

The Man Who Was Nothing Before God

A man who murdered associates over trivialities presented himself, on camera, as a composed and theologically certain instrument of divine will.

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In May 2014, a video appeared online that would become one of the most widely circulated documents of the Boko Haram era. In it, Abubakar Shekau — commander, ideologue, the man who had just ordered the abduction of nearly three hundred schoolgirls from Chibok — looked into a camera and said, “*I am nothing and worthless before God. Even a small person can kill me.*” He also said, in the same video, that he could not be stopped, that no one could end him, that he would sell the girls in the market because Allah had instructed him to do so. He laughed. He fired a weapon into the air. He seemed, as he always seemed, entirely convinced of everything he was saying. By 2014, there were many such videos, stretching back five years, all of them exhibiting the same strange *contradiction*: a man claiming divine invincibility and human worthlessness in the same breath, often in the same sentence. A man who said he was nothing but simultaneously claimed to act as the direct instrument of God's unlimited power on earth. Academic literature on Shekau, which by the time of his death in the Sambisa Forest in May 2021 had become substantial, was largely content to note the grandiosity and move on. His self-glorification is well documented. His self-annihilation is almost entirely ignored.

What looks like a contradiction, on examination, shows a coherent theological system, centuries deep in Northern Nigerian Islamic tradition, in which the two halves of Shekau's self-presentation are mutually constitutive.

The Islamic theological concept that makes sense of all of this is called *fana*. It is a Sufi term, developed most systematically in the mystical tradition but present well beyond formal Sufism in the popular religious imagination of the Muslim world, and nowhere more vividly than in the Islam of Northern Nigeria. *Fana* means annihilation (specifically, the annihilation of the individual self, the *nafs*, in divine presence). The person who has undergone *fana* no longer acts from personal will, personal fear, or personal desire. They act purely as an instrument of divine will. This state is experienced within the tradition as the fullest possible form of power, not as weakness or loss. The person who has annihilated their personal self is no longer limited by personal resources; they act with divine resources and cannot be defeated by human forces, because human forces act upon a personal self that no longer exists. The architecture of self-annihilation rests upon a second, equally foundational pillar: *takfir* and *jahiliyya*. If *fana* supplied the internal purity of the divine vessel, *takfir*, the declaration of apostasy, supplied the external jurisdiction for its violence. The Nigerian state and its adherents were not merely political adversaries in Shekau's cosmos; they were denizens of *jahiliyya*, a pre-Islamic state of ignorance that rendered their lives, their property, and their institutions forfeit. The man who was nothing before God was thereby licensed to annihilate everything outside God's commanded order. To divorce the dialectic of the self from the

dialectic of exclusion is to read only half the grammar of the jihadist sentence. This is the theological architecture inside which Shekau's declarations become axioms. When he said he was nothing before God, he was claiming the power that belongs to those who have emptied themselves of their own contents. When he said he could not be stopped, he was claiming the consequence of that emptiness: the person who is nothing personally is the vessel through which divine power acts without constraint. His worthlessness and his invincibility were one thing seen from two angles.

Northern Nigerian Islam had produced figures who made versions of this claim for centuries. The *wali* (the friend of God, the saint) was someone who had achieved degrees of this annihilation and through it gained access to extraordinary power. The *majzub*, the holy fool, was absorbed so completely in divine presence that ordinary social conventions no longer applied to him. He might appear irrational, indifferent to consequence, operating on a logic that only made sense from inside the divine relationship. Both figures combined apparent human powerlessness with access to something larger. Shekau drew on this complex when he built his persona, and, as we shall see, corrupted it in ways that every legitimate Islamic authority who encountered him eventually felt compelled to condemn.

He came to power in circumstances that required him to construct authority quickly, from a position of genuinely contested legitimacy. Mohammed Yusuf, his predecessor, had been charismatic, educated, politically connected, capable of holding his own in formal theological debate. Shekau was, by available accounts, Yusuf's unruly second-in-command: more radical, less systematically learned, without the social and intellectual capital that had grounded Yusuf's standing. When Nigerian security forces killed Yusuf in extrajudicial circumstances in July 2009, Shekau was left as the movement's leader, but not in any way that was theologically secure. He needed to establish that his authority was authentic. The sacred warrior persona was how he did it. The extrajudicial character of Yusuf's death was not incidental to Shekau's emergence; it was the generative wound. The Nigerian state, in its brutality and its indifference to the legal strictures it purported to uphold, supplied the material aetiology for the divine vengeance Shekau promised. The military's scorched-earth campaigns, the systemic neglect of the north-east's governance, and the endemic corruption that emptied state coffers while filling mass graves, these were the terrestrial preconditions without which the sacred warrior's transcendental claims would have found no purchase on human hearts.

