuated by joy,

[39] Hilary Matfess, Graeme Blair, and Chad Hazlett, 'Beset on All Sides: Children and the Landscape of Conflict in North East Nigeria', in *Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict*, ed. by Siobhan O'Neil and Kato Van Broeckhoven (New York: United Nations University, 2018).

[40] Matfess, Blair, and Hazlett, 40.

[41] In 2022 a Special Independent Investigative Panel was established under the auspices of the Nigerian Human Rights Commission to investigate allegations of women returning from Boko Haram-held territory who may have suffered the forced termination of their pregnancies, as well as other reports of violence: Reuters, 'Nigerian Rights Commission Panel to Probe Abortion Allegations against Military', 1 February 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/nigerian-rights-commission-panel-probe-abortion-allegations-against-military-2023-02-01/> [accessed 22 March 2024].

[42] UNICEF International Alert, 'Bad Blood: Perceptions of Children Born of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence and Women and Girls Associated with Boko Haram in Northeast', 2016, <https://www.unicef.org/nigeria/reports/bad-blood>. [accessed 22 March 2024].

amusement, excitement, and happiness. This seemingly antithetical dichotomy, where positive emotions and experiences coexist alongside the horrors of Boko Haram, underscores the complexity of the human experience under extreme circumstances. As I transition from exploring the group's terrors to understanding these instances of 'fun', it should be stressed that this does not trivialise the harsh realities endured by children in Boko Haram. Instead, it provides a more nuanced insight into the complex realities of association.

To start with, although Boko Haram operates within a violent and insecure environment, it paradoxically provides children with a sense of security. On a physical level, association with Boko Haram assures (in the eyes of children) the fulfilment of fundamental necessities such as food, shelter, and protection, addressing children's immediate survival requirements. This provision of basic needs is especially enticing to children and families impoverished by the persistent conflict in the region, who struggle to obtain these essentials. Importantly, this security transcends mere physical safety; it extends to the emotional and social spheres as well.

This is, for example, the case of Abdu, a boy in his mid-teens from a village near Maiduguri. He knew that two of his friends, Mammadu and Yaya, had left to join Boko Haram in the bush. One day he received a picture of them handling a long-barrelled rifle: 'I thought my friends were so cool and brave, so I also wanted to join them.' It was not only violence and heroism that attracted Akbar. The promises of money, a wife, and status played a role too. Studies have demonstrated how in many African societies, youth – unable to meet the costs associated with marriage and other rites of passage that traditionally secure transition into adulthood – remain 'children' in the eyes of their peers with little, if any, hope of changing their condition in the future.[43] For many young men like Akbar, joining Boko Haram was a unique opportunity to attain social maturity and live a meaningful 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 a wife. I thought that it was probably my best opportunity [to accomplish these goals] in my situation.

While most research participants recalled near constant hunger and a shortage of basic commodities of any sort, some did report that they still had more food, money, and material goods than before joining the group. Abdu's words recall the words of Mohammed – a young man who had joined the group when he was in his mid-teens. He narrated how his first commander always took care of him: 'One day, I told him that I wanted to get married. The *Amir* gave me 500,000 Naira [approximately 1,000 USD], a motorcycle and a house.' The boy eventually married three wives during his association with Boko Haram, a highly desirable social accomplishment for a boy with his background, who would typically lack the cash and wedding goods required to fulfil the onerous obligations placed upon grooms:

[43] Adeline Masquelier, 'The Scorpion's Sting: Youth, Marriage and the Struggle for Social Maturity in Niger', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 11, no. 1 (2005), 59–83.

'We were free to do as we pleased in the bush, and we had all that we had not had before [being recruited].'[44]

This example underscores the influential role of social standing and acknowledgement in sustaining children's alliance with the group, predominantly among young males, though comparable instances have also been observed among females. For instance, key informants report stories of girls married to a Boko Haram commander who were treated 'like a queen'. It is essential, nonetheless, to caution against oversimplifying children's affirmative experiences within the group as merely satisfying their tangible necessities.[45] Engagement in group activities extends beyond meeting physical needs; it resonates deeply with many adolescents' and young males' inherent longing for societal validation and other pro-social drives that are acknowledged as critical needs, especially during adolescence.[46]

The strong sentiment of fraternity and common purpose within the group acts as a binding agent. Children are conditioned to discern their association with Boko Haram not merely as a forced union but as a noble mission. This indoctrination cultivates the belief that they are contributors to a grand cause. When reflecting on their experience, some research participants described their time in the group as being part of something more significant, as if they had value serving a cause much larger than themselves. Children's narratives often expose the joy derived from this unity and shared purpose. As Abdu put it:

> My friends, they were always telling me about Boko Haram. They were so passionate when they spoke about it, saying how they were all fighting for a good cause, how they were doing something important, something bigger than themselves. [...] I remember feeling lost, aimless, like I was just drifting along. I wasn't learning anything, I wasn't contributing to anything. It felt like I was stuck in a rut, like I was going nowhere. My friends ... Their words touched something inside me. They ignited a spark, a desire for something more. 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.

