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Fractured Brotherhoods: Ethnic Identity in Multi-Ethnic Violent Political Groups

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Abstract

This paper explores the critical role of pre-existing social networks in determining the organizational integration or fragmentation of armed groups, with a particular focus on sub-Saharan Africa. Ethnic networks and structures have historically shaped conflicts in this region, such as the civil wars in Burundi and Nigeria. Although some contemporary armed groups, especially religious extremists in Somalia, Nigeria, and Mali, claim to transcend ethnic identities, maintaining cohesion in ethnically heterogeneous groups remains challenging. Effective socialization of combatants is essential for ensuring homogeneity and commitment, as individuals possess multiple overlapping social and political identities. Implementing socialization methods, such as ideological education, helps unify members and maintain organizational coherence despite diverse backgrounds. However, these efforts often face barriers, and ethnicity can remain a dominant factor. Through interviews with Boko Haram ex-combatants in Northern Nigeria (2019–2023), this study examines when, why, and how ethnicity becomes foregrounded within armed groups, overriding intended supra-identities. The findings reveal that unit leaders' pathways to leadership and their socialization into Boko Haram are primary determinants of ethnic foregrounding. Leaders promoted without full socialization are more likely to retain ethnic sentiments and exhibit bias toward co-ethnics, influencing reward, punishment, and military operations.

Resumen

Este artículo estudia el papel fundamental que juegan las redes sociales preexistentes en la determinación de la integración o la fragmentación organizativa de los grupos armados, con un enfoque particular en el África subsahariana. Las redes y las estructuras étnicas han influido históricamente sobre los conflictos de esta región, como, por ejemplo, las guerras civiles en Burundi y Nigeria. Aunque existen algunos grupos armados contemporáneos, especialmente los extremistas religiosos en Somalia, Nigeria y Malí, los cuales afirman trascender las identidades étnicas, mantener la cohesión en grupos étnicamente heterogéneos sigue representando un desafío. La socialización efectiva de los combatientes resulta esencial para garantizar la homogeneidad y el compromiso, ya que los individuos poseen múltiples identidades sociales y políticas superpuestas. El hecho de implementar métodos de socialización, tales como la educación ideológica, ayuda a unificar a los miembros y a mantener la coherencia organizacional, a pesar de sus diferentes orígenes. Sin embargo, estos esfuerzos, a menudo, tienen que enfrentarse a diferentes obstáculos, y, en estos casos, la etnia puede seguir siendo un factor dominante. Este estudio llevó a cabo entrevistas con excombatientes de Boko Haram en el norte de Nigeria entre 2019 y 2023. Esto nos permite analizar cuándo, por qué y cómo la etnicidad se vuelve prominente dentro de los grupos armados y sobrepasa las supraidentidades intencionales. Nuestras conclusiones revelan que las vías hacia el liderazgo de los líderes de unidad, así como su grado de socialización en Boko Haram, son determinantes principales del predominio étnico. Aquellos líderes que ascienden sin haber llevado a cabo una socialización completa tienen más probabilidades de conservar sentimientos étnicos y de mostrar sesgo hacia los miembros de su mismo grupo étnico. Esto, en consecuencia, influye en las recompensas, los castigos y las operaciones militares.

Résumé

Cet article s'intéresse au rôle critique des réseaux sociaux préexistants dans la détermination de l'intégration organisationnelle ou de la fragmentation des groupes armés, en se concentrant plus particulièrement sur l'Afrique subsaharienne. Historiquement, les réseaux et structures ethniques ont façonné les conflits dans cette région, à l'instar des guerres civiles

au Burundi ou au Nigeria. Bien que certains groupes armés contemporains, notamment les extrémistes religieux en Somalie, au Nigeria ou au Mali, affirment transcender les identités ethniques, le maintien de la cohésion dans des groupes aux ethnies hétérogènes reste un défi. Une socialisation efficace des combattants est déterminante pour garantir l'homogénéité et l'engagement, car les individus possèdent nombre d'identités sociales et politiques qui se chevauchent. La mise en œuvre de méthodes de socialisation, telles que l'éducation idéologique, contribue à unifier les membres et à maintenir la cohérence de l'organisation malgré la diversité des parcours. Néanmoins, ces efforts rencontrent souvent des obstacles, et l'ethnie peut rester un facteur dominant. Par le biais d'entretiens avec d'anciens combattants de Boko Haram dans le nord du Nigeria (2019–2023), cette étude examine quand, pourquoi et comment l'origine ethnique est placée au premier plan au sein des groupes armés, passant outre le désir de supra-identité. Les conclusions révèlent que la façon dont les chefs d'unité accèdent au pouvoir et leur socialisation dans Boko Haram constituent des déterminants essentiels de la mise de l'ethnie au premier plan. Les chefs promus sans être complètement socialisés ont plus de chances de conserver des sentiments ethniques et de présenter des biais à l'égard des membres de la même ethnie, ce qui aura une incidence sur les récompenses, les punitions et les opérations militaires.

Key words: socialization; fragmentation; ethnicity; conflict; extremism.

Palabras clave: Socialización; Fragmentación; Etnicidad; Conflicto; Extremismo.

Mots clés: Socialisation; Fragmentation; Ethnie; Conflit; Extrémisme.

Introduction

To what extent does ethnicity influence cohesion in insurgent organizations that are ethnically heterogeneous and ideologically committed to transcending ethnic identity? This question is closely tied to the organizational foundations of insurgent groups. As highlighted by Paul Staniland, the structure of pre-existing social networks upon which an armed group is built plays a crucial role in determining its organizational integration or fragmentation (Staniland 2012). This insight is particularly relevant in the sub-Saharan context, where societal networks, in particular ethnic networks and structures, have often shaped conflicts (Horrowitz 1985; Gurr 1993; Sambanis 2001; ; Ilorah 2009; Wimmer et al. 2010; Balcells et al. 2016, 167; Kasara 2017; Lewis 2017; Haysom 2018).

Historically, many conflicts in the region have been shaped by ethnic dynamics, as seen in the civil wars in Burundi and Nigeria. Today, however, some armed groups, particularly religious extremist organizations in Somalia, Nigeria, and Mali, position themselves as transcending ethnic identities. Despite these claims, the reality of sustaining cohesion and viability in ethnically heterogeneous groups remains challenging.

However, it is important to note that not all groups aim to transcend. As noted by Benstead and Van Lehman (2021) as well as Revkin and Wood (2021), some groups actively perpetuate ethnic differences. While their analysis focuses on women, whose experiences would naturally differ from those of active combatants, it is important to recognize that groups engage with ethnicity in varied ways, deploying it strategically depending on the specific needs and objectives of the organization.

Nevertheless, these dynamics underscore why armed groups must effectively socialize their combatants to build cohesion and commitment (; Hoover Green 2016; Checkel 2017). This process is particularly important because individuals carry multiple, overlapping social and political identities that can be emphasized differently depending on context (McCauley 2017). Through mechanisms such as ideological education, groups seek to unify members and maintain organizational coherence despite diverse backgrounds and identities. Socialization, in this sense, entails the comprehensive adoption of a group's ideology and identity, superseding previously held affiliations and belief systems. Checkel's notion of "Type II" socialization captures this deepest form, marked by a high level of internalization and commitment to collective goals that goes beyond mere loyalty or compliance (Checkel 2017). Such profound socialization is most characteristic of ideologically driven armed groups, in contrast to those that rely primarily on material incentives, such as financial rewards, to secure membership. Within armed groups, this distinction underscores how mechanisms of socialization vary according to the specific goals and ideologies that underpin the organization.

However, these efforts are not always successful and can encounter various barriers and challenges. Despite a group's governing ideology meant to transcend ethnicity, ethnicity sometimes remains a dominant factor. For example, several interviews with Boko Haram ex-combatants in Northern Nigeria between 2019 and 2023 revealed that within some combatant units, despite the group's ideology that transcended ethnicity, at times, ethnicity was foregrounded, influencing unit dynamics and cohesion.[1]

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to further probe this dynamic. In particular, the paper asks

[1] ∗All names and other identifying information are anonymized to protect interviewee confidentiality. This study was approved under LSE's Research Ethics Committee: REC ref. 000940b.

when, why, and how ethnicity becomes foregrounded within armed groups, overriding the intended supra-identity, despite efforts and claims of cross-ethnic inclusivity.

This paper demonstrates that the salience of ethnicity within Boko Haram is neither fixed nor universal; rather, it varies according to patterns of combatant socialization and the mechanisms through which leaders are elevated. Ethnic foregrounding becomes most visible in instances of incomplete or unsuccessful socialization, where the weight of ethnic identity, and its effects on cohesion, is filtered through unit leaders, who serve as the principal custodians of discipline and ideological orientation.

