The Lost Decade

A government convenes an official inquiry into a mass killing, takes testimony, compiles a report, identifies those responsible — and then does nothing.

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The academic literature on Boko Haram contains a curious and persistent gap. Scholars have written extensively about the movement's theology, leadership, social base, and relationship to global Salafism consistently mention the 1990s and then move on. The decade appears in their footnotes and in their chronological summaries, a list of place names that have come to carry a terrible weight in Nigerian political memory: Kafanchan, Zangon-Kataf, Tafawa Balewa, Jos, Kaduna. The names are acknowledged, but their significance is not explained. That gap is a structural error with direct consequences for how we understand what Boko Haram was, where it came from, and why, when it finally erupted into full insurgency after 2009, it spread with a speed and geographic depth that surprised almost everyone.

The argument is straightforward, though its implications are not. The communal violence of the 1990s created four specific structural conditions that made the northeast of Nigeria, by the early 2000s, exceptionally receptive to the kind of movement Mohammed Yusuf was building. Those conditions were: the institutionalisation of impunity, the displacement of local grievances into portable civilisational narratives, the formation of community militia infrastructure, and the progressive collapse of state legitimacy at the ground level. None of these conditions, individually, is sufficient to produce insurgency. Together, as a system, they are very nearly sufficient, and they are the missing variable in nearly every account of how Boko Haram became what it became.

To understand why the 1990s matter, it helps to understand why they have been overlooked. The scholarly literature on political violence in Northern Nigeria was built, in its foundations, around two anchoring events: the Maitatsine uprisings of 1980 to 1985, and the emergence of Boko Haram in the early 2000s. Both events generated substantial and serious scholarship. Maitatsine attracted sociologists and historians who documented its social base among urban migrants, its theological heterodoxy, and the state's characteristic response cycle of inattention followed by military suppression. Boko Haram attracted a different generation of scholars who traced its intellectual genealogy through Salafist networks, Saudi-funded religious education, and the specific biography of Mohammed Yusuf.

The problem is the space between them. Alexander Thurston's Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement (Princeton University Press, 2018), the most thorough intellectual history of the movement available, attends closely to the religious currents of the intervening decades but treats their crises, the riots, the confrontations, the cycles of massacre and reprisal, as backdrop rather than as structure. N.D. Danjibo, in an influential paper titled " Islamic fundamentalism and sectarian violence," lists the crises of the 1990s in chronological order, as if sequence were the same thing as explanation. B. Salawu's comparative survey of ethno-religious conflict covers the period comprehensively without asking what the period collectively produced. What they missed, and what this essay attempts to recover, is the structural legacy of that decade, not its events, which have been documented with some care.

The 1990s were not understudied in their time. Nigerian newspapers covered the communal crises extensively. Human rights organisations like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International produced detailed reports on the killings in Zangon-Kataf, in Kaduna, and in Plateau State. Commissions of inquiry were established after each major episode, heard testimony, and filed reports. The paper trail from the decade is, in archival terms, rich. What is striking, reviewing that paper trail, is not the scale of the violence (though the scale was staggering) but the consistency of what followed it. After the 1987 Kafanchan crisis, a commission was established. After the 1991 Tafawa Balewa riots, an investigative process was initiated. After the Zangon-Kataf massacre of 1992, the Kaduna State government established the Justice Rahila Cudjoe Commission of Inquiry, which heard testimony from both communities and produced its reports. Those reports were submitted, filed, and acted upon in precisely one way: they were not acted upon. No White Paper — the instrument by which a Nigerian government formally responds to a commission of inquiry — was produced for twenty-eight years, until the Kaduna State government finally constituted a committee to draft one in 2020, noting, in its own words, that the commission's recommendations had "not received comprehensive response or attention."

What impunity actually teaches

There is a tendency, in writing about impunity, to describe it in moral terms. That is true. But impunity is also, in a more precise and in some ways more dangerous sense, an information system. It tells the people observing it something specific and actionable about the likely consequences of political violence. Consider what the communities of Northern Nigeria had been told, through the official processes of the Nigerian state, by the time the decade ended. After each major episode of communal killing, the state had convened hearings, taken testimony, and, in some instances, publicly named those responsible for organising the violence. And then it had returned those people to their ordinary lives without legal consequence. From the perspective of anyone calibrating the expected costs of participating in future communal violence, this was a reliable estimate, produced by the state's own official processes and confirmed across multiple episodes and multiple years. The estimate was: the legal risk of organised communal violence in Northern Nigeria is negligible.

