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“Unwilling Cocoons”: Boko Haram’s War Against Women

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ABSTRACT

The kidnapping of 276 girls at Government Secondary School Chibok, Borno State, Nigeria, on 14 April 2014 has brought into international prominence the organization *Jama’atu Ahlis Suna Lidda’awati Wal Jihad* or Boko Haram. This incident heralded a new trajectory in Boko Haram’s tactics and strategies. This article focuses on Boko Haram’s strategic deployment of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) against women. The gendered performativity of Boko Haram, its methodology for sourcing for women and young girls, and its concomitant utilitarian/instrumental approach vis-à-vis SGBV against women are analyzed against the backdrop of the political economy and patriarchal ideational infrastructure of the Nigerian society. The article argues that Boko Haram’s deployment of SGBV against women is an extension of the “repertoire of violence” ingrained in the sociopolitical and cultural milieu of Boko Haram’s primary area of operation. Boko Haram’s instrumental approach to SGBV is fourfold and hinges on the sociobiological utility of women. Boko Haram construes women as the bearers of its future despite its brutality toward them. The consequence is a strategic plan for procreation of a new generation of children raised through the cyclical constellation of mass rape of women, consequent impregnation and kidnapping the offspring of such rapes. Overall, this article contributes to the burgeoning scholarly literature on Boko Haram’s terrorist activities.

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The insurgents may have decided to literally sow seeds of discord that will ultimately take on a life of their own and haunt the nation sometime in the not too distant future. To the scum, polluting the blood of these women and siring in the process their kind who will inexorably become thorns in the flesh of future generations could be their way of having a laugh at the expense of decent Nigerians. ... For women, even the thought of rape is nightmarish. To be a victim must be like being in hell itself. These 214 women experienced it, in addition to other inhuman treatment by their captors. Taking them away from their homes, familiar environment and dear ones was harrowing enough. Now they are unwilling cocoons of the seeds of those who defiled them.¹

Sexual violation of women in anomic situations continues to attract academic attention. There are compelling scholarly accounts of deployment of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) against women in World War II, Bosnia, Guatemala, Peru, Uganda, and the

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Rwandan genocide, among others.² Scholarly analysis of women's experiences in war has undergone two main phases.³ The first phase construes women as victims of sexual violence in war, while the second phase is "agency-oriented" and presents a more robust articulation of women's roles as victims and perpetrators of war.⁴ Marks⁵ foregrounds a third phase that involves "researching women's wartime experiences and sexual violence in social context." This phase entails investigating the social and military context within which violence occurs.⁶

This article aims to contribute to the third phase by focusing on the strategic deployment of SGBV against women by the organization *Jama'atu Ahlis Suna Lidda'awati Wal Jihad* or Boko Haram. Three main arguments are advanced in the article. First, Boko Haram's treatment of women in Nigeria draws on and is iterative of the status of women in Northeast Nigeria, the terrorist organization's main area of operation. The gendered performativity of Boko Haram, its methodology for sourcing for women and young girls, and its concomitant utilitarian/instrumental approach vis-à-vis SGBV against women are analyzed against the backdrop of the patriarchal ideational infrastructure of the Nigerian society. The article argues that Boko Haram's deployment of SGBV against women is an extension of the "repertoire of violence"⁷ ingrained in the sociopolitical and cultural milieu of Boko Haram's primary area of operation. Second, the article demonstrates that women of various age groups perform various important functions for Boko Haram and are therefore fundamental to the organization's operational mechanics, global reputation, and terroristic success. Beyond detailing the roles of women, the article demonstrates that women's roles within Boko Haram reflect gender inequality and patent objectification of women. Third, the article demonstrates the consequences of Boko Haram's SGBV for (a) women and their families and communities; (b) Boko Haram's global recognition and male members' solidarity; and (c) broader implications for gender inequality.

This article contributes to the burgeoning scholarly literature on Boko Haram's terrorist activities while at a theoretical level it draws on and provides further evidence of the "rape as a weapon of war" frame(work). It is part of a larger study on "The fight for the soul of Nigeria: Boko Haram's *fatua* on Nigeria." Three sets of data are used in the study: Interviews and focus group discussions (FGD) conducted in summer 2015 with activists from the #Bringbackourgirls movement in Abuja, Nigeria (23 interviewees and eight FGD participants in four group discussions); statistical data from the Global Terrorism Database (University of Maryland), and newspaper reports on the narratives of freed captives and activities of Boko Haram.

The first part of the article presents a brief (and necessarily incomplete) overview of the rise of Boko Haram and its mode of operation. The second part focuses on how Boko Haram sources for women and young girls. The third part interrogates Boko Haram's instrumentalization of women across the broad spectrum of its operational needs. The fourth part analyzes the consequences of Boko Haram's actions on women and young girls in Nigeria. This is followed by a discussion section and conclusion.

The Boko Haram Insurgency⁸

On Saturday, 25 July 2009, a bomb was detonated in a building near a flour company in Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria. The police arrested eight Boko Haram members and seized arms and explosives.⁹ Boko Haram members violently engaged the police and burned several

churches and government buildings purportedly to secure the release of their leader, Mohammed Yusuf, on 26 July 2009.¹⁰ The Nigerian military's ad hoc detachment, the Joint Task Force (JTF) was invited as the sect proved intractable to the police following escalations in Borno, Kano, Bauchi, and Yobe states. The JTF restored order in the turbulent states. One Colonel Ben Ahanotu led the JTF operation and claimed to have personally arrested Mohammed Yusuf, Boko Haram's leader, and handed him over to the police in Maiduguri on 30 July 2009.¹¹ However, the police claimed Mohammed Yusuf had died in a gun battle and displayed his bullet-ridden body to journalists.¹² Boko Haram had killed 30 police personnel in Borno around this period; the police responded by killing all Boko Haram suspects in their custody.¹³ The death of Mohammed Yusuf in police custody became a watershed moment in the Boko Haram crisis.

The intensity of Boko Haram's activities after Mohammed Yusuf's death in police custody appears to support the idea that killing a terrorist or insurgent leader only "accelerates the insurgency's radicalization and use of more indiscriminate violence."¹⁴ Yusuf's former deputy, Abubakar Shekau, appeared in a public video and announced that he had become the new leader of Boko Haram. He vowed that the organization would avenge the death of its late leader. Boko Haram invaded a prison in Bauchi State on 8 September 2010 and released its incarcerated members. The organization's terrorist activities intensified thereafter.