When leaders themselves are only weakly socialized into the group's supra-ethnic identity, they are more prone to tolerate, or even amplify, ethnic dynamics within their units. This tendency is closely linked to the pathways through which they have attained authority.

The route a leader takes to power, and the depth of their ideological internalization, are therefore critical determinants of whether unit cohesion is strengthened or eroded. Leaders promoted on the basis of religious knowledge and doctrinal reliability, typically following sustained ideological training, are more likely to embody the organization's supra-ethnic identity. They tend to mediate disputes through appeals to shared doctrine and to treat subordinates consistently across ethnic lines. By contrast, leaders elevated primarily for battlefield performance or ethnic affiliation often lack comparable ideological grounding. As a result, they are more likely to reproduce ethnic biases, enabling or even encouraging ethnic favoritism within their units and thereby undermining cohesion.

This bias is most evident in the management of rewards, punishments, and military operations, where ethnic ties provide an alternative and readily available source of solidarity and belonging when ideological socialization is weak. Taken together, these findings suggest that the salience of ethnicity in insurgent groups is not merely an imported cleavage, but an outcome shaped by the interaction of socialization processes and leadership trajectories.

By examining combatant unit dynamics, this paper contributes to the expanding literature on combat socialization and fragmentation, as well as the broader study of how armed groups maintain cohesion under strain. In particular, it offers a novel perspective on how different routes to leadership shape socialization processes within units, and how these processes in turn affect the balance between ethnic affiliation and group-wide identity.

The paper proceeds by first reviewing existing scholarship on rebel organizations, with particular attention to combatant socialization, networks, and mechanisms of cohesion. It then outlines the methodological approach and data sources. Next, the paper situates Boko Haram within Nigeria's ethnic landscape to highlight the salience of identity dynamics. Building on this context, the core analysis examines how leadership within units, and the routes through which individuals attain leadership, shape unit-level socialization, thereby influencing cohesion and amplifying (or mitigating) ethnic divisions. The conclusion draws these threads together, clarifying how leadership pathways and socialization processes jointly explain the salience of ethnicity in non-ethnic groups.

Pre-Existing Social Networks

Scholars of insurgent organizations emphasize how pre-existing social networks shape both their formation and evolution. Staniland's social-institutional theory highlights that the structure of these networks conditions whether armed groups integrate or fragment (Staniland 2012, 142). Schlichte similarly stresses that groups cannot invent new social orders but instead reproduce the concepts of power, allegiances, and socialization already present in the societies from which they emerge (Schlichte 2009, 154). In sub-Saharan Africa, ethnic kinship ties often provide the most salient of these pre-existing structures.

Indeed, ethnic affinity is regarded as a strong motivator for loyalty and is a readily identifiable trait (Oppenheim et al. 2015, 796). With regard to, though not limited to, armed groups, ethnicity can be a powerful lever for legitimacy and commitment, offering not only solidarity but also protection and access to resources. Participation may even be driven less by ideology than by the risks of non-participation within a co-ethnic community (Kocher and Kalyvas 2007). In this sense, rebellion can be a strategy to mitigate, rather than assume, risk.

Yet as groups expand beyond homogeneous origins, which holds logistical benefits (Lewis 2017), they confront the challenge of incorporating diverse constituencies, all of which can introduce fractures that test organizational coherence (Schlichte 2009, 154). Socialization and fragmentation scholarship thus helps explain how these inherited social structures both enable cohesion and generate internal tensions as groups evolve.

Strategies of Compliance: Socialization and Ideology

Research on combat socialization demonstrates that combatants vary in the depth of their commitment, ranging from instrumental compliance to deep internalization of group goals (Checkel 2017). Scholars identify several mechanisms driving these out-

comes: education, training, and indoctrination; coerced participation in violence that forges shared bonds; and ideology, which prescribes institutions and strategies for achieving the group's objectives and shapes patterns of behavior (Ugarriza and Craig 2012; Sanin and Wood 2014; Costalli and Ruggeri 2015; Ahmad 2016; Hoover Green 2016; Ahmodov and Hughes 2017; Cohen 2017; Wood and Thomas 2017). Such processes are critical for explaining how armed groups sustain cohesion beyond material incentives and short-term survival.

At the same time, organizational practices such as combatant promotion and leadership selection intersect with, rather than stand apart from, these socialization processes. Leaders shape the duration of conflicts (Tierney 2015; Cunningham & Sawyer 2019; Doctor 2021), as well as the behavior of combatants and the organization of group operations (Weinstein 2006; Lidow 2016; Acosta et al. 2023; Doctor et al. 2024). As Ortiz 2025, 1913) notes, rebel leaders who have undergone the non-state group training "can better socialize their fighters strategically using the methods they themselves have experienced in their training." Yet, despite these insights, the literature still leaves important questions about the nuances of how, and on what basis, leaders are promoted within insurgent organizations.

Moreover, socialization efforts frequently encounter obstacles. Vertical transmission of norms from commanders to subordinates (Matfess 2023) can be resisted, even by highly trained or seemingly well-integrated fighters (Manekin 2017). This highlights a broader tension in the literature: while socialization can foster cohesion, it may also fail, opening space for disobedience, resistance, or fragmentation.

Studies of fragmentation approach this issue from two perspectives (Woldemariam 2018). Structural explanations link the propensity for division to factors such as resource bases, social foundations, or founding ideologies (Weinstein 2006; Staniland 2012). Temporal explanations, by contrast, emphasize the role of leadership and shifting contexts in determining when groups splinter (Woldemariam 2018). Leadership experience appears especially significant: groups led by militarily trained leaders are more likely to remain cohesive, while those under political leaders often struggle with the demands of insurgency and are more prone to fragmentation (Doctor 2021).

Overall, this scholarship underscores both the promise and the limits of combat socialization. It can cultivate durable bonds and commitment, but its success depends on organizational structures, leadership, and broader social foundations. The paper therefore contributes to leadership scholarship by highlighting how and why leaders are promoted, but chiefly by demonstrating how these leadership dynamics shape socialization processes and, in turn, patterns of cohesion and fragmentation.

Understanding when and why these processes break down remains an important frontier for research, and it is this tension between cohesion and fragmentation that this paper seeks to address.

Methodology

In order to understand how ethnicity affected group cohesion and was foregrounded in some units and not others, the paper relies on a total of ninety-five interviews conducted by myself and my two research assistants, Nasir∗ and Musa∗, in Maiduguri and Bama between 2019 and 2023 across three fieldwork visits. The research began in an exploratory manner, with each visit allowing me to refine and adapt my approach in order to better capture the lived experiences of individuals from different ethnic groups within and across various units. The interviews involved a range of participants, including local Borno residents, NGO staff, local leaders, internally displaced people (IDPs), and ex-combatants. Nigeria and Boko Haram were chosen because the ethnic dynamics at play within Boko Haram reflect patterns observable across much of sub-Saharan Africa, making it a compelling context for examining how ethnicity interacts with insurgent organization and socialization.

Among these interviews, fifty-two were conducted with ex-combatants from various Boko Haram factions, aged 18–45, representing eight different ethnic backgrounds.[2] While the Kanuri made up the majority (approximately 65 percent), the interviews also included several ex-combatants from the Mafa, Margi, Waha, Shua Arab, Bolawa, Ngarmagu, and Fulani ethnic groups. Of those interviewed, six had held leadership positions, with only two of them not being Kanuri (one Mafa and one Ngarmagu).

To identify individuals for interviews, both Musa and Nasir leveraged their local networks in both Bama and Maiduguri. In Maiduguri, Nasir and I travelled to different IDP camps within the city, identifying willing participants with the assistance of local interlocutors, including an ex-Boko Haram commander. In Bama, Musa, who had previously worked on a resettlement project for ex-combatants, leveraged his networks within the town to access a wide sample of individuals whom he could contact and invite for interviews.

[2] Although Boko Haram has evolved significantly since its inception, the realities of conducting fieldwork with combatants make it nearly impossible to isolate a controlled sample comprised solely of ISWAP members. Many of the fighters interviewed had moved between Boko Haram, JAS, and ISWAP over time, blurring the lines between the two factions. This fluidity meant that the insights gathered reflected experiences and socialization processes across both groups.