When Mohammed Yusuf's recruiters arrived in the early 2000s, preaching that the Nigerian state was not a legitimate authority worthy of obedience, they were making an empirically grounded claim to communities that had watched, repeatedly and documentably, as the state declined to punish those who killed their neighbors. The receptiveness of those communities to that message is the logical consequence of a decade of communicated impunity. Yusuf's project, however, did not merely await this receptive condition; it actively completed the governance void that impunity had opened. Within its Maiduguri enclave, the movement constructed what one contemporary observer called a state within a state: departments, a shura, a hisbah, a farm, a microfinance scheme, and Yusuf himself sitting as judge in the settlement of disputes, a parallel apparatus built to operate alongside the federal state until, its members believed, it would one day replace it. To communities around it, this offered a tangible, if coercive, alternative to the formal judiciary and fiscal systems that had so manifestly failed to enforce legal accountability. The theological justification for these structures was novel, but their functional appeal derived directly from the specific judicial and economic lacunae that the preceding decade had carved into the region's institutional landscape.

The mechanism of displacement

In February 1992, violence erupted in Zangon-Kataf, a local government area in southern Kaduna State, over the decision to relocate a weekly market. The dispute was, at its origins, precisely a question of where traders would set up their stalls, and which community's economic and symbolic interests would be served by the answer. The grievance was bound by the history of Atyap-Hausa relations in that specific place. By the time the second wave of violence crested in May of that year, the dead numbered in the hundreds by official counts — and above eighteen hundred in the figures the Kaduna State government itself would later cite — and the conflict had been reframed as an instance of civilisational confrontation between Islam and Christianity: killings of Hausa by Kataf were answered by reprisal killings of Christians across several other parts of Kaduna State. The transformation was the product of deliberate political work by actors who had strong interests in categorical rather than specific conflict. A dispute about a market is not easily exported; a civilisational confrontation between communities of faith is infinitely portable.

The political scientist E. E. Schattschneider identified, in 1960, the fundamental logic at work here. Specific, localised grievances constrain themselves by their specificity: they involve particular actors, particular places, particular disputes, and the range of people they can mobilise is limited by those particulars. Categorical grievances framed as conflicts between groups defined by religion, ethnicity, or civilisational identity carry no such constraint. Such framings, in Schattschneider's words, "make conflict contagious"; they invite outside intervention. They can be taken up by people with no personal stake in the original dispute, deployed by political entrepreneurs in entirely different contexts, and recruited into narratives of conflict that existed long before the specific triggering event and will persist long after it is resolved.

This is what happened to the grievances of the 1990s. The decade's communal violence produced a portable narrative framework that was available, by the early 2000s, to any movement that wanted to use it. Boko Haram used it with particular efficiency. Yusuf did not need to explain to his potential recruits why they should distrust the Nigerian state. He needed only to name, in theological language, what they had already seen.

The militias that the state made

When communities experience mass violence and watch the state decline to punish those responsible, they face a practical decision about their future safety. The decision, in abstract terms, is straightforward: do you rely on the state that has just demonstrated its unwillingness to protect you, or do you organise to protect yourself? Across Northern Nigeria in the 1990s, many communities chose the second option. The choice was rational. The result was the emergence, across the decade, of community defense formations of varying formality and cohesion: youth security organisations, vigilante groups with geographic responsibilities and leadership hierarchies, armed community response networks that operated entirely outside formal state authority. The same pressure reshaped communal organisation of every kind: the Atyap's own development association, registered in 1989 as a youth body, was transformed by the violence and its unpunished aftermath into a permanent apparatus of communal advocacy, documentation, and self-defence agitation, the civic face of the same calculation that armed the vigilantes. Similar formations emerged across southern Kaduna, across Plateau State, across the areas most repeatedly exposed to communal violence.