Analysis of the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) indicates that in 2014 (see Figure 1), Boko Haram carried out 493 attacks and killed 7,112 people, including victims and perpetrators (97 percent of the deceased were victims). Each Boko Haram attack killed on average 15 persons. In contrast, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) carried out 1,241 attacks and killed 9,324 individuals. This means that ISIS killed about seven persons per attack in 2014 or roughly half the number killed by Boko Haram. Casualty figures for 2015 have followed a similar pattern.¹⁵ The implication is that Boko Haram has become more lethal than ISIS in spite of the intense media attention on the atrocities of the latter.

Figure 2 indicates that private citizens and properties are Boko Haram's primary target. This category of targets accounts for 35 percent (429 events) of Boko Haram's attacks between 2009 and 2014. Attacks against the police rank second (17 percent; 213 events). More than 50 percent of Boko Haram's killings (5,640 casualties) occur during attacks

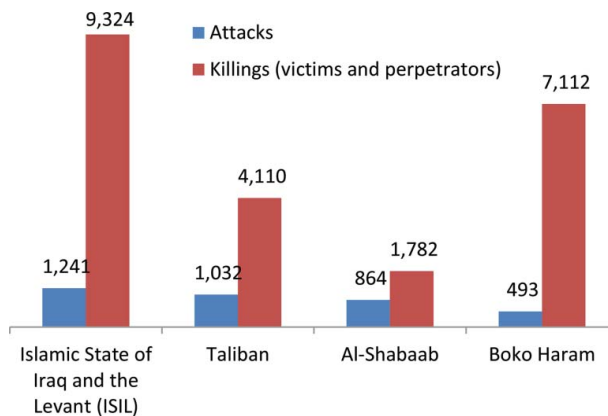


Figure 1. World's top terrorist groups in 2014 by attacks and killings. *Source:* Elaborated based on the Global Terrorism Database (GTD).

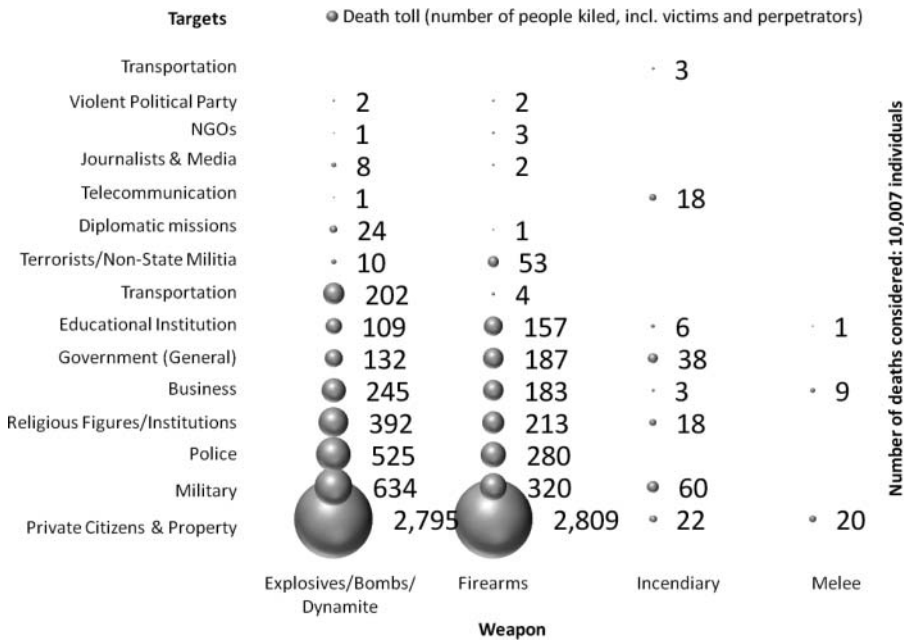


Figure 2. Number of deaths caused by Boko Haram’s attacks by target type and weapon type, Nigeria, 2009–2014. *Source:* Elaborated based on the Global Terrorism Database (GTD).

against private citizens and properties. Firearms are used in approximately 60 percent of attacks against private citizens and properties. The second most common weapon used against private citizens and properties is bombing and explosions (27 percent). **Figure 3** demonstrates the increase in Boko Haram’s efficiency (ratio of killings per attack) while **Figure 4** indicates the geographic spread of the organization from one state in 2009 to 17 in 2014.

The available evidence suggests that the root causes of Boko Haram’s activities are the motivation of its members to fight against social injustice, ideology of its founder, revenge for the 2009 security crackdown, financial benefits, the failure of the Nigerian state, currents of global religious terrorism,¹⁶ and resistance against perceived Western cultural domination

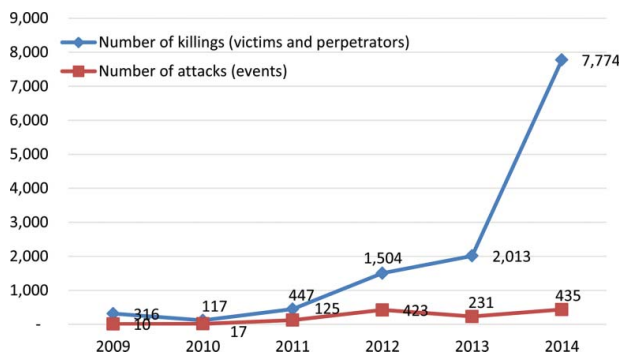


Figure 3. Number of attacks and killings by Boko Haram, Nigeria, 2009–2014. *Source:* Elaborated based on the Global Terrorism Database (GTD).