The use of two study sites originated out of necessity due to ongoing government restrictions at the Hajj camp, which housed ex-combatants in Maiduguri, and the closure of IDP camps in Maiduguri in 2021. However, it also enabled me to access a broader sample of respondents from across Borno State, thereby reducing the potential effects of selection bias. Both Bama and Maiduguri served as valuable locations for this research, hosting diverse individuals from multiple ethnic groups across the state. This diversity allowed me to identify respondents with a wide array of experiences and backgrounds, representing various ethnic identities.

One-to-one semi-structured interviews served as the best possible medium to collect the type of data required, as the questioning style helped create a more relaxed atmosphere and helped interview respondents feel more comfortable. Additionally, all the interviews were conducted in private in Hausa or Kanuri, either in a makeshift home in IDP camps or a local office that was rented out, in order to ensure the anonymity of those interviewed.[3] The use of interviews was critical to uncovering the internal dynamics and lived experiences within these groups. Such qualitative engagement provides depth and nuance that would not be attainable through secondary data alone, offering unique insights into how socialization, leadership, and ethnic identity shape organizational cohesion and fragmentation.

Before commencing each interview, oral consent was obtained following an explanation of the purpose of the research. There was only one instance where an interview was terminated before starting, after the respondent seemed agitated. However, in all other interviews, after consent was given, each interview began with some simple questions that focused on the respondent's background. For example, we asked *where respondents were born, how many siblings they had, what ethnicity they were, and what ethnicity meant to them*. These questions were all probed to understand the individuals better and give them time to get used to the interview format before progressing to the more sensitive questions.

Following this, the interviews moved on to questions concerning the individuals' experiences with Boko Haram. In particular, for those individuals who had either lived with or fought for the group, questions were centered around the respondent's first interaction and subsequent entry into the group. After this line of inquiry, the interview questions focused on the respondent's experience living with the group and the people they lived with. In particular, the questions focused on the nature of the respondent's unit, including the demographics, the leadership, group operations, and disputes. These questions were developed and used in order to uncover any variation in experience as well as the driving reason for this.

Each interview lasted between 1 and 2 h and was recorded on a device and immediately uploaded to a secure online drive. While both Musa and Nasir translated the interviews they conducted for me, my project heavily relied on an interpretivist sensibility, considering that the role and effect of ethnicity are not predetermined but depend on the individual and circumstances. This meant I was interested in capturing the meaning conveyed by respondents, and I felt it was important not to rely solely on Musa and Nasir's translations and interpretations.

Given their own positionality and knowledge of the conflict, and how much I learned from each of them, I was committed to ensuring I also had some understanding of my respondents' words independent of the interpretations of Musa and Nasir. With this in mind, I felt it was important to seek out additional translations, and I was able to recruit Hausa and Kanuri speakers to assist in this pursuit. This served both as a form of quality control and to ensure I was not missing out on any information being given during the interviews. Since my third translator had not been involved in the interviewing and data collection in any form, and was only tasked with translating the audio files shared word for word, the translation felt as neutral, impartial, and independent as I could get.

Overall, this exercise proved very fruitful and validating, as, in addition to a great many commonalities concerning the core themes, I also encountered a few things that were translated differently by different people. For example, during the interviews, the question "what does peace mean to you?" was posed to try to better understand each respondent's positionality, as well as stagger the introduction of talking about violence. I provide a specific example of some of the divergences I encountered between translators below.

In an interview with a Mafa ex-combatant, one translator recorded his response as

> [Peace is] to have no problems with anybody. So that's why it's very good to live in peace and harmony with anybody. It is destined by God."

Alternatively, the other translator recorded the same respondent's answer as

> Peace is not bearing grudges against anyone and I know that whatever happens to me in life has already been destined by God.[4]

[3] While there are many different ethnic groups and ultimately many ethnic languages in Northern Nigeria, Hausa, and Kanuri are widely spoken throughout Borno, irrespective of a person's ethnic group. Additionally, because of the large number of Kanuri people in Boko Haram, many people who lived with the group learned Kanuri; therefore, speaking Kanuri or Hausa did not feel foreign.

[4] B1: Male, Mafa. Borno 2022.

Therefore, while both quotes capture very similar meanings, analyzing both together helped gain a richer and more precise understanding of what was shared during the interviews.

Nevertheless, throughout the project, Nasir and Musa were invaluable to this research. This was not only because they both had first-hand experience with Boko Haram's activity in Borno, having both lived through the height of the group's expansion. Their backgrounds also helped build rapport with interviewees. As one interviewee mentioned to Nasir during an interview: "*you know what happened in Borno, you were here.*" It was evident from the rapport each was able to build with interviewees that Nasir and Musa were much better positioned to build relationships that allowed respondents to talk comfortably and freely about their experiences. As LeeAnn Fujii comments in her reflections on relational interviewing, it is not always attainable to build good rapport with interviewees, despite textbook advice to this (Fujii 2018). The reality is that structural, positional, and identity-based factors can intervene in this endeavor despite the effort researchers may put into breaking down such barriers. This is particularly true in contexts such as mine, where insecurity and mistrust are rife.

Overall, by using an interpretivist approach, the goal was not "to achieve a singularly accurate objective snapshot of the world, but to develop an explanation of how people socially construct and understand the world in which they are embedded and the logics they use to navigate those worlds" (Fujii 2018, 74). As a result, while the interviews were aimed at understanding ethnicity, they also helped gain a deeper understanding of each respondent, and their relationships to and characterizations of their own life experiences.[5]

Overall, the utilization of the myriad tools employed, along with the invaluable contributions of research assistants and translators, helped construct and evaluate the papers' hypotheses.[6]

Ethnicity and Identity

Ethnic identity in Nigeria, like in most parts of sub-Saharan Africa, is the most visible and politically salient form of identity. As Reed and Mberu (2015) note: "In competitive and non-competitive settings, Nigerians are more likely to define themselves in terms of their ethnic affinities than any other identity" (Reed and Mberu 2015, 419). Additionally, religious identity is also very important to individuals, and often these two identity tropes are tightly intertwined. For example, almost all Hausa, Kanuri, and Fulani people are Muslim; as a result, Islamic identity is very much embedded within each group.

Regardless of any diversity based on ethnicity, within Islam, the notion of *Ummah* means that all followers are part of a unifying ideological community. However, even though membership of the *ummah* ostensibly replaced the tribal loyalty for Nigerian Muslims, it did not abolish it. Rather, it only sought to change the hierarchy of an individual's identities in society (Ataman 2003).

However, within the subcontinent of sub-Saharan Africa, despite the significance and breadth of Islam, ethnic identity is still an almost unshakable phenomenon, and an individual's ethnic identity often carries a significant amount of sentimentality that manifests as an identity that connects them to their wider community—like an extended family.

In Borno itself, there is considerable heterogeneity, with the dominant ethnic group, the Kanuri, residing in Abadam, Mobbar, Gubio, Guzamala, Kukawa, Nganzai, Monguno, Marte, Ngala, Kaka-Balga, Dikwa, Bama, Konduga, Mafa, Kaga, Magumeri, Damboa, and Maiduguri LGAs. The Shuwa ethnic group is present in Mafa, Jere, Marte, Monguno, Dikwa, Ngala, Kala-Balge, Bama, and Koguda LGAs. Additionally, there are other ethnic groups such as the Hausas in Askira and Maiduguri LGAs, Babur-Bura in Biu, Hawul, Kwaya-Kusar, Bayo, and Shani LGAs, Mandara in Gwoza LGA, and Chibok in Chibok LGA (CIRDDOC 2016).

Boko Haram

Boko Haram is an Islamic extremist group that originated in north-eastern Nigeria. The group was founded by Mohammed Yusuf in 2002 and was led by Abubakar Shekau after Yusuf's death in 2009 until Shekau's death in 2021.

Initially starting as a mass religious movement that demanded the incorporation of Sharia Law in Borno, the group later transitioned to an armed struggle (Thurston 2017) aimed at overthrowing Nigeria's secular government and establishing an Islamic state .

Since its shift into violence, the group has continuously evolved, its leadership has changed, and the group split in 2016 into two main competing groups, namely JAS and the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP).[7]

[5] As with all research of this kind, caution is warranted when interpreting self-reported accounts of decision-making. To mitigate the risk of biased interpretations, I triangulated the accounts of interviewees, both leaders and rank-and-file combatants, to identify patterns. While this does not eliminate bias, it helps reveal discrepancies between official narratives, individual self-presentation, and the diverse influences shaping decision-making.

[6] Further methodological details regarding the ethical approach are provided in Online Appendix A.