The analytical significance of these formations is not primarily what they did. It is what they represented: communities with experience of, established social norms around, and functional infrastructure for armed collective action outside state structures. This is, in the academic literature on insurgency, a well-documented precondition. Paul Staniland's research on how insurgent organisations are built demonstrates that the prewar social networks in which organisers are embedded determine the kind of organisation they can construct once conflict begins, that preexisting social bases vary in the resources they offer, and that the vertical ties between organisers and local communities shape recruitment itself. Movements achieve organisational depth most rapidly, in other words, where social networks capable of sustaining armed organisation already exist, where the question of how to coordinate armed resistance has already been partially answered before the insurgent movement arrives to ask it.

The community defense formations of the 1990s were created as rational responses to state failure. But they produced, as a structural legacy, precisely the organisational raw material that Staniland identifies as enabling: a region in which the capacity for armed extra-state organisation had been built, tested, and normalised across a decade of practice. When Boko Haram's organisers arrived in the early 2000s, they were not operating in a region where the state's monopoly on organised force was intact and the idea of armed self-organisation unfamiliar. They were recruiting in a North where that monopoly had already been conceded in practice — where the northeast's own traditions of hunters' guilds and community guards sat within a decade-old, region-wide repertoire of organising armed force outside the state. This legacy imposes a corresponding strategic paradox upon subsequent state responses. When the Nigerian security establishment belatedly sought to counter Boko Haram's territorial gains, its reactive co-optation of these same traditions — arming vigilante groups against the insurgency — risked institutionalising the very extra-state coercive capacity the preceding decades had engendered: the vigilantes sharpened the campaign, but the risk, as Crisis Group warned, was combatants turning to communal violence and organised crime, and the eventual emergence of mafias and ethnic militias. The formation served its immediate tactical purpose, but it also deepened the structural precedent of organised armed action beyond formal state command, entrenching a governance dilemma that transcends the specific jihadist threat.

The slow death of legitimacy

The fourth mechanism is the hardest to document with the precision that commission reports or militia formations permit, but it may be the most consequential of the four. It is the process by which communities progressively withdraw their recognition of the Nigerian state's right to govern them. Political legitimacy, in David Beetham's influential account, rests on three foundations: legal authority, the state exercises power according to established rules; justificatory authority, the state exercises power in accordance with values that its subjects recognise as appropriate; and expressed consent, the subjects of the state actively acknowledge its claim to rule. Beetham gives the erosion a name, delegitimation, and locates it precisely where this essay does: not in abstract belief, but in the accumulating actions of the governed, from non-cooperation and passive resistance to open disobedience, each of which withdraws a measure of what it once conferred. The erosion of legitimacy is the process by which a state loses its claim to one or more of these foundations, not abstractly, but in the lived experience of the communities it governs.

In Northern Nigeria across the 1990s, the Nigerian state undermined all three simultaneously. Its legal authority was weakened by its refusal to apply the law to those responsible for communal killing; the most fundamental legal obligation of any state is to prevent and punish the killing of its citizens. Its justificatory authority was destroyed by the gap between its self-presentation as a protector of community security and its demonstrated performance. And its claim to expressed consent, already attenuated, in a decade governed by military decree, to something closer to acquiescence, was withdrawn not primarily in words but in the manner Beetham's framework predicts: in actions. Every community that organised its own armed protection was performing, whatever its members said publicly, a formal withdrawal of the consent on which the state's claim to a monopoly of force depends. The defense formations of the third mechanism are also the evidence of the fourth.

What the collapse of legitimacy produces, in practical terms, is a demand-side condition for alternative governance. Zachariah Mampilly's comparative study of rebel governance, spanning insurgencies in Sri Lanka, Congo, and Sudan, demonstrates that armed movements generate civilian compliance less through coercion, though coercion is always present, than by appropriating the functions of the state itself: courts, policing, taxation, schools, the whole performative apparatus of rule. Compliance, in other words, follows governance. But governance can only be offered to communities prepared to accept it, communities that have undergone a prior process of legitimacy revision, a shift in their assessment of which authority structure deserves their recognition.

That prior process of revision was what the 1990s delivered to Northern Nigerian communities. By the end of the decade, the state's claim to legitimate authority in many parts of the North East rested on a decade of compounding failure to prevent violence, punish it, and deliver the basic governance functions that legitimise the exercise of state power. When Boko Haram offered an alternative frame of authority, it was offering itself to communities for whom state failure was the most consistent feature of their institutional experience.