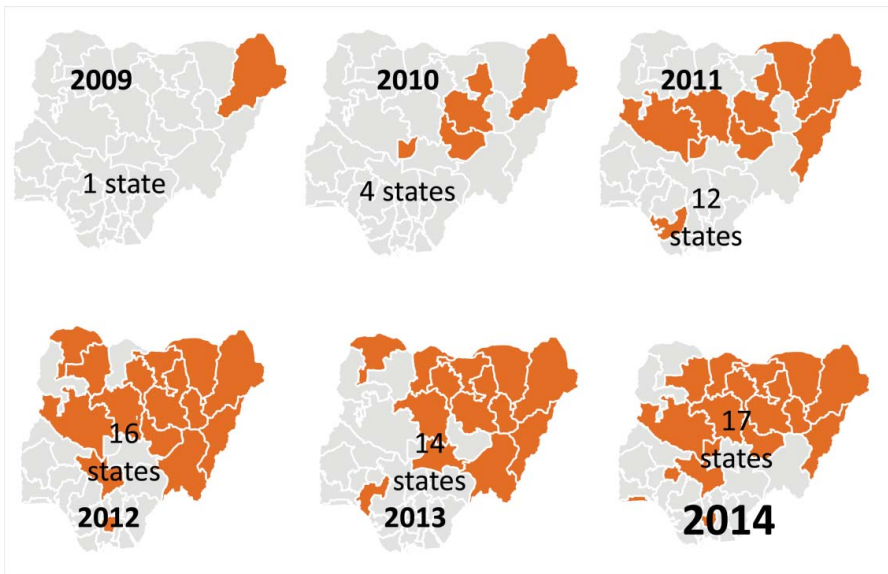


Figure 4. Boko Haram’s territorial expansion across Nigeria, 2009–2014. *Source:* Elaborated based on the Global Terrorism Database (GTD).

and wars in Muslim countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq.¹⁷ There is growing consensus that Boko Haram “arantly disregards the Nigerian state for its secular nature. It sees the state as illegitimate and holds no respect for the state’s constituted laws.”¹⁸

Boko Haram attacked Federal Government College, Buni Yadi, Yobe State on 25 February 2014. Fifty-nine boys were massacred: Some were slaughtered with knives, many were shot, while others died when all 24 buildings in the school were set ablaze.¹⁹ One of the key moments of the gruesome killing was widely reported in the media: “Teachers at the school in Buni Yadi said the gunmen gathered the female students together before telling them to go away and get married and to abandon their education.”²⁰ There is no record of sexual molestation of the girls in that particular encounter. This incident revealed Boko Haram’s approach to gender: Males had to be neutralized while females existed purely for purposes of marriage and childbearing. In the organization’s mind’s eye, attempts to educate females constituted a waste of time; it was irreligious and a forbidden deployment of women’s reproductive energies.

This approach to women and girls changed on 14 April 2014 when Boko Haram attacked the Federal Government College, Chibok, Borno State. Boko Haram confirmed in a video on 12 May 2014 that they were behind the mass kidnapping, as widely suspected. The incident was a spectacular act even by the standards of a country in which kidnapping had become relatively routine since the late 1990s, particularly in the oil-rich Niger Delta region.²¹ The mass kidnapping generated huge global attention.²² Boko Haram is estimated to have killed 2,053 persons in 95 attacks within the first six months of 2014.²³ More comprehensive figures indicate that Boko Haram attacked over 300 villages and towns and killed at least 14,000 people between 2009 and April 2015.²⁴

The systematic kidnapping of women and young girls since April 2014 is one of the emerging trajectories in Boko Haram’s terrorist attacks. The sheer magnitude of this

Table 1. The number of people liberated by the Nigerian military: 19 January 2015 to 28 October 2015.

Report date	Location of operation	Number of rescued persons		Details
19 January 2015	Far north in Cameroon	24	NA	
28 April 2015	Sambisa Forest	293		200 girls and 93 women
30 April 2015	Sambisa Forest	160		60 women and girls 100 men and boys
3 May 2015	Sambisa Forest	234		234 women and children
3 May 2015	Sambisa Forest	275		69 women, 14 girls (13–17 years), 26 boys (aged 6–12 yrs), 49 boys (aged 5 yrs), 48 girls (aged 0–5 yrs) and 69 girls (aged 6–12 yrs)
6 May 2015	Sambisa Forest	25		25 women and children
20 May 2015	Sambisa Forest	275		275 women and children
23 May 2015	Sambisa forest	20		20 women and children
29 July 2015	Dikwa LGA in Borno State	30		21 children and 7 women
30 July 2015	Chuogori and Shantumari areas of Borno State	59		NA
3 August 2015	Bama, Borno State	178		67 women 101 children 10 elderly men
15 September 2015	camp at Bolungu 1 and 2, Bula Doye and Cheehi Dare, Borno State	Dozens		dozens of women and children
19 September 2015	Bitti and Pulka	62		NA
20 September 2015	Dissa and Balaza villages located in the same Gwoza Local Government Area	90		33 women and 34 children and 23 men
28 October 2015	Sambisa Forest	338		192 children and 138 women.
	Total =	2,063		

Note: Total number of people liberated by the Nigerian military: 2,063 (excluding the “dozens”). Produced from content analysis of media reports (Premium Times, Sahara Reporters, and BBC News websites) of the JTF rescue operations. The reportage often lumps “women and children” together. This makes it difficult to have exact numbers by sex.

gendered kidnapping by Boko Haram was unveiled as the Nigerian Army rescued 200 girls and 93 women on 28 April 2015 in a Sambisa Forest operation.²⁵

Table 1 shows the number of people liberated by the Nigerian military between 19 January 2015 and 28 October 2015. Overall, at least 2,063 persons were freed from Boko Haram’s captivity. This estimate has widespread support.²⁶ A majority of the rescued persons were women and girls.

Boko Haram declared the formation of an “Islamic state”²⁷ on 24 August 2014²⁸ and began to capture territories in Northeastern Nigeria. Its original goal was the introduction of a puritanical version of *Sharia* law in Northern Nigeria.²⁹ It has transmuted from seeking changes in the Nigerian legal system to actively establishing its structures of governance. Boko Haram pledged allegiance to ISIS on 7 March 2015. This move firmly put Boko Haram at the epicenter of global concerns over the rise of violent religious extremism as well as gender-based violence against women. The next section focuses on how Boko Haram sources for women and girls.

The Status of Women in Nigeria and Boko Haram’s Avenues for Acquiring Women

Gender inequality, particularly widely shared patriarchal notions about the social roles and the “place” of women in (Northern) Nigeria is evident in the manner in which Boko Haram

sources for women. Boko Haram acquires women and girls through three major avenues. First, it engages in systematic kidnapping directly targeted at forcefully taking women and girls from their communities or schools. The mass abduction of the Chibok girls remains one of the largest exercises the organization has engaged in to date. Boko Haram operatives arrived in multiple vehicles and instructed the girls to get on board. The operatives dressed in military uniforms and presented a façade—a rescue mission on behalf of the Nigerian state. An estimated 276 girls were kidnapped (as stated earlier) although 57 girls managed to escape.³⁰ An interview with one activist³¹ illuminates Boko Haram’s kidnapping methods prior to the Chibok incident:

Interviewer: And what year was this?

