



## Islamophobia at the Intra-Muslim Level

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PANEL: 'Sectarianism Driven by Political Interests: The Case of Nigeria and Islamic  
Movement of Nigeria'

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Sectarian narratives abound in and about Nigeria. Deemed a post-colonial state in international relations terms, it is considered to be afflicted by 'Muslim' / 'Christian' 'communal tensions', 'tribal tensions' and 'corruption'. In an era of rising Islamophobia, it is also viewed as the victim of 'Islamic' radicalisation 'evidenced' by the rise of Boko Haram, reflected as a South Western Asian / 'Middle Eastern' trend in Muslim political organisation as 'terrorism'. All of these rely heavily on racialized tropes that set Africans / Muslims/ others against a normative Westernized idea of citizenry and civilization. In trying to 'understand' the rise of Islamic Movement in Nigeria layered onto all of these narratives is one of Muslim sectarianism i.e. Sunni – Shia conflict.

This paper seeks to problematize this last narrative in particular with a view to understanding how it seeks to:

- undermine real and significant political organisation on the part of the Islamic Movement and its leaders;

- stigmatise the model of Islamic Movement using sectarian narratives to prevent that model from being impactful on (i) other Muslim movements; (ii) other liberation movements;
- evidences tendencies towards internalized racism that require mobilization on the part of those practitioners, stakeholders and activists who claim to seek justice in the wider context of societies like Nigeria.

### What is the 'Shia' Narrative?

The 'Shia' narrative is advanced as a description of the Islamic Movement of Nigeria led by Sheikh Ibraheem el-Zakzaky. Details of his illegal detention, torture and other crimes against humanity committed against him, his family and members of the movement are detailed in other papers presented on this panel. The impact of this in delegitimising the Islamic Movement includes:

- (i) playing to a worldwide sectarian narrative fuelled for almost 40 years and funded by Saudi petro-dollars in large part that seeks to undermine the Islamic Revolution in Iran as 'Shia' and therefore (a) partisan to Shias, (b) deviants from a so-called mainstream Islamic point of view, (c) undemocratic in both the terms of Nigerian Muslim demographics (and therefore an illegitimate expression of Muslim representativeness in Nigeria) and in a world-wide understanding of who and how Muslims are, and how they should organise;
- (ii) Providing an 'Islamic' cover for acts against the Islamic Movement by 'Muslim' and or state actors in Nigeria;

- (iii) Allowing the significance of any and all Islamic Movement achievements and potentiality to be undermined in a wider conversation about transformative movements in post-colonial settings;
- (iv) Reducing the Islamic Movement to an eccentricity or anomalous moment in an otherwise easily mapped teleology of underdevelopment, corruption and good governance initiatives that forms the ready-made discourse of Westernised relations with states like Nigeria. Part of this is to depict the Islamic Movement's aims for an 'Islamic society' as one based on the theological and jurisprudential details of 'Shia' fiqh – demonised as a sort of 'Shia' Saudi Arabia in a popularised demonization.

There are multiple consumers for the above delegitimization, including international political actors, the international, elite human rights community, transformative movements and networks of activists, the Nigerian, African and global media etc.

The 'Shia' narrative maintains that after the Islamic Revolution in Iran, Ibraheem el-Zakzaky, then a Sunni became inspired to emulate the example of that country and in his quest to do so became a 'Shia' and developed a following who all also became 'Shia'. Evidence for this is given by the numerous events held by Islamic Movement groups commemorating 'Shia' dates in the Islamic Calendar e.g. that of the commemoration of Ashura as the anniversary of the martyrdom of the grandson of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). Any part of this narrative may be argued to be true, however in totality it is both simplistic and deeply misrepresentative, and also takes away the voice and agency of Islamic Movement leaders and actors who counter this narrative using the argument. In other words any description countering this from the Islamic Movement is effectively portrayed as, "They would say

that,” meaning that somehow it would be in the nature of ‘Shias’ to deny the true state of things, averring to anti-Muslim tropes of taqiyyah, internalized as anti-Shia tropes.