[7] Splits within Boko Haram stemmed from disputes over Shekau's extreme violence against Muslims, his weak theological

Since 2009, more than 35,000 people have been killed by the group, earning it the label of one of the deadliest terrorist groups in the world (Afzal 2020). Their tactics include killings, suicide bombings, abductions, torture, rape, forced marriages, and the recruitment of child soldiers, as well as attacks directed against government infrastructure, traditional and religious leaders, and the civilian population. Additionally, there are at least 1.8 million internally displaced persons in the north-eastern states of Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe, and health services and education have been severely disrupted. The group has also carried out attacks in neighboring countries, resulting in the killing and displacement of civilians in Cameroon, Chad, and Niger (GCR2P 2023).

As a result of an aggressive counteroffensive by the Nigerian government and continued pressure from the regional response teams provided by the Multinational Joint Task Force, the group has suffered severe weakening. Furthermore, after the death of Shekau, the former leader of JAS following infighting between the two factions, a significant number of fighters have left the group. However, while JAS is believed to have been defeated, ISWAP is still known to be active within the region.

While the precise ethnic composition of Boko Haram is unknown, it is widely acknowledged that the Kanuri ethnic group constituted the largest demographic within the organization, reflecting the demographics of Borno. Additionally, Boko Haram included members from various other ethnic groups. Despite the significant role of religion, ethnicity remained a notable factor and held considerable sentiment for recruits both during recruitment and while in the group.

In particular, when asked about their feelings toward their identity, respondents, regardless of their ethnic group, frequently emphasized its significance, with one respondent stating that "*no one denies their identity*."[8] Similarly, as proclaimed by one Shua respondent:

> I am Shua by tribe. I am feeling like the most important person on earth and there is no other language on earth that is better than me.[9]

Therefore, it was not surprising that following recruitment, at times, insurgents from the same ethnic background often preferred to spend time together, rather than with those from other ethnic backgrounds. This loyalty prevailed for many Boko Haram members in spite of their group's fairly diverse ethnic composition. Alex, a combatant from Gwoza Local Government, reinforced this point, noting that:

> Sometimes those insurgents that are from the same ethnic group prefer to hang out together.[10]

However, this desire did not automatically lead to fragmentation and factionalization within units and, as will be explored in the following section, Boko Haram was, in most instances, able to effectively ensure and protect cohesion and a shared sense of buy-in, although there were instances where this was not successful.

The Utility and Significance of Ethnicity and the Leadership Effect

As previously noted, while Boko Haram did attract fighters from various ethnic backgrounds, Kanuri members constituted the majority of fighters in most units. Moreover, historically, the group's leadership has been predominantly composed of Kanuri members. This ultimately made the group more appealing to their co-ethnics compared to other ethnic groups. Such a dynamic constituted a far more complex sociological process, created by the existing dynamics of the border space (Mbowou 2017). Ethnicity provides an effective recruitment tool because it offers a pre-existing community through which ideology can be spread, drawing on shared language, cultural practices, and identity markers that facilitate trust and access.

For example, as was highlighted by one Kanuri ex-commander:

> The Kanuri… are the bedrock. Yeah, they are the bedrock…. Even started the whole team. So the reason why the Kanuri are the majority, because you know even the founder of the sect is Kanuri, that is Mohammed Yussuf.
>
> … any place you go, if you preach to them in their own, you know tribe, they will find it easier for them to join. So that's why they are the majority… because our fellow Kanuri are doing it, so we thought it is a good thing.[11]

Moreover, despite the group's ideology rejecting ethnic affinity or superiority, the Kanuri people were often seen as the most respected. This was because, as was explained by a number of respondents, "*all the leaders are Kanuri*," and because they "*have the largest population of members*."[12]

justification for leadership, and personal rivalries such as Mamman Nur's leadership ambitions. While this important dynamic lies beyond the scope of this paper, which focuses on ethnicity, further detail would be needed to do it justice, though it does not affect the main argument here.

[8] B20: Male, Kanuri. Borno 2022

[9] B3: Male, Kanuri. Borno 2022

[10] Alex: Male, Waha. Borno 2019

[11] M4: Male, Kanuri. Borno 2022

[12] B7: Male, Kanuri. Borno 2022, B15: Male, Kanuri. Borno 2022

When asked how they felt about being the majority or about being in the same ethnic group as the leadership, almost all Kanuri respondents expressed feelings of varying degrees of pride and happiness. For example, one respondent noted that he found "*it was heart-warming knowing that my tribe's men were in the forefront of God's work; so I was very happy*."[13]

The opposite sentiment was, therefore, felt at times for minority ethnic group's identity within a given unit. For example, as one respondent noted when asked about the least respected people in the group, "*I would say Wula. . . Because they are minority tribes in Borno*."[14]

One benefit of the positionality held by the Kanuri was the ability to dictate the group's norms. This ability, known as bargaining power, is contingent on, among other things, control over the resources (material or immaterial), for instance, if holding all of the prominent leadership positions.

As Bunce and McElreath note, individuals from an out-group (e.g. non-Kanuri) may adopt another group's norms as exposure to those norms, identification with the out-group, and access to resources controlled by it all shape norm adoption processes (Bunce and McElreath 2017). This phenomenon was similarly seen within Boko Haram. For example, many non-Kanuri members interviewed learnt to speak Kanuri while in the *bush* to better assimilate with the wider community. For instance, one respondent noted:

> I was in the midst of two Kanuri and all of a sudden, they started speaking Kanuri. Although Hausa is the general language here but most times when you have two or more Kanuri, they sometimes switch to Kanuri even though there are other people that don't understand Kanuri. This has prompted me to learn the Kanuri language.[15]

However, the majority of the leadership did not encourage any sense of superiority based on ethnicity. Instead, they focused on fostering a unified environment and a shared sense of community and commitment. And in most instances, the groups' unifying governing ideology was promoted above any ethnic sentiments. As was explained by a Kanuri ex-combatant, "*you know the leader is Kanuri, so if everyone is not treated fairly, other tribes might not support the cause.*"[16]As a result, many non-Kanuri "*didn't feel anything because our religion was what brought us together and not our tribes*."[17]

To achieve this shared sense of buy-in, as discussed in the following sections, Boko Haram leadership extensively focused on practices aimed at the complete socialization and indoctrination of combatants. It was only when these efforts were unsuccessful that ethnicity was foregrounded, subsequently influencing group cohesion.

Combatant Socialization and the Role of Leadership in Boko Haram

Combatant socialization is a critical component of an insurgent group's success, as it enables combatants to operate as a unified body and carry out large-scale violence often against non-combatant communities. To achieve this, insurgent groups use a variety of institutions to socialize new recruits into the group's governing ethos and ideology (Hoover Green 2017). These institutions are part of a broader repertoire of political (re)education, which is designed to create a cohesive social community with shared expectations about what is right (Manekin 2017). These processes, when effective, deeply shape the behavior exhibited by the group and their ability to work effectively together toward the same goal.

For Boko Haram, the two key institutions essential during combat socialization are ideological education and military training. Both are designed to strip away pre-existing values, commitments, norms, and identities, replacing them with the group's single cohesive governing ideology and identity. Ideological education, in particular, is a key mechanism in the organization used to instill loyalty and unity.

As discussed earlier, all members of Boko Haram interviewed, regardless of their ethnicity, hold their ethnic identity in high regard. This is because it often carries a significant amount of sentimentality, connecting the individual to their wider community, similar to a relationship with extended family. Co-ethnics often invoke shared common traits, including language, to help cement these connections. For example, many respondents noted that while they did not look down on other tribes, they felt happy and at peace whenever they met people from their own tribe.[18]

However, the desire to interact with one's co-ethnics does not automatically result in group disputes or conflicts, and associating more with co-ethnics does not necessarily equate to feelings of superiority or exclusion. Instead, Deng argues that the concept of unity within diverse environments derives from the assumption that a successful group or nation is one that is able to pool its diverse social intermixture together in a way that builds on the richness of different members' backgrounds rather than alienating any single group (Deng 1997). Moreover, in

[13] B15: Male, Kanuri. Borno 2022
[14] B9: Male, Kanuri. Borno 2022
[15] Alex: Male, Borno 2019
[16] B2: Male, Kanuri. Borno 2022
[17] B22: Male, Ngarmagu. Borno 2022
[18] B27: Male, Mafa. Borno 2022

general, for Boko Haram's top leadership, ethnicity held no ideological significance, and everyone who accepted the group's ideology was accepted. One respondent shared of the highest echelons of the Boko Haram leadership that:

> Culture means nothing to them. Everyone, irrespective of tribe, will be accepted into the group. They are only bothered about religion.[19]

In order to firmly embed this sentiment, Boko Haram's leadership focused on entrenching the group's supra-identity, centered around their governing ideology, and was intended to supersede all other loyalties. They sought to achieve this through a rigorous and intensive commitment to ideological education. In particular, the organization's leaders sought to embed Boko Haram's core values, namely, drawn from Wahabism, through the continuous preaching of the group's central unifying ideas during religious sermons and schooling.