Interviewee: It was last year. So that is how they started even before Chibok. Chibok was 2014, that was around 2013 October/November, when this happened, they started going into Maiduguri. They just grab girls, throw ₦ 1000 or ₦ 2000 Naira (\$5–\$10 US) at their parents and say that is their dowry. These girls will be screaming, bouncing them, biting them; that is how they throw them behind the pickup and they leave with them.

Interviewer: They were doing that in Maiduguri?

Interviewee: Yes, in Maiduguri with their faces uncovered. People knew who they were, but their so called parents then were protecting them because they were giving them money. Because Maiduguri is a very, very poor state, we have a lot of poor people there and that is one of the biggest things they used in indoctrinating Boko Haram into the minds of the people in Maiduguri—money.

Second, there is evidence suggesting that some fathers have been handing over their female children and/or wives to Boko Haram. This may involve exchange for cash (i.e., outright sale or donation). Such parents are sympathizers rather than formal members of Boko Haram. For instance, 13-year-old Zahharau Babangida, who was arrested in December 2014 after abandoning a suicide vest in a taxi, claimed that her father donated her and her mother to Boko Haram.³² This is a fundamentally gendered “gift.” The gender hierarchy and superiority of the donor³³ presupposed in this gifting accentuates women’s social positionality relative to men and symbolizes where (absolute) power lies. It is arguably inconceivable that Zahharau Babangida’s mother could have donated her daughter and/or husband to Boko Haram.

These dimensions of Boko Haram’s acquisition of women reflect a cultural climate in which women and young girls are perceived as expendable material and burdens to be rid of. This encompasses entrenched undervaluation of the girl-child and presumption that parents’ basic responsibility is to prepare a girl-child for marriage. Young girls were already being routinely rounded off and their families paid pittance prior to the Chibok kidnapping, as indicated above. Payments made to their poor families ensured that there was a criminal silence about the incidents in an area reputed for near universal absence of symbols of the state such as the police.

The activist cited above noted that:

In the northern part, we are still being used as if we are bugs that can be changed when you don’t want. You marry four wives and you start thinking, you have seen a girl and you start thinking of which one to send packing so that you can marry her. That integrity of the institution of marriage is shattered in the north, just a few know what it is to be married, that sacredness of marriage...

Early marriage among girls is widely practiced in Northern Nigeria. Most of these marriages are arranged and forced.³⁴ Some girls accept the marriages as the will of Allah while

others consent because of threats by their fathers that their mothers may be thrown out of the family home and/or that they (the girls) may be disowned.³⁵ The Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey indicates that the average age at first marriage in the Northeast and Northwest is under 16 years (15.9 in the Northeast and 15.7 in the Northwest).³⁶ The Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey also indicate that 39.3 percent and 44.6 percent of girls aged 15–19 years in the Northeast and Northwest, respectively, have begun child-bearing.³⁷

This has contributed to extremely low levels of education among women. For instance, 68.1 percent of women aged 15–49 years had no formal education at the time of first marriage in the Boko Haram–ravaged Northeast as of 2008.³⁸ The Northwest fared worse at 74.2 percent. Overall, only 5 percent of women aged 15–49 years in the Northeast and 5.3 percent in the Northwest had completed secondary school at first marriage.³⁹ There are rural–urban contours. About 75 percent of girls in rural parts of the Northeast and Northwest of Nigeria have never been to school.⁴⁰ The widespread nature and fatalistic acceptance of these practices or discriminatory “family codes”⁴¹ create a generational dependency cycle for young girls and women as they are rarely allowed to acquire any marketable skills and are therefore kept out of productive engagement in the labor market. Consequently, the acceptance of pittance for daughters and donation of Zahharau and her mother to Boko Haram must be understood as an organic product of a sociocultural environment where such human (specifically, female) “offering” is routine and relatively unspectacular.

Third, there are also female volunteers who are engaged in “consensual”⁴² sexual relationships with Boko Haram fighters in some of the affected communities. The relationships offer such women basic necessities such as food. This is tied to the socioeconomic problems in the society. Roughly 54 percent of Nigerians live in poverty; and 42 percent of children suffer malnutrition⁴³ as parents struggle to provide required basic sustenance. The national figures mask divergent regional differentials: The level of poverty in the North is significantly worse than the South. The Northeast, for instance, has a poverty rate of 72 percent while the Southeast has 26 percent.⁴⁴ The state of the economy also means that of the six million young men and women who enter the labor market every year, only 10 percent find employment in the formal sector.⁴⁵ Jobs in the formal sector require a modicum of education, which, as is already evident, most women and young girls in the Northeast do not have. Therefore, only one third of the successful applicants are women.⁴⁶

In addition, relationships with Boko Haram’s operatives offer protection in an extremely insecure environment. Nigeria is ranked 151st in a pool of 162 countries in the Global Peace Index.⁴⁷ Insecurity in Nigeria has steadily risen since the late 1990s.⁴⁸ Insurgent organizations in Nigeria’s oil-rich Delta region, particularly the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), engaged the state in violent resistance.⁴⁹ Attacks on oil infrastructure and bombings gradually deescalated after the introduction of an amnesty program in 2009.⁵⁰ However, Boko Haram’s ascendance in the Northeast of Nigeria became intensified in July 2009.⁵¹ The likelihood of violence in the hands of Boko Haram is exacerbated by similar atrocities committed by state forces. At least 7,000 civilians have died in military detention centers and soldiers of the Nigerian military have arbitrarily arrested over 20,000 persons, particularly males and executed without trial 1,200 people.⁵²

Consequently, establishing romantic relationships with male operatives in geographic locations seized by Boko Haram is arguably a survival strategy. Other women and young girls in this category were initially conscripted by Boko Haram but are now engaged in violence against newer victims of Boko Haram. This victim–perpetrator

dynamic is not unprecedented. It speaks to the intrinsically complex, multifaceted, and theoretically disconcerting realities of women and young girls who are conscripted into warfare as abducted victims but succeed in negotiating a social space of relative independence as “bush wives” and/or commanders and begin to victimize others while concurrently enduring victimization.⁵³

Boko Haram’s Deployment of Women

This section focuses on how Boko Haram instrumentalizes women in the course of its terrorist activities. Boko Haram’s strategies reinforce the oppression, gender-based discrimination, and sexual objectification of women. The strategies also link women’s immanent worth with capacity to serve as cocoons for babies. Four major areas of instrumentalization of women are identified. These are utilization of women for procreation as part of the organization’s strategy for continuity, use of women as part of the killing machinery, domestic purposes, and human shield/bargaining power.

