On Rescuing Modernity: Religion, Power, and Gender Violence in Contemporary Nigeria

A RESPONSE TO:

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Nigeria is not absolutely beyond redemption. Critical, yes, but not entirely hopeless. But every single day of continued neglect brings her ever closer to the brink of the abyss. To pull her back and turn her around is clearly beyond the contrivance of mediocre leadership. It calls for greatness.

CHINUA ACHEBE

The Nigerian state, sensibilities, and space are currently under siege with ethno-religious jingoists that have unleashed terror, death, and violence in the country. The sacred rage of the Boko Haram movement continues to leave untold misery and pain in certain areas of the country. This is a phenomenon that has attracted both international attention and negative publicity for the Nigerian government. Since 2009, Boko Haram has waged an unrelenting war against government officials (especially the police), Christians, Muslims, clerics, traditional leaders, and politicians who have condemned the movement’s tactics or were perceived of being in partnership with the government. For Boko Haram, nothing is off limits because they have also attacked the United Nations building and the offices of This Day, a private newspaper in Abuja. The recent carnage at a mosque during Friday prayer in November 2014 confirms that the movement considers mainstream Islam a pernicious form of religiosity.

The article by El-Affendi and Gumel carefully spells out some of the nagging issues that are connected with the abduction of about 239 girls by Boko Haram in Chibok. This incident garnered global repulsion when the leader of the movement gleefully proclaimed that he had sold off the girls like cheap commodities. Their article carefully articulates the tendentious issue of power
and gender discrimination in Nigeria. In this West African nation, bias against females and male hegemonic control are serious problems. The United Nations describes gender violence and discrimination as stark manifestations of historically unequal power relations between men and women. Whether overt or covert, male chauvinism still persists in Nigeria. In many quarters, the female is considered the eternal second-class citizen whose domain and dominion is only in the domestic realm. This ideology insidiously perpetuates the concept of “power over” that subjugates females and shuns their possibilities for literacy and self-promotion. El-Affendi and Gumel made this point abundantly clear in their article. It indicates that gender violence is both a symptom of an acute pathology within Boko Haram and consequently, a blatant opposition to modernity and the continuous marginalization of northern Nigeria. While this is true, it is germane to add here that the resurgence of Boko Haram signals a serious situation of anomie within Nigeria. Its rise also underscores the economic, political, and civil crisis in Nigeria. I will not repeat the cogent points on gender violence covered in the article. The thrust of my response as a keen observer of the Nigerian context, is to lay out some of the other broader issues that surround the rage and reign of Boko Haram in Nigeria. Beyond patriarchy, there are other crucial concerns connected with the siege of Boko Haram in contemporary Nigeria.

While members of the movement argue that Boko Haram is not primarily working for Islam, observers point out that Boko Haram identifies with a radical branch of Islam that sanctions violence. However, other observers point out that it is also possible to identify the economic and social conditions that contribute to the overall disenchantment of this group. The economic disparity in the country is a major cause for alarm. The plight of the almajiri groups in northern Nigeria is a great concern for anyone interested in the condition of the dispossessed in the country. In many parts of northern Nigeria, the almajiris are Quranic students attending schools in places very far from their homes. Due to their young ages, they have to resort to begging since there is no other source of support for them. This phenomenon is a telling testimony to the menace of poverty in northern Nigeria today. This system creates the breeding ground for social misfits and anarchists. The Federal government has to make a concerted effort to provide the resources and the enduring framework that will

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1 On a positive note, the Islamic Development Bank in conjunction with the Nigerian government has announced the setting up of a $98 million Almajiri education fund to promote bilingual education and improve Almajiri schooling.