From the moment individuals were introduced to the group, whether voluntarily or coercively, the group's unifying dogma was taught to recruits, while those who were not members of Boko Haram were perpetually otherized. This was done through the strict enforcement of daily prayers and frequent sermons from emirs, as well as during allocated times for individuals to study the Quran.[20] This practice consumed a significant amount of the recruits' days and continued throughout their time with the group, and many respondents expressed positive sentiments toward collective ideological education, as highlighted by one respondent who stated that he loved reading every day when asked what they liked about being in the bush.[21] Nevertheless, this practice was very successful in instilling the group's doctrine, and multiple respondents shared that they believed what they were doing was right and that they believed they were doing the "*works of God*." [22]

In addition to ideological education, military training also served as a critical institution used by the group through which the organization's values were communicated and embedded amongst members. However, ideological education never stopped. Running alongside the group's ideological education, military education similarly emphasized principles of religious and political loyalty. Known as *Tadrip*, the military training taught recruits the essential skills needed for warfare, and the ideological education, which ran in tandem, instilled the reason why it was needed.[23] For example, one respondent shared:

> We had military training, but we studied the faith as well.[24]

Similarly, another noted:

> [I would spend the day at] religious learning school, where [the recruits would] learn about the faith. After that, we learnt the skills of shooting guns, and then they started taking us out for operations."[25]

These twin practices of ideological education and military training provided recruits with an identity that ensured their obedience and made them ready to fight, kill, or die in pursuit of the group's goals.[26]

Moreover, while these sentiments were effective in turning Boko Haram against non-members of the group, in most instances, they also played a powerful role in creating an environment where ethnic heterogeneity did not lead to fragmentation despite the leadership being mostly saturated with one ethnic group or even at times of stress, for example, when resources were low. This was also true for those who had never interacted or co-habited with non-co-ethnics. When asked how he felt interacting with people from other ethnic groups, one respondent who had rarely previously interacted with non-co-ethnics expanded on this theme:

> Since I shared and propagated the same ideology, I felt comfortable.[27]

It was also through the processes of religious and military education that specific individuals were identified as potential leaders by the existing Boko Haram hierarchy. In particular, as the following section discusses, individuals who distinguished themselves through their religious intelligence and/or military accomplishments were subsequently appointed to new positions after being recognized for their potential leadership qualities.

At the time this research was conducted, at the top of the Boko Haram hierarchy was the Imam, Abubakar Shekau, who led the group from 2009 to 2021.[28] Below him sat the Emir Jesh and the Emir Pair who control weapons and resources and approve requests of the Ka'id who are responsible for organizing and coordinating war. Under the Ka'id, who are war commanders, are normally four Mumzir who assist them. Under the Mumzir are the Nakip, who are platoon commanders. Finally, under them are the local unit Emirs, who are subcommanders responsible for collecting resources and looking after civilians.[29] Camps varied significantly

[19] B9: Male, Kanuri. Borno 2022
[20] M1: Male, Mafa. Borno 2022
[21] B35: Male, Shua Arab. Borno 2022
[22] B10: Male, Kanuri. Borno 2022
[23] M4: Male, Kanuri. Borno 2022
[24] B24: Male, Kanuri. Borno 2022
[25] B5: Male, Kanuri. Borno 2022
[26] B8: Male
[27] B2: Male, Kanuri. Borno 2022
[28] Boko Haram and JAS
[29] M10: Male, Kanuri. Borno, 2023

within the Sambisa, ranging from a few hundred to thousands, and the larger the number, the more senior leaders present within the camp with multiple commanders below them that had control of their own men.

In most instances, the selection of a person for a leadership position was done by the immediate superiors in the hierarchy. For example, the Ka'id would select the Mumzir, and the Mumzir would appoint the Nakip—often from the community in question—as highlighted by one combatant who explained that most of the time, the leader selected was from "*within us*."[30]

After the death of a former leader, which often occurred in battle or as a result of a drone strike, the leadership would select a successor based on their demonstration of a specific quality that qualified them for the position.[31] The selection process typically followed three paths. In particular, leaders were selected on the basis of their religious knowledge and the degree to which they excelled in demonstrating loyalty and commitment to Boko Haram's overarching mission. The second pathway through which leaders were selected was based on military achievements, while the final pathway involved ethnic patronage. Rather, ethnic affinity typically served as a supplementary pathway rather than a primary one—though is nevertheless worth noting. Of all three pathways, the first and second are integral for the group's survival, while the third often naturally occurs unless actively suppressed.

Path One—Ideological Education

If an individual is recognized for having a high aptitude and a conviction in the group's ideology—described by one respondent as "*knowing the roots*"—they are likely to be quickly promoted once a leadership position becomes available.[32] More specifically, if an individual distinguishes themselves from others because of their knowledge of the group doctrine, then the leadership will often take notice and promote them to a leadership role. An individual's selection can also be accelerated if they have shown other attributes, such as positive relationships with others and an ability to communicate the group's message, ethos, and ideology to peers.[33] This is because if they have shown an aptitude for communicating the group's ideology, it will help them not only ensure stability within the group, as will be discussed in the following section, but also effectively recruit others to join the group.

For example, as was noted by one Ngarmagu ex-combatant:

> They are looking at your braveness, secondly your intelligence. How you understand the holy book and they look critically with your relationship with people. How you can communicate their ideology with the people. [34]

Similarly, two Kanuri ex-combatants explained:

> There are different leadership positions; Ka'id, Nakip and Emir. If you are influential and you are knowledgeable about the religion and you are brave, they will make you a leader.[35]

> The leadership are within us….the one that is very intelligent.[36]

Overall, this pathway to leadership is heavily influenced by the individual's knowledge and conviction in the group's ideology. Individuals who possess these qualities are recognized and sought out as they are often skilled at communicating the group's beliefs and values. This ability not only helps sustain the group but also plays a critical role in its growth.

Path Two—Military Skill

Secondly, an individual can also be selected for a leadership position based on their military knowledge and accomplishments. For example, as noted earlier, an individual may be promoted if they have demonstrated bravery and a willingness to never withdraw during battle.[37] Moreover, if an individual has a lot of military knowledge, including knowledge of the terrain, or has successfully carried out multiple attacks, they may be approached and promoted to fill a new leadership role. For instance, one ex-Nakip shared that he was promoted because he was an excellent driver and knew the route to all the small villages.[38] As aforementioned, this often happens after the death of the previous leader. If an individual is recognized for their abilities, they are likely to be chosen to fill the position.[39]

Another way military accomplishments could lead to promotion was if an individual had participated in multiple attacks and brought back resources, including captives, to the camp. During our conversation, a Ngarmagu ex-combatant shared how individuals in his unit were promoted based on this criterion. In particular, he noted:

> If you are going to take part in many operations, and if you come back, they are going to promote

[30] M4: Male, Kanuri. Borno 2022
[31] M10: Male, Kanuri. Borno 2023
[32] Ibid
[33] M9: Male, Gladba. Borno 2023
[34] B50: Male, Ngarmagu. Borno 2023
[35] B9: Male, Kanuri. Borno 2022
[36] M4: Male, Kanuri. Borno 2022
[37] M8: Male, Kanuri. Borno 2023
[38] M10: Male, Kanuri. Borno 2023
[39] B18: Male, Kanuri. Borno 2022

> you from the initial post that you are. So after carrying out so much of an attack and bringing people to the bush, it depends on the number of people you have under you[40]

Another shared that:

> There was a time that we went to war with my commander in Movi** and unfortunately, he got killed. So after he gets killed they are searching for someone that will be a commander, then they say I am the best person to be the commander…. They say I should be the commander. That was how I became a commander.[41]

Therefore, given the heavy dependence on military expertise and the frequency of Boko Haram's military operations, individuals who were seen as good soldiers were often recognized and sought after. When a new role became available, these individuals were often selected and promoted. However, *leaders* promoted through this channel did not necessarily exhibit the same internalization to the group's shared identity above their own ethnic identity.

Path Three—Ethnicity

The role of ethnicity in leadership promotion is more complex. Ethnicity can influence selection in two distinct ways:

- **Ethnic affinity**—leaders may prefer to promote co-ethnics, particularly from the dominant ethnic group, for example, Kanuri, even when others are equally or more qualified.[42]
- **Strategic ethnic selection**—leaders may promote individuals from particular ethnic groups in order to enhance outreach and governance within that community.