SGBV and the Future of Boko Haram

Accounts of instrumentalization of women and young girls who were abducted, raped, and forced to be part of rebel organizations in Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Democratic Republic of Congo, among others, have advanced scholarly debate from notions of “bad-things-happen-in-war” rhetoric to recognition that some state and non-state actors consciously adopt rape and other forms of sexual violence as a war strategy.⁵⁴ Systematic rape of women by Boko Haram is a fundamental aspect of the organization’s strategy for continuity. Sexual violence against women is “not merely incidental, but integral to Boko Haram’s strategy of domination and self-perpetuation.”⁵⁵

Boko Haram adopts a utilitarian approach vis-à-vis its sexual violence against women. This approach is three-pronged and hinges partly on the sociobiological utility of women. First, Boko Haram believes that “they can confiscate any wife or property from someone who does not share their interpretation of Islam.”⁵⁶ Boko Haram considers women as property of men. One activist noted that:

women according to their ideology, they shouldn’t kill women, but they shouldn’t allow women to be educated. Women are meant for men, women are regarded as our property, they can use it (sic) for

sex ... they need sex. So when they see women, they can do whatsoever sexually to them...⁵⁷

Second, Boko Haram believes that impregnated women can be identified and monitored in their communities; and finally, the progeny can be kidnapped in the future.⁵⁸ Consequently, a new generation of children supposedly espousing the ideology of their fathers can be raised through the cyclical constellation of mass rape of women, consequent impregnation and kidnapping offspring of such rapes. Boko Haram construes women as the bearers of its future despite its brutality toward them. This is evident in the number of rescued young girls and women who returned pregnant with babies of their captors.⁵⁹ The pregnant girls and women included a majority of the 234 women and children rescued from Sambisa

Forest in May 2015. That brought the number of pregnant girls at one internal displaced persons (IDP) camp in Borno State to at least 214.⁶⁰

Such has been the level of systematic rape that the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) helped with the deliveries of 16,000 babies within one year (i.e., 2014–2015) in Boko Haram–ravaged Northeastern Nigeria.⁶¹ Boko Haram’s strategy of systematic rape and deliberate attempt to produce progeny from such rapes is reminiscent of similar atrocities in Bosnia and Bangladesh, among others, although not all mass rapes are intended to produce progeny.⁶² Nevertheless, such incidents accentuate the fact that women’s bodies are now an integral part of armed conflict and terrorism.⁶³

However, there are nuances to Boko Haram’s sexual violence against women. Boko Haram delineates female persons into three categories vis-à-vis its sexual violence. These are young female children below 14; women and young girls within the reproductive bracket (14 years to about 45 years), and those older than 45 years. The terrorist group’s sexual violence is primarily directed at women and girls within the reproductive age bracket. The organization places particularly high premium on women or young girls in this category who are neither married nor have children. This is important as early marriage among the female population is rife in Northern Nigeria (as stated earlier) and adolescent girls tend to begin to have children immediately after their weddings.⁶⁴

Boko Haram considers undesirable a woman who is already married or has children. In one attack in Maiduguri in late 2013, Boko Haram separated married women from single ones: They “left the old ones there, didn’t even look at them, took these fertile-looking women and left with them.”⁶⁵ One woman narrated how she managed to escape being married off to Boko Haram fighters: “I am not married but I told them I was. I said: ‘Look, here are my two children.’”⁶⁶ The children were in fact those put in her care by fleeing captives.⁶⁷ The manner in which Boko Haram treats mothers in their camps reflects widespread cultural practices that put lesser value on women who have children. Such women command lesser bride price, for instance, and are viewed as “damaged goods” in the wider society. Boko Haram’s gender ideology, therefore, draws on prevailing attitudes and cultural practices regarding the social value, market value, and ultimately desirability of women in a patriarchal society.

There is evidence suggesting that older women and women with children are spared from rape. One 56-year-old woman, Mbutu Papka, who was held by Boko Haram for eight months, claimed that she was not sexually assaulted.⁶⁸ Boko Haram released Papka alongside 10 other older women in March 2015.⁶⁹ This suggests that Boko Haram is engaged in a processual sorting of women and young girls for its variegated purposes. Consequently, women’s experiences in the hands of Boko Haram vary widely. This is not unprecedented. For instance, there was no “homogeneity of interests” between four categories of women: “non-wives,” “unprotected wives,” “protected wives,” and “senior women” in Sierra Leone’s civil war.⁷⁰ Each category represented varying kinds of experiences.

Killing Machinery

Boko Haram has also been using kidnapped young girls as part of its killing machinery. The organization is estimated to have about 15,000 fighters.⁷¹ The fighting forces have been complemented with kidnapped girls. Boko Haram has been training girls to execute armed attacks in villages, including the girls’ places of origin.⁷² One freed captive stated that at least

100 women and girls in the camp she was kept were trained by Boko Haram to fight and kill.⁷³ She claimed to have been part of “those trained to shoot. I was also trained on how to use bombs and how to attack a village.”⁷⁴ Those who refused to learn to kill were summarily executed and buried in mass graves.⁷⁵ Another freed captive claimed that some of the Chibok girls were being trained to become part of Boko Haram’s fighting forces.⁷⁶ Some freed captives have claimed that the Chibok girls were observed killing people on behalf of Boko Haram.⁷⁷

In addition, women and young children are placed on the frontlines of Boko Haram’s armed confrontations with the Nigerian military. This is intended to give Boko Haram advantage over the military as they recognize that the Nigerian military personnel have to be seen to obey the rules of engagement.⁷⁸ The exact number of women and girls in Boko Haram’s fighting forces and the circumstances surrounding how they joined are unclear.⁷⁹ However, use of kidnapped boys and girls in armed conflict is not new but poses significant long-term problems for society.⁸⁰