Why the standard explanations fall short

The structural bridge argument does not replace the existing explanations for Boko Haram's emergence. It supplements them, and in supplementing them, it clarifies both what they get right and what they cannot account for.

Take the poverty argument, which appears in virtually every account of the insurgency. The collapse of Nigeria's oil economy, the structural adjustment programs of the 1980s that dismantled the social infrastructure of the Northern Nigerian state, and the chronic unemployment that attended the transition from oil boom to oil bust, all created conditions of material deprivation that are genuine preconditions for political violence. But poverty is chronically present in Northern Nigeria in a way that insurgency is not. Many of the poorest communities in the region did not produce Boko Haram. Poverty is necessary, but nowhere near sufficient, and explanations that rely primarily on it cannot account for the timing, geography, or specific organisational character of the movement.

Take the governance failure argument. State weakness is real, and the Nigerian state's failure to deliver basic services and security in the North East is genuinely relevant, but weak states are not rare in sub-Saharan Africa, and most weak states do not produce Boko Haram. What the governance failure argument misses is the question of how specific patterns of state failure interact with specific pre-existing social structures to produce specific organisational outcomes. The structural bridge argument provides precisely that mediation.

Take the ideological radicalisation argument, most fully developed in Thurston's intellectual history of the movement. The analysis of how Salafist theology, Saudi-funded religious networks, and the specific intellectual formation of Mohammed Yusuf combined to produce Boko Haram's theological character is indispensable, but ideology requires a social environment in which to propagate. The same ideas, preached to communities without the structural legacies of the 1990s, would have encountered less prepared, less receptive soil, which would have been more capable of being contained by state response.

What the 2020s inherit

The banditry and kidnapping crisis that has devastated Northwestern and North Central Nigeria through the 2020s is, on its surface, a different phenomenon from Boko Haram. The actors are different. The geographic locus has shifted westward. The ideological content, where it exists, is distinct from Salafist theology. The targets and tactics have evolved. But the structural mechanisms are recognisable. The impunity for organised armed actors that characterised the 1990s has been reproduced and intensified by two decades of counterinsurgency operations that have frequently produced civilian casualties without accountability. The portable grievance narratives that the 1990s generated have been enriched by the displacement of two million people from the North East, by the normalization of mass kidnapping as an economic and coercive strategy, and by the further erosion of state legitimacy through decades of demonstrated failure. The extra-state organisational infrastructure that the 1990s built has expanded and ramified across subsequent decades of state failure. And the communities experiencing the current crisis are approaching it as communities for whom that abandonment is, by now, not a decade-old but generational.

The structural process that this essay documents for the 1990s-to-2000s transition has reproduced itself, with local variations, in the 2010s-to-2020s transition. The mechanisms are the same. The deposits are deeper. The communities most affected have more experience of state failure, more organizational infrastructure developed outside state authority, and more fully elaborated grievance narratives to draw on.

The research program within which this essay sits, the 80-25 project, examining the history of insecurity in Northern Nigeria from 1980 to 2025, rests on the proposition that what looks, from a distance, like a succession of discrete crises is better understood as a single, cumulative structural process. Each era deposits conditions that the next inherits. The 1990s deposited four specific mechanisms. The 2000s and 2010s compounded them. The 2020s are living in what those compounds produced.

In the aftermath of the Zangon-Kataf killings of 1992, the federal government established a commission of inquiry. The commission heard testimony. It compiled evidence. It produced a report identifying the dynamics of the violence. The report was submitted and filed. No prosecution followed. The communities that had experienced the violence, and the communities that had watched the state's response, absorbed the information that the process transmitted. They drew the conclusions that the evidence supported.

Twenty years later, when Boko Haram had established territorial control across large portions of the North East, kidnapped thousands, and displaced more than two million people, Nigerian security analysts and international observers expressed repeated surprise at the speed and depth of the insurgency's expansion. The surprise was, in retrospect, a measure of what the analysts had not been tracking. They had been watching ideology and leadership, and economic indicators. They had not been watching what a decade of systematically unanswered communal violence had deposited in the communities through which the insurgency moved.

Published by 80–25, a digital archive of forty-five years of insecurity in Northern Nigeria (1980–2025).
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