However, ethnicity does not function as an entirely independent or substitutive pathway to leadership. Instead, it operates in tandem with the other two routes, ideological education and military accomplishment, by amplifying the prospects of individuals who already demonstrate these core qualifications. These routes remained indispensable to the group's internal logic and operational requirements, and ethnicity rarely, if ever, completely supplanted them. Although ethnicity can provide candidates with an advantage, at times even an unfair one, and is perceived by some as benefiting individuals despite shortcomings when compared to non-co-ethnic competitors, this influence does not diminish the centrality of ideological and military credentials. Rather, ethnicity's role lies in how it can reinforce or elevate these other forms of qualification. Nevertheless, its impact is significant, as it can ultimately tip the balance in leadership selection.

Within Boko Haram, an individual may receive preferential treatment for leadership selection due to existing leaders' affinity toward their co-ethnic, most notably within the dominant ethnic group—Kanuri.[43] Consequently, Kanuri members may receive preferential treatment over non-Kanuri members, even if they possess similar skills and aptitudes.

If multiple individuals have shown military skill, the current leadership's co-ethnic may select a co-ethnic candidate over a non-co-ethnic one. This is because, despite outwardly professing that ethnicity is not considered when selecting a leader, some respondents noted that it did play a role under certain conditions.

For example, Abdul* and another Kanuri ex-combatant both shared this sentiment during our conversation:

> … they used to assess and analyse which of the tribes that are trustworthy. Most of time they tend to choose from the Kanuri, that is the number one choice. The second choice is the Hausa, because the rest of the tribe, like the Ngarmagu they used to have a problem with them…. they are not trustworthy[44]

> You know there are different tribes in Boko Haram; yes, usually a Kanuri leader will favour his fellow Kanuri even if the Ngarmagu are much more qualified for the leadership position[45]

Similarly, a Ngarmagu ex-combatant shared that:

> There are so many different camps. If you are going to be promoted as a leader, if there is like 100 or 50 or 200 people, they can decide to put you as a leader. But it is more than 1000 people, like 2000 people, they must tell the commander general, that is Shekau, and he must know you and where you come from and will make some little investigation on you and the people you stayed with and your community before they give you the leadership. And even though they do this investigation you must be Kanuri before you get any leadership to have even interacted with the senior leadership in the bush.[46]

[40] B28: Male, Ngarmagu. Borno 2022
[41] Ibid
[42] Although the Kanuri were often the most dominant ethnic group in Boko Haram, this was not always the case. In particular, if another ethnic group had more members and held leadership positions within a particular unit, that group would be the most dominant.
[43] This notion of ethnic affinity is similar to what Cook-Martin and Viladrich discuss in their work on migration, where they highlight the privilege of migration or citizenship status based on perceived common origins (Cook-Martin and Viladrich 2009).
[44] M8: Male Kanuri. Borno 2022
[45] B13: Male, Kanuri. Borno 2022
[46] B50: Male, Ngarmagu. Borno 2023

This practice was confirmed by Abdul∗ during our interview. He shared that certain ethnic groups, particularly Kanuri and Hausa, are seen as trustworthy and are chosen over others for leadership positions. Abdul∗ acknowledged that he was selected for his position because he was Kanuri:

> I am among the big big people…. And when I joined it didn't even reach 1 year and they started to promote me because I am Kanuri.[47]

Therefore, ethnicity alone is rarely the sole reason for an individual's selection. Rather, it can serve as an extra advantage to further distinguish an individual. As explained by another ex-combatant:

> If you are influential and you are knowledgeable about the Koran, you are brave with good fighting skills. And sometimes one may be appointed leader by tribalism.[48]

In the second channel, leaders from particular ethnic groups may be selected to strengthen the organization's outreach and legitimacy within their communities. This highlights the additional advantage that ethnicity can confer in distinguishing an individual for leadership.[49] While other attributes such as religious knowledge or military skill remain relevant, this pathway is nonetheless shaped decisively by ethnic background, with leadership often weighing an individual's ethnicity as a key factor in their selection.

Overall, it is challenging to classify these pathways into fixed categories, since two of the attributes that influence them—ideological education and military achievement—are often intertwined. This makes it difficult to strictly delineate these pathways. However, as will be discussed in the following sections, it is the absence or minimal presence of religious knowledge/ideological education in leadership, and the subsequent failure to internalize the group's supra-identity that allows for ethnicity to become foregrounded. And when this occurs within the leadership, it can have the biggest effect on group cohesion and shape the salience of ethnic identity within the unit as a whole.

Leadership Dynamics and Sub-Unit Variation in Boko Haram

Despite Boko Haram's efforts, it is not uncommon for recruits to resist socialization efforts. This resistance is unsurprising, given that recruits are not blank slates and often come with pre-existing beliefs and commitments that may conflict with the group's ideology and identity. Moreover, many recruits may have joined the group out of fear for their own safety, rather than a genuine desire to be part of the group. As one respondent explained:

> We were separated, I was one of those who chose to move to the side of those who would join because I saw their faces; I knew what they may likely do, so those who indicated not to join were instantly killed. And that was how we followed them to the bush.[50]

Those recruited through threat and fear may not be predisposed to internalize the group's ideology or identity, but rather to respond to particular incentive structures, such as the fear of being killed if they do not comply with the group's demands. This type of resistance to socialization efforts can pose significant challenges for extremist groups like Boko Haram, as it undermines their ability to create a cohesive and committed membership base.

Resistance to socialization efforts is not limited to fear-based motivations. In some cases, attempts to internalize the group's ideology and identity were met with significant resistance, as recruits viewed the group's identity, beliefs, and practices as incompatible with their own, or at least not strong enough to supersede them. Alex,∗ an ex-combatant from Borno, emphasized: "*people are different, and everyone is created differently by God*."[51]

Nevertheless, it is the role of the leadership to continue to promote and enforce the group's ideology and identity among those under their control to ensure cohesion and the successful internalization of the group's supra-identity. For example, if there are any disagreements or disputes, including along ethnic lines, it is the unit leader who is tasked with settling these, often by promoting the group's governing ideology.[52]

This is because Boko Haram had a very fragmented structure (Curiel et al. 2020). After entering many of the towns, just as the Islamic State had done, Boko Haram appointed its own emirs and began to institute its own governance agenda enforced by hudud punishments (Warner et al. 2021).[53] As previously noted, "*some have up to ten thousand in their camp, some five thousand and some five hundred*," even within the Sambisa Forest.[54] Therefore, unit leaders had a lot of power, including over resources.

[47] M8: Male, Kanuri. Borno 2023
[48] B13: Male, Kanuri. Borno 2022
[49] B21: Male, Ngarmagu. Borno 2022
[50] M3: Male, Boyeye. Borno 2022
[51] Alex: Male, Waha. Borno 2019
[52] As previously noted, ethnic ties provide an alternative and readily available source of solidarity and belonging when ideological socialization is weak.
[53] **udūd punishments** (Arabic: حدود, "limits" or "boundaries") are a category of penalties in Islamic law prescribed for certain offenses considered violations of God's rights. They are traditionally viewed as fixed punishments whose conditions must be strictly met before enforcement.
[54] M1: Male, Kanuri. Borno 2022

Moreover, many recruits had little contact with the group's main leaders. In fact, throughout all the interviews conducted, most respondents noted that they had never met or seen Shekau in person. This was confirmed by one Shua Arab ex-combatant who explained that:

> These leaders, it is hard to even see them. That is the leaders from the Shekau camp.[55]

This lack of direct contact with the group's senior leadership underscores the pivotal role of unit leaders in maintaining cohesion and reinforcing the group's ideology and collective identity among recruits. These leaders occupied central and multifaceted positions within the fragmented organization, balancing authority, discipline, logistics, and personal relationships with their fighters. Serving as the primary link between rank-and-file members and the senior command, they ensured that the group's ideology, operational directives, and behavioral codes were consistently communicated and strictly enforced, a dynamic also highlighted by Themnér (2015) in his analysis of mid-level commanders.

Unit leaders were disciplinarians, upholding strict behavioral standards and imposing severe punishments for infractions, such as smoking or drug use, violations that could result in eighty to ninety lashes with a cane.[56] This strict discipline reinforced order and obedience, creating an environment where hierarchy and loyalty were non-negotiable.[57] As one fighter explained of his commander:

> He is a peaceful person, but he is always ready to punish offenders; if he catches you smoking, the punishment for that is 80 strokes of cane. Anyone caught in drug abuse (tramadol), will receive 90 strokes of cane. [58]

Beyond discipline, leaders exercised significant logistical and operational control. They planned and organized raids, assigned men to missions, and ensured fighters were adequately provisioned, often providing cash payments (ranging from ₦50,000 to ₦100,000) and food supplies before operations.[59] Upon return, they managed the distribution of resources, reinforcing loyalty and a sense of reciprocity within their units.