Children narrated tales of camaraderie and mutual exhilaration. They articulated how they, although uprooted from home and forced into an unwanted existence, established connections among themselves. They found joy and comfort in their common experiences and clung to this shared foundation as a pillar of strength. This camaraderie frequently manifested as mutual amusement during training, collective thrill when participating in group events, and simple contentment born from a sense of inclusion. They found humour in their struggles, amusement in their

[44] Taken from UNODC, 110.
[45] Utas.
[46] O'Neil and Van Broeckhoven, 57.

shared predicaments, and delight in their collective resilience. This mutual sense of humour acted as a survival strategy, rendering their grim reality more tolerable.

Roxani Krystalli and Philipp Schulz, in their research on the interplay of love and care among individuals engaged in armed conflicts, provide an account from one of their interviewees in Uganda. This woman, who was a 'forced wife' in the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), described moments of 'genuine joy and happiness' found in mutual support and care among the women in instances of illness, childbirth, childcare, or postpartum recovery.[47] Significantly, one of my research participants in Adame, a young woman kidnapped by Boko Haram from her village during her mid-teens, brought forth a striking analogy:

> 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.

Despite the initial allure Boko Haram might have for some individuals, the appeal often proves to be short-lived for most if not all children, as they are confronted with severe hardships and violence.[48] Nonetheless, disengagement is a complex process fraught with danger, meaning that a decision to leave does not always result in immediate departure from the group. What is crucial to understand in this disengagement process are the challenges children face post-exit, particularly those related to 'fun' and its corollary of positive feelings. In an analogy to Bakhtin's carnival concept,[49] where temporary role reversals disrupt the traditional hierarchy, Boko Haram offers children the chance to enhance their social standing in ways otherwise impossible in their patriarchal society. It provides accelerated paths to societal milestones (such as marriage) and grants them symbols of authority (such as weapons) that, like carnival costumes, permit an assumed identity.

A Nigerian intelligence officer's reflection on his own experience summarises the sense of empowerment felt by the children. He observed that these children, transformed by ideology, faith, and fear, 'are hardly the same people they used to be anymore'. Empowered by the respect earned from violent actions, they adopt a sort of intoxication with the power accorded to them. Much like the officer's own experience of being given rank and authority in military school, these children thrive on the exhilarating feeling of power and control. Significantly, if many children find the attraction of Boko Haram waning quickly after recruitment, it is noteworthy that some may contemplate re-joining the group even after successful exit. The children's struggles post-departure resemble the post-carnival return to societal norms. The potential loss of elevated status may deter them from leaving and complicate their reintegration into civilian life. Post-disengagement, like the anti-climax

[47] Krystalli and Schulz, 10.
[48] UNODC, 111.
[49] Mikhail Mikhaĭlovich Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, vol. 341 A Midland Book (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 10.

of a carnival's end, children often grapple with feelings of insignificance and impotence, particularly when their new civilian roles fail to match the prestige they once held or aspired to within the group.

Perilous play: the disturbing nexus of fun and violence

The observations above illustrate the paradoxical intertwining of enjoyment, brutality, suffering, and exploitation across extended periods. The interplay between these elements offers a more intricate perspective of how children 'endure' a life within Boko Haram, despite the inherent dangers and hardships. Here, however, I want to focus on another aspect of children's experiences within Boko Haram: the fascinating and deeply troubling symbiosis of violence and fun. Numerous episodes from the lives of children within Boko Haram expose a profound juxtaposition of fun and joy found not only in the midst of violence but, surprisingly and disconcertingly, through the very act of violence itself.

Through the perpetration of violence, children are unwittingly socialised into the group, with shared traumatic experiences creating bonds that become hard to sever. Interviews with children paint a vivid picture of this dynamic. It is not unusual for those recounting their experiences to allude to the violence perpetrated by the group while simultaneously acknowledging the sense of camaraderie and belonging they found within its ranks. A young woman, who had been abducted at age fourteen, recounted: 'The atrocities I was made to commit were so bad, but [within that horror] I found a family. We were all pulled together by circumstance'.