Boko Haram also uses young female children as suicide bombers. There has been a significant increase in suicide bombings by Boko Haram in the last year. For instance, while 26 suicide bombings occurred in the whole of 2014, there were 27 suicide bombings between January and May 2015.⁸¹ Young girls constitute a major part of the ranks of Boko Haram’s suicide bombers. At least three-quarters of Boko Haram’s suicide bombers are women and children.⁸² Eyewitness testimonies indicate that the age of the girls range from 7 to 17 years.⁸³ Such girls are often sent on suicide missions to soft targets with huge volumes of civilians: Markets, bus stations, soccer viewing spaces, and worship centers. Such gendered missions have operational advantages. Female suicide bombers can navigate security architectures more easily; they tend not to hold leadership positions and are thus non-essential to the continuity of the organization; they generate greater media attention than their male counterparts; and they may garner greater sympathy for the cause.⁸⁴

Therefore, female suicide bombers are generally more effective than males.⁸⁵ Women can exploit “the perceived weakness of their sex to fool the army’ and other security operatives.⁸⁶ This rests on patriarchy and heteronormativity, particularly chivalry at the interactional level.⁸⁷ The scale of Boko Haram’s deployment of female suicide bombers is demonstrated in the fact that at least 22 women and girls who managed to flee from executing their suicide missions were being rehabilitated by the Countering Violent Extremism Department in the Office of Nigeria’s National Security Adviser as of July 2015.⁸⁸

While there are obvious issues regarding manipulation of children by adults to carry out violent activities, the gender implications are also disconcerting.⁸⁹ Most of the young girls who successfully executed their missions were often closely supervised by adult males and on rare occasions, females.⁹⁰ Boko Haram favors post-menopausal women and prepubescent girls in its suicide missions. It appears that female captives or “volunteers” within the productive age bracket are primarily designated for reproduction while suicide bombing is reserved for those too young or too old to reproduce. This dualized approach to women and young girls—hinged on probable fecundity—objectifies women through fixation on the aesthetics of reproduction. Its existential permutation is demonstrated in its being used to produce new life or consume the lives of the captives and others.

Domestic Purposes

Boko Haram has been using women as domestic servants at its camps. They are assigned duties such as cooking, cleaning, garnering firewood, and collecting water.⁹¹ While these are clearly gendered roles, they have provided avenue for some women and young girls to stay alive (i.e., via access to a level of nutrition) and also enhanced chances of fleeing from Boko Haram's camp.

Human Shield/Bargaining Power

Boko Haram's deployment of gendered surveillance is being unveiled by some of the freed kidnap victims. Asabe Umaru, who was rescued by the military, stated that: "They didn't allow us to move an inch. ... If you needed the toilet, they followed you. We were kept in one place. We were under bondage."⁹² A hierarchy of security is established: Boko Haram's key leaders and the Chibok girls are separated from other captives and operatives. For instance, at the Gwoza camp, "there were clear demarcations between where people were kept. The Chibok girls, other captives and Boko Haram members and their family members all had their separate areas secured, though the security in the area where the girls are kept is visibly different and much tighter."⁹³

The Nigerian military claims to have exercised restraint in bombing some well-known Boko Haram camps, especially in Sambisa Forest because of fears that women and children were being held at those locations. The Chibok girls appear to be the most valuable in that regard. Boko Haram began discussions with the newly elected Nigerian president, Mohammedu Buhari, over freeing some Boko Haram operatives in exchange for some of the Chibok girls.⁹⁴ Boko Haram specifically requested for the release of its key bombmaker in exchange for some of the Chibok girls in September 2015. There is a general consensus among activists that the Chibok girls are a "prized possession" in the hands of Boko Haram.⁹⁵ They are being used as human shields.⁹⁶

Consequences of Boko Haram's War Against Women

This section demonstrates the consequences of Boko Haram's atrocities on (1) women and their families and communities; (2) solidarity among Boko Haram's operatives and the organization's global recognition; and (3) broader consequences on gender.

Women and Their Families and Communities

The consequences of Boko Haram's war on women are multidimensional. At the individual level, Boko Haram's strategy strips kidnapped women and girls of their sense of self or identity. People's sense of self is closely tied to their religious identity.⁹⁷ Boko Haram engages in forced conversion of kidnapped women and girls to its version of Islam. For instance, Mohammed Shekau released a video that showed the Chibok girls reciting the Quran.⁹⁸ He argued that the "(g)irls from Chibok confessing Islam is the true religion!" This proselytization effort includes having the girls "dressed in full-length hijab, with only faces and hands showing," which is different from their earlier dressing patterns as predominantly Christian girls.⁹⁹

Boko Haram also deploys psychological torture to make kidnapped women and girls lose their sense of self and identity. This helps to break down the resistance of the captives and ensures swift compliance with orders from the organization's operatives. This is achieved through making women and girls witness horrific killings of others, particularly men and boys, who were regularly "slaughtered like rams" or stoned to death.¹⁰⁰ Some women were forced to watch as their husbands and sons were killed.¹⁰¹ One freed captive stated: "I saw death when I was with Boko Haram. I lived with death. ... But I'm not the same person now. We saw so many ugly things. People were slaughtered with knives in front of us. It has changed my view of the world completely."¹⁰²

Some of the mothers among Boko Haram's kidnap victims appeared to have been forced to make inhuman decisions that could potentially cause them to question their competence as women and mothers. This is a salient matter in patriarchal societies.¹⁰³ One woman, Margaret, who had five children, was kidnapped while she had gone out with two of her children. She fled after several months with one child, leaving the other behind when she had the opportunity to escape from her captors. Margaret realized that it was not possible to escape with two young children, so she left, placing a child in the care of a fellow abductee.¹⁰⁴ Margaret was lucky to find the child she was forced to abandon alive in an IDP camp. The impact of such life and death decisions on a mother is profound.