Leaders also assumed paternal roles, fostering trust and loyalty by demonstrating care for their men. Many combatants described their commanders as figures who "catered for us," tending to the wounded, ensuring medical care for the sick, and, in the event of death, taking on the responsibility of supporting the deceased fighter's family.[60] As one former member recalled:

> "He gathers the men and takes them out on operations, and if any is injured, he makes sure they are well taken care of. If any of the men dies, he takes on the responsibility of his family. This is why we adore him; and for sick men, he personally takes care of the person and makes sure he is treated." [61]

In addition to their internal responsibilities, leaders held absolute authority in captured areas, making key decisions about governance and control. Some commanders allowed local populations to continue their daily activities, fostering a sense of normalcy, while others imposed strict shutdowns, asserting total dominance over the towns and their resources.[62]

Overall, the decentralized structure of Boko Haram underscores the importance of effective unit leadership in promoting the group's ideology and identity and maintaining cohesion among its members. For example, one respondent noted that: "*leaders are responsible for upholding the law and order*."[63]

This combination of discipline, operational oversight, and paternal care positioned unit leaders as both authority figures and mediators within their camps. By managing the daily rhythms of camp life, from enforcing behavioral codes to ensuring fair distribution of resources, they cultivated a sense of order and loyalty that extended beyond the battlefield. This dynamic also reinforced the perception of unit leaders as the immediate embodiment of the group's authority, making them the first point of recourse for resolving tensions and disputes within the ranks.

As a result, as noted, when disputes happened, conflicting members often brought the issues to the unit leader to settle, and it was not uncommon for ethnic group communities to argue, for example, over access to resources such as arable farmland. This conflict was primarily observed among ethnically distinct groups with a history of discord, often rooted in perceptions of superiority by one group over the other.

However, when this happened, it was the role of the leadership to settle the dispute and pacify angry members by promoting the group's ideology that emphasized the members' shared identity and the reason why they need to work together.

For example, as was highlighted by one ex-combatant:

[55] B3.5
[56] B10
[57] M6
[58] B10
[59] B10
[60] B25
[61] B5
[62] B2
[63] M1: Male, Kanuri. Borno 2022

> If we do an argument, we will call the leaders and they will resolve it…. I have never seen them maltreat anyone. And the reason is they want us to come closer to them to feel as if, yes, the ideology and the religion is real.[64]

Similarly, during his interview, a Ngarmagu respondent explained that there were often arguments between the Ngarmagu and Kanuri within his unit—because historically, as the Kanuri traditionally held a sense of superiority over the Ngarargu. However, when these disputes arose, they would bring them to the leader, who would use the group's ideology to pacify any disagreements by preaching the group's unifying doctrine and shared identity. Specifically, he shared:

> What usually brings argument between tribes mostly when the Ngarmagu people are discussing that we are the strongest, we understand the war better than anybody, … Then the Kanuri people will start accusing us and saying, "when did you even convert to Islam" "what do you know about Islam" ' it is just recently that you have accepted the religion'. This is how we get to start an argument that even leads to fights…
>
> …How we resolve it is that at times, we talk to our leader and then the leaders will judge us and tell us what to do and what not to do, and we should stop discriminating and calling names. [65]

Therefore, considering the potential limitations of socialization and the noted tendency for combatants to disagree along ethnic lines resulting in its foregrounding, it can be challenging to ensure cohesion without effective leadership. This, in turn, restricts the group's ability to achieve its objectives. Therefore, it is the role of the leadership to try and mitigate any potential for conflict and fractionalization. However, if an appointed camp leader has not fully himself been sufficiently socialized and internalized the group's supra-identity, as will be discussed in the following section, they not only have limited capacity to deal with divisions but also have the power to propagate division, particularly concerning ethnicity.

The Salience of Ethnicity as a Function of Leadership Trajectory

While the three leadership trajectories identified in the previous section are often intertwined, ideological education—and subsequent emphasis on religious intelligence, as a reason for promotion, most profoundly influences the salience of ethnicity within a unit.

More specifically, if ideological education and knowledge are not given prominence, it is less likely that an individual has sufficiently internalized the group's ideology the group's new supra-ethnic Jihadi identity above all else.

Alternatively, if religious intelligence is emphasized in an individual's promotion trajectory, particularly when they are promoted based on their religious intelligence, they are more likely to embody the group's overarching cross-ethnic ideology and promote it within their given unit. This phenomenon, akin to Checkel's (2017)"Type II socialization," indicates a deeper level of commitment.

Secondly, as highlighted in the previous section, unit leaders have a great deal of power and influence over sub-unit culture and can resultingly have a significant impact on group behavior and cohesion. Moreover, often those under their control would not complain if they had any issues out of respect or fear. As noted by one Kanuri ex-Nakip:

> We cannot go and complain to the higher authority as it is a sign of disrespect to say you are going to complain, so it is hardly that you see someone punished for all these things, but it used to happen.[66]

Nevertheless, if the leaders are fully socialized into Boko Haram, they are more likely to promote the group's values and norms to mitigate the chance of division, limiting the salience of ethnicity within the unit. This dynamic was highlighted by one Ngarmagu ex-combatant who shared how such a leader would

> ….want to draw your attention closer to them, and they want you to believe in the ideology and they want more people to be their followers. And by doing that they create peace within the people that are staying in the bush".[67]

This perspective was shared by several respondents who after stating that leaders were chosen because of intelligence also spoke of their fairness, as well as the absence of ethnicity as a determining factor within the unit. For example, during our conversation, a 35-year-old Kanuri ex-combatant explained that leadership positions were given based on religious intelligence, which was central to the group's overarching identity. Additionally, he also shared how it was because of his leader's religious knowledge and conviction that he trusted him, as well as how he treated everyone equally:

> Int: Who was your leader then? *He is from Mafa.*
>
> Int: Did you trust him? *Yes.*

[64] B22: Male, Ngarmagu. Borno 2022
[65] B49: Male, Ngarmagu. Borno 2023
[66] M10: Male, Kanuri. Borno 2023
[67] B3.1: Ngarmagu. Borno 2023

Int: Why did you all trust him?

Because he was our religious leader, and he was carrying out Allah's bidding before he was killed…. He made sure everyone gets what they deserve.

Int: How does one become a leader in the group?

There are different leadership positions; Ka'id, Nakip and Emir. If you are influential and you are knowledgeable about the religion and you are brave, they will make you a leader.

Culture means nothing to them; everyone, irrespective of tribe, will be accepted into the group. They are only bothered about religion. Why? *Because religion is the instrument used to recruit people into the group and not their tribe.*

Similarly, one Ngarmagu ex-combatant, who, during our conversation, spoke fondly of his non-co-ethnic leader and of how he treated everyone equally, also noted that the leader was selected because of his religious knowledge and conviction. In particular, he stated that:

> They are looking at your braveness, secondly your intelligence. How you understand the holy book and they look critically with your relationship with people. How you can communicate their ideology with the people. [68]

Mustafa∗, a Ngarmagu ex-combatant, also commented on a particular leader that treated everyone fairly compared to other leaders. In particular, he described how he was chosen because of his religious intelligence. Moreover, Mustafa noted that he always relied on religious texts to govern his actions whenever any disputes or issues arose. In particular, he shared how the leader was

> …Very kind. Because he is too religious and understands the religion so well. Had it been he was our leader there we would have enjoyed better. Because he is treating people fairly with justice and respect… whatever happened he would just open the holy book and then read to us and say this is what the holy book said and this is what the judgement is supposed to be.[69]

These examples and experiences noted above demonstrate the significance and effect of a leader's religious knowledge and conviction in the group's governing ideology. In particular, while other attributes were also involved, in instances where a respondent noted that a leader was chosen because of his religious conviction and knowledge, there were no instances of ethnic bias or preferential treatment. Instead, such leaders were known to always treat those under them as equals, regardless of their ethnicity. For example, three respondents, including two Kanuri and one Ngarmargu, revealed during their individual interviews that they were part of the same camp in Sambisa. They also shared that the leader selection process considered knowledge and the inclusive nature of Islam. Notably, all emphasized that everyone, irrespective of ethnicity, received equal treatment. Similarly, three out of five different respondents from three different ethnic groups, who also mentioned that they stayed in the camp and that ethnicity did not matter, referenced religious intelligence or knowledge as a reason for promotion.[70]

And, if any disputes or divisions occurred between ethnic communities, such leaders were known to abide by the group's norms and beliefs in settling conflicts. This maintaining of neutrality and promoting of unifying ideas mitigated the seriousness of any potential division within a given unit from arising, including along ethnic lines, and helped to achieve "*collective homogeneity*."[71] For example, as was highlighted by one combatant, who noted that his leader would "*never allow problems to come between you; rather they will pacify you, using religion to accept their ways*."[72]

However, in instances where respondents noted that a leader was selected within no reference to religious intelligence, for example, solely because of his military accomplishments, it was more likely that they would have commented on the salience of ethnicity or noted instances of bias within their unit and fragmentation. Therefore, alluding that such leaders chosen through these channels were more likely to still harbor ethnic biases. In such cases, ethnicity becomes more prominent, and respondent noted that certain ethnic groups received preferential treatment particularly in the distribution of resources, military operations, and the administration of punishment and rewards.