This complex narrative highlights how the performance of violent acts within the group, however repugnant, could paradoxically serve as a bonding mechanism. Such shared traumatic experiences, played out on a collective stage, solidify bonds of camaraderie and intensify the sense of belonging, forming an unorthodox support network for these children. Corroborating this, a key expert from the Nigerian security forces reported observing a distinct shift in attitude in the children once they are removed from the group environment:

> Children speak also positively about their time, some even in enthusiastic terms. I overheard once one kid boasting about his deeds, showing off in front of other kids. This very kid looked very repentant and submissive when I interrogated him in the centre. Then, a few months after, I see him in his village, drunk, boasting about what he has done and how many people he killed in front of other kids.[50]

This oscillation between remorse and bravado is illustrative of the complex dynamics at play within the group. While the violence inflicted and endured undeniably traumatises the children, the bonds formed within the group and the sense of social status derived from their association with Boko Haram serve as powerful incentives to stay in the group. Two critical elements in group dynamics

[50] For a comparative discussion: Susan Shepler, 'Childhood Deployed', in *Childhood Deployed* (New York: New York University Press, 2014); Danny Hoffman, *The War Machines: Young Men and Violence in Sierra Leone and Liberia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

stand out: social norms and dehumanisation.[51] Social norms, which embody typical or preferred behaviours within a social circle, significantly steer individual actions. In armed groups, violence is often normalised and endorsed, causing members – especially children – to view it as typical group behaviour. Nonetheless, despite the media's glorification of violence, historical and psychological studies suggest that people often avoid harming others, even at personal cost, and experience distress when they resort to violence.[52] One way in which people overcome this reluctance is through the dehumanisation of the 'enemy'.[53] Here, 'fun' plays a crucial role.

In Boko Haram, children often celebrated injuries and ridiculed victims, actions akin to mocking intended to make violent acts acceptable and desirable. This process underlines the dichotomy between 'us' and 'others', emphasising the 'otherness' of victims and portraying them as less-than-human 'enemies'. For example, a boy who was kidnapped by Boko Haram when he was still in his preteens and spent seven years in the group recalls how he was trained to see state authorities and law enforcement as non-humans, monsters that needed to be eliminated:

> 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 wage jihad. The security forces, the police, they were animals, in our eyes, creatures that needed to be killed [...] The stories we were told, the teachings we absorbed, they helped us push past our fears. So, each time we heard of them causing harm to one of ours, this was the proof that we needed that they were bad. [...] 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.

In a similar vein, the former head of Boko Haram, Shekau, utilised the same tactics of narrative and mockery on a broader scale. Masterfully exploiting the local need for social revenge, he defamed, ridiculed, and insulted the highest political and religious authorities in the country – individuals who were usually shown only praise and respect. By doing so, he ensured that his ideas gained popularity among his followers. This strategy was glaringly evident in Shekau's speech following the attack on the Giwa camp, an army barracks in Maiduguri. After the Nigerian soldiers' humiliating defeat and retreat, Shekau revelled in the chance to deride his enemies further, using animal metaphors (e.g. 'dogs', 'pigs', 'rats') and particularly offensive Hausa epithets, such as *shegue* (bastard).[54] Thus, Shekau's tactics were

[51] O'Neil and Van Broeckhoven, 68.

[52] Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (New York: Open Road Media, 2014).

[53] Catherine Lutz and Kathleen Millar, 'War', in *A Companion to Moral Anthropology* (2012), ed. Didier Fasin (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 482–99.

[54] A video was initially uploaded to YouTube but was later taken down as it violated the platform's Terms of Service. For further insights into the rhetoric of Boko Haram's leader: Élodie Apard, 'The Words of Boko Haram', *Afrique Contemporaine* 255, no. 3 (2015), 41–69.

mirrored by the children in the group, who used mockery and narrative to dehumanise their enemies, reinforce their perception of an 'us vs them' dynamic, and ultimately make violence acceptable.

At the same time, however, social relations in Boko Haram were not always and exclusively cathartic but were often also very hostile and the cause of much suffering and harm among members themselves. The ambivalent experiences of 'fun' among children associated with Boko Haram underscore its role in constructing a social world amid violence and exploitation. Yet, alarmingly, it also propels their own exploitation and vilification. It is a troubling reality that these children, while victims of the group's violence, become active participants in the cycle of abuse. This perpetuation stems not merely from coercive indoctrination or survival needs in a normalised brutal environment, but also paradoxically from experiences labelled as 'fun'. A young woman who had been associated as a girl narrated how children as young as three years old, both boys and girls, were taken in the evenings to an open space that they referred to as the 'gallery' to watch executions: 'The idea was to harden us, transform us into something else'.[55] Again, 'fun' was a crucial component through which children not only endured violence but also performed it. Several female research participants recounted how their husbands or leaders would loan them for a day to gratify other members (including adolescents and even younger children) of the group sexually.[56]

Crucially, there is a threshold to the violence children can endure and perpetrate, irrespective of how transient these acts may seem. Over time, their cumulative exposure prompts a search for escape from such interactions, demonstrating a limit to resilience in the face of brutality. Involvement in Boko Haram's violent activities positions children as integral to the perpetuation of the very mechanisms exploiting them, creating a cycle of entrapment that complicates potential exit routes. The time spent within the group can drastically alter a child's social orientation. Upon disengagement, children experience a psychological disconnect that makes re-establishing meaningful relationships difficult.[57] This dislocation can also hamper their complete dissociation from the group. 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.