At the family/communal level, as Zainab Bangura, UN special representative of the secretary-general, pointed out: "Boko Haram is not only destroying existing family and community structures but is bent on controlling their future composition."¹⁰⁵ Given the prevalence of gender norms that bestow "destructive power"¹⁰⁶ on sexual violence and its concomitant "symbolic meaning"¹⁰⁷ within a patriarchal society's universe of discourse, the bodies of women and girls become the soil on which Boko Haram plants its seeds of destruction. This harms—physically and psychologically—not just the primary victims; it damages the collective identity¹⁰⁸ of their families, religious group, and ethnic community through vicarious victimization. It also demoralizes and emasculates the men in such affected communities.¹⁰⁹

This systematic act of deliberate violation of women's bodies and consequent dilution of whole lineages, communities, and ethnic groups is not unprecedented, as Bosnia-Herzegovina, Congo, Rwanda, and Bangladesh, among others, demonstrated. It functions on the cultural notions that "sex is something that a man does *to* a woman,"¹¹⁰ the "symbolic construction of the female body"¹¹¹ as the quintessential inner sanctuary of the community¹¹² and the widespread gendered intersubjective understanding that such illicit sex exclusively pollutes women rather than men and symbolically shames the community to which the victimized women belong. The effects of mass deterritorialization and feelings of shame, powerlessness, and symbolic rape are, for instance, collectively experienced by the people of Chibok, where over 200 girls were kidnapped in 2014.¹¹³ Such feelings compound the socio-political and economic marginality of the Kibaku people, a religious and ethnic minority group in southern Borno State.¹¹⁴ The Kibaku people strongly believe that their marginal social position contributed to the kidnapping of their young girls in Chibok and the lackadaisical effort to rescue them.¹¹⁵

Boko Haram's Global Recognition and Solidarity Among Male Operatives

Boko Haram's global recognition as a terrorist organization is largely predicated on their brutality toward women. Although Boko Haram had turned explicitly violent since at least

July 2009, the organization did not enjoy any significant attention in world media. For example, there was little national or global attention to the February 2014 assassination of 59 high schools boys at Buni Yadi. However, the kidnapping and subsequent sexual enslavement of the Chibok girls has helped to transform the organization, which was a relatively unknown ragtag terrorist collectivity in a section of the most marginalized corridor of Northeast Nigeria to an easily recognizable global terrorist franchise. Sexual violence in conflict garners huge attention.¹¹⁶ With such attention or notoriety comes opportunities for fund-raising, membership recruitment, camaraderie, and enhanced sense of group solidarity.

While men who “approximate hegemonic masculinity”¹¹⁷ symbolically rape the Nigerian economy¹¹⁸ and drain it of valuable resources, some excluded men engage in large-scale gendered violence.¹¹⁹ Marginalized men are generally known to challenge their social positionality through sexual and gender-based violence against women,¹²⁰ particularly during periods of insecurity engendered by unfavorable political and economic conditions.¹²¹ “By physically overpowering a weaker, feminized body, sexual violence operates to reinforce the perpetrator’s masculinity at the direct expense of the social power of the victim,”¹²² individual Boko Haram members are thus able to fulfill their psychological quest for power and assertion of feelings of superiority.¹²³ It appears that such men perceived that male power was being disrupted in a society where some “women (had) become leaders in the offices, (and) civil servants”¹²⁴ despite major obstacles.

Boko Haram uses sexual violence against women, particularly forced marriages to promote solidarity among its male operatives.¹²⁵ This also appears to make the organization attractive to unemployed and impoverished males in the Northeast who cannot afford the costs associated with weddings.¹²⁶ The contracting out of women in bush marriages to enhance insurgent or terrorist group cohesion is not new.¹²⁷

Structural Consequences of Boko Haram’s War on Women

Boko Haram’s attacks against women serve several other macro-sociological purposes. Such violence reinforces “traditional domestic dominance” and attendant subjugation of women.¹²⁸ This latter involves deliberate cessation of Western education for kidnapped girls and also making those who are free fearful of going to school. For instance, one teenage Chibok girl who escaped from Boko Haram vowed never to return to school and promptly got married.¹²⁹ One activist from Chibok claimed to know three other young girls who escaped from Boko Haram in 2014 and have since dropped out of school and gotten married. The cumulative effect of such individual cases hands victory not only to Boko Haram’s ideology against women but works in favor of male dominance overall.

Boko Haram’s attacks also make it nearly impossible for women and girls to be full-fledged citizens. Many women who were rescued by the Nigerian military had no idea that a presidential election had occurred in Nigeria.¹³⁰ The combination of physical, sexual, and psychological abuse of the women and girls in the hands of Boko Haram and their material deprivation in conventional society therefore reinforces their second-class status. In addition, women who display signs of Stockholm syndrome¹³¹ may be at risk of being detained for unusually long periods for purposes of intelligence gathering. Others who had attempted suicide bombing may become added to the ranks of criminalized women. This category includes Hadiza Musa, a 10-year-old girl, who was arrested in July 2014 in Kano¹³² and 13-year-old Zahharau Babangida whose case was noted earlier. The incriminating evidence

against these young girls—suicide vests—may be used for prosecution given that the minimum age of criminal responsibility in Nigeria is seven years.¹³³ Other women and young girls who have been forced to participate in killing civilians may also face prosecution unless the government provides amnesty to Boko Haram's fighters.

Another consequence of Boko Haram's attacks centers around social class. Many of Boko Haram's victims—males and females—are largely drawn from the poor masses of Northern Nigeria. This category includes private citizens who were gunned down or bombed to death in rural communities, markets, places of worship, military barracks, and bus terminals among others. The estimated 15,000 fighters in the ranks of Boko Haram are also largely impoverished persons from the North. Young females who continue to drop out of school also contribute to further impoverishing the female *talakawa* of Northern Nigeria as most face bleak futures when married off early in life after dropping out of school. Boko Haram's atrocities, particularly sexual violence against women, are not only antipoor in orientation but also reflective of the inequalities in Nigeria's economic and political system.¹³⁴

Discussion

There is a connection between women's peacetime status and how they are treated during conflict, as UN Special Representative Zainab Bangura has noted.¹³⁵ Social movement organizations—violent or nonviolent—generally draw on available resources, practices, knowledge, networks, and prevailing attitudes and beliefs in their environment.¹³⁶ Boko Haram's "conversion potential"¹³⁷ is evidenced in how it uses prevailing cultural practices in Nigeria in its war against women. For instance, insurgents who are marrying off prepubescent girls are not doing anything that the local population is not already familiar with. Such arranged and forced marriages are routine.¹³⁸ The implication is that some members of society who are condemning Boko Haram's atrocities were in fact married off at a similar age or had married girls as young as some of those forced to marry Boko Haram's fighters. The processual fabrication of gender through the interplay of individual gender, gender symbolism and gender structure¹³⁹ has resulted in the production of a large number of persons who are kept on the margins of the (Nigerian) society—materially and ideationally—because they are females.