A cursory look at the above historiography highlights the operation of certain internalized narratives of racism that will be dealt with at the end of this paper. A quick overview of issues raised within it disrupts with little difficulty the claims made. Insofar as el-Zakzaky ‘became’ a Shia this appears to have happened over a decade after the Islamic Revolution and appears. The changing from one form of Islamic practice to another amongst existing members of the movement at that time is unresearched, but again there appears not to have been a critical mass shift moment relating to his change. How organic a process is perhaps a work for anthropologists, with all their demons. What is clear is that from a few thousand followers at the time of the revolution to the time of this change, el-Zakzaky was able to mobilize a membership of millions (arguably in the region of 3 million) at the time of this change. Since then the movement has grown to be of about 15 million members across Nigeria. Given the large investment of Saudi Arabia in Nigerian Muslim affairs, it seems strange that a movement can grow to that size based on the proselytizing of ‘Shiism’ alone. A history of the Islamic Movement by Mu’allimah Zeena, one of the movement’s leaders is due for publication, but more research on its genesis and rise is required. In terms of demographic makeup, a cursory glance finds its appeal to be broad and that its constituents may well be in their majority ‘Shia’ but it may not be in the numbers considered. It is clear that those of other Muslim backgrounds continue to join and belong, and indeed there are also Christian caucuses within the movement, as well as significant Muslim supporters from civil society hailing from Sufi and Salafi communities. It is worth noting that a cursory glance at the names of those killed or detained from the movement in recent years indicates either

significant 'Sunni' participation, or the existence of a syncretic or hybrid form of 'Shia' identity.

There remains a third defiance of the 'Shia' narrative, and that is the existence of other Shia communities and leaders in Nigeria who are (a) at odds with the Islamic Movement, and (b) supportive of and supported by successive Nigerian governments. For all the bluster about heretical Muslim groups, and deviance as propounded by a number of state actors in their defence of atrocities and violations against the Islamic Movement, they appear to have no qualms in allowing these groups to exist unmolested in their public rituals and private or otherwise practices.

Understanding the Islamic Movement as a 'Shia' movement in this environment without questioning the use of this narrative simply reinforces mutedness (Ameli et. al., 2006, Kramer, 1981) and vilifies the Islamic Movement on purely spurious bases.

#### To what end demonization?

In a stirring polemic, el-Zakazky's daughter Dr. Nusaiba el-Zakazky states:

"We Muslims shouldn't accept names like Shia Muslim, Sunni Muslim, Nigerian Muslim, American Muslim, modern Muslim, contemporary Muslim, moderate Muslim and so on. Its really unfortunate and disappointing how I see some of our brothers and sisters referring to what happened in Zaria as a massacre of Shiites, as if these people (The Nigerian government and Army) attacked us because we gravitate to the Shia school of thought. As if there are no other people in Nigeria that gravitate towards the same school of thought but were not attacked.

“When this movement started, most of the people in it gravitated to the Sunni school of thought, none the less the government attacked them just like they are attacking us now. They imprisoned them just the same, and viewed them as a threat to their unjust and corrupt ways. Why? Because we seek to end their oppression of the Nigerian people. If we behaved just like most people in this country who say nothing about the corruption and the oppression we all suffer, then we will live in “peace” , as much peace anyway as you can live in a country where we have no rights, not even basic human rights.

“My father has never identified himself as a leader of a sect, or the Islamic movement as a sect. The Islamic movement’s main agenda was to fight the injustice of the system that we are forced to live under in this country. Anyone from anywhere including non-Muslims are welcome to join our struggle.”

The potentiality of ‘anyone from anywhere’ as a model for Islamic organisation against systemic injustice is of totemic significance and has been detailed in the paper of Shadjareh (2018) also presented on this panel. At this point it is sufficient to say that, the ‘Shia’ narrative which has also been mobilized in support of the Islamic Movement by well meaning sympathisers and human rights activists, at best distracts and at worst gives cover for both serious infringements and violations of the rights of the members, but also undermines the rights of the Islamic Movement as a movement and has wider implications regarding the delegitimization of movements that do not conform to Westernized / neoliberal models of political organisation. In that sense, the Islamic Movement looks more like a Zapatista type movement in its scope and scale than e.g. an Ikhwanul Muslimeen movement of whatever ilk.

### 3. Defending Islam from Deviation?

The well rehearsed tropes of Muslim deviance as they play out in Muslim political narratives where Saudi influence has been brought to bear on organisations of political trends, has an internal audience in Nigeria made up of state and civil society actors allied to the Saudi project. However, it is arguable that this has decreasing significance amongst Sunni communities in Nigeria, insofar as it ever had any reach. Its main audience is external and forms part of a wider powerplay involving Saudi and other regional actors, as well as the US and its western allies working in all these theaters.