[55] Taken from UNODC, 111.

[56] While many accounts convincingly highlight the prevalence of sexual violence within the group, there is reason to believe that the magnitude of the problem is even greater than is commonly understood: see, for example, Matfess, Blair, and Hazlett, 197. One significant reason is that a considerable portion of this violence takes place within the confines of what is termed 'marriage', irrespective of the consensual nature of these unions. Notably, some girls who either joined Boko Haram willingly or were coerced into marital roles have indicated that they were better off than those who were exploited as 'sexual slaves'. The criteria guiding this segregation – be it based on internal hierarchy, ethnic affiliations, or religious distinctions – remain unclear. Similarly, the influence of sexual dynamics in shaping the composition and structure of these militias is yet to be comprehensively understood.

[57] Matfess, Blair, and Hazlett, 198 – 200.

Conclusion

The deeply unsettling yet intricately complex dynamics within Boko Haram, especially as they pertain to children and youth, offer valuable insights into the intersection of fun, violence, and social cohesion within the context of such groups. This examination suggests that 'fun', typically considered a positive construct, might not always be perceived as wholesomely beneficial. In the complex socio-political terrain of an armed group, it can serve as a powerful mechanism for both resilience and exploitation.

Firstly, 'fun' emerges as an unlikely yet essential survival strategy for children in Boko Haram. The children within the extremist group actively create spaces for joy, camaraderie, and shared experiences amid an overwhelmingly hostile environment. The concept of 'fun' in this context is multifaceted and complex. It may take the form of shared laughter over a successful ploy, assistance in times of need, or a quiet moment of connection amid the chaos. The children's ability to cultivate moments of 'fun' is a testament to their resilience, their capacity to carve out spaces of normality even in the most abnormal of circumstances. Beyond its role as a survival mechanism, 'fun' also serves as a potent tool for social bonding and the establishment of hierarchy within Boko Haram. In Boko Haram, the children, who are initially outsiders, are gradually socialised into the group through shared experiences. The allure of power, status, and a seemingly shared purpose are used to manipulate the children into feeling a sense of belonging. In this space, where traditional societal norms are temporarily upended or altered, children are allowed to rise momentarily above their pre-existing societal constraints, attaining a semblance of empowerment, albeit within the confined boundaries of the extremist group. This shared sense of power and purpose, coupled with the communal experiences of joy and adversity, engenders a potent bond among the children, solidifying their affiliation with the group.

As we delve deeper though, we encounter a chilling emotional landscape where violence becomes infused with elements of enjoyment and camaraderie, and 'fun' becomes a catalyst for shared violence. The potency of 'fun' as a conduit for violence is perhaps the most unsettling aspect of its role within Boko Haram. The group finds shared pleasure and bonding in violent acts. These collective experiences serve as a peculiar form of social glue, binding them more tightly to each other and the group. The joy derived from acts of violence permits a temporary transcendence of the macabre reality that surrounds them. This laughter is, however, a tragic and distorted mirror, reflecting a world where brutality becomes not only tolerable but even enjoyable. Crucial in this process is the deployment of humour and mockery directed towards enemies, which acts as a tool for dehumanisation, creating an emotional buffer that facilitates violent acts. The children are taught to caricature and scorn their adversaries, stripping them of their humanity and cementing their 'otherness'. This constructed narrative normalises the perpetration of violence, transforming the enemy into an object of ridicule rather than empathy. Moreover, it engenders an environment where harm inflicted upon these dehumanised enemies becomes a source of group bonding and shared amusement, rather than a cause for moral distress.

Despite the grim picture painted here, it is crucial to remember the inherent complexity of the situation. The children associated with Boko Haram are not simply passive victims or mindless agents of violence. Rather, they are active participants in a tragic tapestry of survival, resistance, and adaptation. Their experiences of 'fun' are deeply entangled within a web of coercion, exploitation, and violence – revealing a profound ambivalence that complicates our understanding of their experiences. If, on the one hand, the highlighted dynamics complicate the disengagement process, making their extraction from the group a deeply layered and complex challenge, on the other hand the cumulative exposure to violence often drives them to actively seek disengagement.

In conclusion, 'fun' within Boko Haram's ranks emerges as a complex, ambivalent, and powerful tool through which children do and undo their social worlds. The nuanced understanding of this seemingly innocuous concept underscores the importance of an anthropological perspective in examining conflict situations, aiding in the development of more effective and context-specific strategies for supporting children impacted by armed conflict. Recognising and understanding this complexity is the first step towards forming more effective strategies for their support and reintegration, and perhaps even towards preventing similar situations from arising in the future.

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