An example of this was shared during a conversation with Abdul∗ who spoke of one Emir Jef whom Shekau appointed because of his military knowledge and achievement. However, as he explained during our conversation, after he was appointed, he began

[68] B50: Male, Ngarmagu. Borno 2023
[69] B49: Male, Garmargu. Borno 2023
[70] B8: Male, Garmargu; B9: Male, Kanuri; B19: Male, Kanuri; B36: Male, Kanuri; B38: Male, Mafa. Borno 2022
[71] Building upon Weinstein's work, this paper delves deeper into the concept of "collective equilibrium," which pertains to the leader's role in fostering uniformity among all forces and interests within a specific unit. However, the argument put forth in this paper posits that the term "collective homogeneity" provides a more comprehensive explanation for the strategies employed by insurgent groups like Boko Haram. Unlike collective equilibrium, collective homogeneity underscores the group's emphasis on achieving uniformity among its actors, rather than aiming for a state of balanced interests (Weinstein 2006).
[72] B32: Male, Ngarmagu. Borno 2022

to show bias toward his fellow Hausa by awarding them gifts. In particular, he noted:

> There was an Amir Jesh. His name is Ali, he loves the Hausa because he is Hausa. …When it comes to gift to people, he chooses the Hausa to give and not the Kanuri.
>
> … It was Shekau that appointed him without knowing that he is as such. He replaced someone that was called … Charlie…he was killed in a battle in the Lake Chad. When he died they said because Ali used to be his personal assistant he should just take the leadership …. because he knows more about their area of control [73]

Similarly, Mustafa∗ who also noted that some individuals were selected for leadership positions because of military successes—particularly if the value of the goods seized was high—about the unfair treatment that such leaders directed toward the Ngarmagu people. In particular, he shared:

> There are other leaders who are not truthful… some of them are doing it just to get money, some are doing it to protect their ethnicity just to gain a name and other promotions, …. Some are not doing it the way they preach to us what the leadership is, because of God. Later on, we come to understand that.
>
> How they are selecting is like politics. …they give the leadership to someone who they know can bring something…They give these big big leadership [positions] to those who can serve them. … For example, if you go and attack a community, like you attack a bank and bring a lot of money, and you bring it to the bush… they will know you bring something to them.

And when things were being shared:

> If you are not Kanuri, if you go and collect food items, how they will be giving the food items for the Kanuri and how they will be giving the food items [to]..other tribes is not the same…the Kanuri people, they are going to be providing very good things to them.

He also mentioned:

> There was a time where we had a problem with the Kanuri people, and when they call us they said we should be his witness and explain what happened. But they said they are not going to accept it, because we are Ngarmargu people, we are backing our brother. And they punished him and even us they locked us in a cell. [74]

Additionally, a different Ngarmagu ex-combatant, who explained that individuals were selected for leadership roles based on their participation in multiple military operations, also commented extensively on the salience of ethnicity within his unit. He explained how he would target his co-ethnics to bring back to the "bush" when on operations, demonstrating again the lasting ethnic sentiment within such units.

In particular, he noted:

> If you are going to take part in many operations, and if you come back, they are going to promote you from the initial post that you are. So after carrying out so much of an attack and bringing people to the bush, it depends on the number of people you have under you.
>
> Even me now, when we go on operations, I target the people of my ethnicity to take them to the bush. The reason why I am doing that is because I gather them so I will have more strength…
>
> Yes, it is possible to have people from different tribes but if you have more of your tribal people in your own camp you again have more recognition and you have more powers[75]

Another Kanuri ex-Emir, who spoke of how he would use Ngarmagu fighters in battle because they are like "slaves to us," also noted that individuals are chosen for leadership positions because of military abilities.[76] This once again demonstrates how, when selected because of reasons that are not contingent on the complete internalization of the group's ideology and supra-identity, then ethnicity is more likely to become salient within units.[77]

Moreover, as noted, one's ethnicity can be an extra advantage that leads to their appointment to a leadership position. However, similarly, when chosen based on ethnicity, the individual is more likely to hold ethnic sentiments, which they can propagate once in a leadership position. Once this dynamic unfolds, it profoundly influences the salience of ethnicity within their given unit. For example, during his interview, one Ngarmagu ex-commander, who shared how he was selected as a leader because of his ethnicity, also shared how there was widespread ethnic bias within his unit. He noted throughout our interview that the Kanuri favored their fellow Kanuri and expressed how he also favored and showed leniency toward his fellow Ngarmagu. For example, he shared:

> By the time they are ready to share the loot, they will keep the best items for themselves and toss the bad ones to us. As a matter of fact, I have not

[73] M8: Male, Kanuri. Borno 2022
[74] B49: Male, Ngarmagu. Borno 2023
[75] B28: Male, Ngarmagu. Borno 2022
[76] B7: Male, Kanuri. Borno 2022
[77] B21: Male, Ngarmagu. Borno 2022

> forgotten the way they segregated us and I still feel the pain in my heart.[78]

Similarly, Abdul∗, who acknowledged his promotion was partly due to being Kanuri, spoke passionately about how only certain ethnic groups, specifically Kanuri and Hausa, are deemed trustworthy enough for leadership roles. These examples illustrate that when ethnicity is a significant factor in selecting leaders, the prominence of ethnicity within the group increases. This tendency is particularly evident in the appointment of new leaders, where ethnic bias or identity can overshadow the group's unifying ideology, even among those given leadership positions. Consequently, within such groups, ethnicity often takes precedence as leadership favors their pre-existing ethnic social ties over the group's broader supra-identity.

Overall, the accounts from ex-combatants shared in their interviews highlight how, despite a group's governing ideology aiming to transcend ethnicity, ethnic identity sometimes remained a dominant factor within certain combatant units, influencing unit dynamics and cohesion. As demonstrated throughout this paper, this is significantly shaped by the unit leader's path to leadership and their socialization into the group.

Conclusion

Within his work on Islam and ethnic conflict, Gurses asks if religion can "in fact help foster a new political identity that de-prioritises ethnic identities and grievances?" He further asks: Can co-religiosity really help bring peace between warring groups of the same faith? Focusing on the dispute between the Muslim Kurds and the Turks, Gurses finds that rather than being an antidote for the Kurdish conflict, Islam has become more of a tool for political leaders to strengthen their position than an ideological force to guide their platforms. And in the hands of political entrepreneurs, religious ideology has turned into another effective instrument of legitimization and mobilization (Gurses 2015).

Despite their adoption of Boko Haram's ideology, ethnic identity still held a lot of importance for many Boko Haram recruits. However, while the group's interpretation of Islamic doctrine often worked to entrench an overriding supra-identity, its success was not universal. In practice, it fell to leaders to reinforce this supra-ethnic identity above all else, ensuring deeper socialization and promoting cohesion.

In other words, the responsibility often falls on the unit leader to ensure that individuals under his control are fully socialized into the group, setting the tone for cohesion and unity among diverse members. However, due to divergent promotion trajectories, leaders who were not effectively socialized into the group and had not fully internalized the group's ideology and identity, such as those promoted based on military accolades or ethnic selection, were more likely to retain ethnic sentiments. In such instances, rather than promoting the group's supra-identity, these leaders are more likely to exhibit bias toward their co-ethnics, contributing to the salience of ethnicity within the group, which in turn can influence unit cohesion.

Therefore, while at a macro level, the group leadership projected a unified image, on a more micro level, within certain units, varying experiences of socialization—which can be traced to leader promotion patterns within the group—meant that ethnicity was foregrounded to different degrees.

[78] B21: Male, Ngarmargu. Borno 2022

Supplementary material

Supplementary material is available at *Journal of Global Security Studies* online.

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