#### Ludicrous is as ludicrous does

The exteriority of this narrative is an important issue that needs to be addressed not least because it impacts on how we address human rights, abuses and how we discuss liberation movements (Shadjareh, 2018). However there is a further reason why we must focus on the readiness with which both supporters and detractors grasp at this narrative when trying to understand events in Nigeria. In readily accepting these terms, the author argues that those employing this narrative exhibit classic signs of internalized racism – a factor that further disempowers those reproducing the very tropes that in fact oppress them.

Elsewhere (Merali, 2011) the author has outlined various forms that internalised racism takes including using the Women's Theological Center's definitions (1995) of what this behaviour amounts to. WTC's four essential and inter-connected elements of internalised racism are:

- (i) Decision-making
- (ii) Resources

(iii) Standards

(iv) Naming the problem

WTC's work looks at the situation between communities of colour within nation state contexts but they and this author (2011) argue that these processes apply across transnational settings and are as impactful on transnational communities of organisation who are also in effect communities or organisations of colour i.e. they are demonised / racialized / marginalised. Understanding how all four of these operates, requires an acknowledgement that there is a system in place that privileges some over others using effectively supremacist arguments. Whilst once these arguments were of race or religion (and as such are now seen to be racist or at least prejudicial) they have not been eradicated, simply subsumed under other rhetoric e.g. the arguments of development, human rights and democracy. As Grosfoguel and many others have summarised, the narrative goes:

“Civilise or I will kill you

“Christianise or I will kill you

“Develop or I will kill you

“Democratise or I will kill you”

To understand Nigeria from an international relations view, as outlined at the start of this paper as: afflicted by ‘Muslim’ / ‘Christian’ ‘communal tensions’, ‘tribal tensions’ and ‘corruption’, ‘Islamic’ radicalisation ‘evidenced’ by the rise of Boko Haram and ‘terrorism’ and now Sunni – Shia conflict, is to understand Nigeria as simultaneously the author of all its woes as immanently uncivilised / Christian / developed or democratic, as well as in need of a continued civilizational, Christian, developmental and good governance mission from supposedly erstwhile colonial powers in whose gift these goals remain. Of WTC's four



essential concepts of internalised racism (all of which pertain here) it is the fourth – Naming the Problem – that can be utilised here to understand how the Shia narrative has taken hold and been instrumentalised beyond any real or coherent conversation about Islam and expressed in the devotional or political practices of Nigerians.

According to WTC (1995):

“There is a system in place that misnames the problem of racism as a problem of or caused by people of color and blames the disease - emotional, economic, political, etc. on people of color. With internalized racism, people of color might, for example, believe we are more violent than white people and not consider state-sanctioned political violence or the hidden or privatized violence of white people and the systems they put in place and support.”

In their opinion, the effect and impact of these is effectively divide and rule of disparate communities under a supremacist culture. Importantly, this divide and rule actually fosters violence between subjugated communities, whereby in order to prove itself not like the demonised version of self, subjugated communities project that demonization on others acting or perceived to be acting in ways inimical to the normative power structure. In this case, there is a race to prove oneself worthy of the ‘Westernised gaze’, whether as a head of state claiming to tackle corruption, whether as Muslim activists outside Nigeria seeking to minimise embarrassment cause by the ‘Shiites’ in Nigeria or by those claiming to seek justice for Islamic Movement members imprisoned, killed or otherwise violated as being ‘exceptional’ (in this case the inversion of the demonised Shia trope) victim.

Whilst the WTC’s discussions of internalised racism have taken place within nation state contexts, it is important to test the parallels in transnational communities, particularly within civil society and the putative political classes of the marginalised

world/South/periphery (Merali, 2011). To paraphrase Grosfoguel's (2016) characterisation of this process of internalization, these notions have colonised our own cosmologies. We hear the same things 'Islamise or I will kill you', which is the same Western-centric project, 'Christianise or I kill you'. The problem is not just that we have the structures, it is that in all of us there is a Westernised subject and Westernised structural thinking there and "you have versions of Islam which repeat the Western things and present them as authentic." That 'authenticity' derives its own justifications from its proximity to a Westernized notion of acceptable. As Shadjareh (2018) in this panel avers, in doing so, it allows a man who presides over a system being investigated for crimes against humanity to be named and celebrated as an anti-corruption campaigner. In this context, the failure to name the problem, is more than an apt description of a situation when the idea of corruption is itself so deeply corrupted.