Therefore, besides suicide bombing which is arguably anathema to Nigeria's cultures and values, Boko Haram's sexual and gendered violence against women is a derivative of the prevailing patriarchal infrastructure of Nigeria. For example, 15-year-old Wasila Tasi'u, known as the "Kano girl-bride," was charged to court for murdering her 35-year-old "husband" and four of his family members whom she allegedly killed with rat poison.¹⁴⁰ She was 14 years old in 2014 when she was forced into marriage. The husband's family withdrew the case claiming to have forgiven Wasila. She could have received the death penalty had the case not been withdrawn.¹⁴¹

Taking young girls as brides in Northern Nigeria is not restricted to the average citizen. For instance, a senator and former governor of Northwestern Zamfara State, Ahmed Sani, drew public condemnation in 2010 over debates about the age of his fourth wife, an Egyptian girl for whom he allegedly paid a \$100,000 dowry.¹⁴² His response was:

I don't care about the issue of age since I have not violated any rule as far as Islam is concerned. ... History tells us that Prophet Muhammad did marry a young girl as well. Therefore I have

not contravened any law. Even if she is 13, as it is being falsely peddled around. ... If I state the age, they will still use it to smear Islam.

Culture, religion, and the law serve as the triumvirate whose interplay enable routine sexual and gender-based violence against women in Nigeria. Senator Ahmed Sani's 2010 marriage and another in 2006 to a 15-year-old girl breached Nigeria's Child Rights Act of 2003. The complicity of the law is laid bare in that Nigeria's tripartite system of laws meant that any marriage contracted under Islamic or customary law was valid. Sani Yerima was reelected to the Senate in 2011 in part because his marriage was not necessarily culturally abhorrent in his constituency. Consequently, within the (Northern) Nigerian cultural milieu, the problem is not that Boko Haram is marrying off young girls and using them as breeders; the only problem is that Boko Haram is kidnapping young girls. This is interesting because some of the forced marriages in peacetime involve episodes similar to kidnapping reluctant child brides.

Boko Haram's approach to women has parallels in history. In the slavery era, slave women often became unwitting concubines to slave owners, incubators for new slaves as well as beasts of burden in the homes and plantations. Enslaved women were exploited as slaves and women; "female bondage was not only different from male bondage, it was more severe as a result of sexual exploitation."¹⁴³ As slaves, they performed domestic duties such as cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the children of the master.¹⁴⁴ The slave woman in this case was the worldhistorical "black mammy,"¹⁴⁵ who was purportedly happy in her subjugation and was faithful and obedient to her master.¹⁴⁶ Although these domestic duties are not totally nongendered, many tedious jobs on plantations were also assigned to women presupposing a kind of genderlessness in task assignment.¹⁴⁷ Female slaves also endured suffering related to their gender. Such women had to endure from an early age the facticity of being objects of the sexual desire of their master.¹⁴⁸ They were required to have sex with whomever their master wanted.¹⁴⁹ They were unwilling participants in "slave breeding" geared toward producing as many slaves as possible.¹⁵⁰ This reproductive burden in turn generated additional responsibility related to carrying pregnancies to full term while engaged in inhuman labor;¹⁵¹ caring for such children under extremely difficult circumstances and watching their children sold on the slave market or go through the same experiences as their mother.

The experiences of women and young girls in the hands of Boko Haram are therefore similar to those of slave women in the United States. Boko Haram perpetuates the long suffering of African women in particular and social marginality of women in general. Women and young girls are concurrently gendered and rendered genderless by Boko Haram. The women and girls are gendered when they are (sexually) abused as sexual(ized) beings. This extends to periods when such women and young girls are given away to whomever the leaders of Boko Haram please, including re-assignment whenever their "husbands" die in battle. The short life span of Boko Haram fighters owing to growing bombardment by the Nigerian military means a girl could be forced to marry up to five men within a few months.¹⁵² Therefore, a woman who is trapped in Boko Haram's quagmire becomes "a habitual sex slave."¹⁵³ This suggests that the historical (mis)use of women remains alive and is engraved in women's biological constitution and its social interpretation.

Boko Haram's deployment of women also presupposes genderlessness: Some of the female captives are used in the organization's fighting forces, while a few are deployed as

suicide bombers—domains that were traditionally associated with men. While male captives of Boko Haram are either summarily executed or conscripted to the fighting forces, women and young girls face a longer, more tortuous and agonizing dehumanization process.

One key difference between misuse of enslaved women in the United States and Boko Haram's war on women is that men legitimized the libidinal terrorism during slavery but in the case of Boko Haram, men—who control the state's apparatus of coercion—have failed to stop the atrocities. This underscores the location of power in society and signposts women's marginality across time and space.

Conclusion

Finally, this article has focused on three major themes. These are (1) Boko Haram's atrocities against women merely reflect routine manifestations of (peacetime) gender inequality and oppressive cultural practices against women in Northern Nigeria; (2) the salience of women to the Boko Haram phenomenon; and (3) the consequences of Boko Haram's sexual and gender-based violence on: (a) women as well as their families and communities; (b) Boko Haram's global recognition and male bonding and; (c) gender inequality. The dimensions of Boko Haram's SGBV are analyzed as factors that are embedded in the social fabric of the Nigerian society. Boko Haram construes women as the bearers of its future despite its brutality toward them. The article also contributes to growing scholarship indicating that there is no monolithic *female* experience during periods of anomie. Women and girls have multiple and varied experiences.

This study aligns with and contributes to research indicating that sexual violence against women hinges on the ways in which gender functions as an organizing principle at various levels of society: individual, cultural, and structural.¹⁵⁴ Boko Haram's sexual violence against women is articulated as a reflection and an extension of mundane gender-based violence that are all too common in society.¹⁵⁵ Overall, this article argues that Boko Haram targets and instrumentalizes female persons. Such female persons are targeted for the facticity of their gender—the sociobiological utility of women.

Notes

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6. Ibid.
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