The early videos, read as a cumulative text rather than as a chronicle, reveal a consistent strategic logic. They can be understood as being about borrowing legitimacy from the predecessor. Shekau positioned himself as the avenger of Yusuf's unjust killing, which allowed him to inherit Yusuf's martyrdom as a kind of rhetorical capital. The self-annihilation dimension was present in these early addresses but less developed than it would become. The foundational move, as Shekau's repeated formulations suggest, was the substitution of divine allegiance for national allegiance. "*You pledge to Nigeria, your country,*" he said, in formulations he would repeat throughout his career. "*I pledge to Allah my God.*" It was a declaration of sovereign loyalty, and it contained, in embryo, the entire dialectic. To pledge to Allah is to have no personal stake in the arrangements of human institutions. To be nothing before God is to owe nothing to any human authority. The self-annihilation before the divine was simultaneously a self-assertion against the state.

Between 2013 and 2016, the persona reached its fullest expression. These were the years of Boko Haram's greatest territorial expansion, the Chibok abduction, the pledge of allegiance to ISIS, and also the years in which Shekau's video addresses became most theatrically elaborate and most theologically extreme. The staging was precise. He appeared outdoors, against landscapes deliberately indeterminate enough to prevent geographic identification while conveying spatial freedom. He wore robes and a turban that communicated religious authority, paired with weapons that communicated military force. This was the visual grammar of the sacred warrior archetype: a figure for whom religious and military authority were inseparable, each legitimating the other.

But the staging was not merely visual; it was technical. The cameras that captured these tableaux, the editors who curated the rhythm of the invocations and the discharge of weapons, the logistical networks that distributed the final product across terabytes of rural storage media and encrypted urban channels, these constituted the material apparatus of the persona's production. The video Shekau was not a spontaneous emanation of a solitary consciousness; he was a manufactured object, forged in the crucible of a propaganda offensive that understood the ontological weight of the image as acutely as any theologian understood the word. The precise term for the figure he performed in classical Islamic jurisprudence is *mujahid*; one who undertakes jihad, defined in *fiqh* not as indiscriminate violence but as struggle conducted within a strict framework of conditions: declared by a legitimate authority, directed at legitimate targets, governed by rules on the treatment of civilians and captives. The classical mujahid was a legally regulated figure. The Chibok video of May 2014 is the fullest single expression of the dialectic. In it, Shekau claimed to have received direct divine communication about the fate of the girls, a claim that placed him in the tradition of prophetic authority, in which the vessel of divine will receives direct instruction. To be nothing before God and to receive direct divine commands are the same claim made twice. The one who has annihilated himself before God is precisely the one through whom God speaks directly. But the girls of Chibok were not merely the props of his performance; they were the subjects of his theological negation. The sacred warrior, in Shekau's rendering, was axiomatically male, and his authority was predicated upon the absolute subjugation of the feminine. The *fana* tradition, in its classical iterations, offered no such exclusion; Northern Nigeria has produced female saints and scholars whose annihilation before the divine was indistinguishable from that of their male counterparts. Shekau chose a path of radical misogyny, and that choice, to render the female body as the territory upon which divine will was enacted, was not an incidental cruelty but a constitutive feature of his corrupted theology. To understand the persona is to understand that the man who claimed to be nothing before God asserted a violent, incontestable dominion over women, a contradiction that reveals the internal fault lines of his entire construction. After 2016, the territorial losses mounted. ISIS removed Shekau from formal leadership of the broader movement. Boko Haram's urban and territorial control contracted. And the videos continued but in a form that was increasingly eschatological rather than triumphant. The self-annihilation rhetoric shifted register. In earlier phases it had functioned as the theological precondition for invincibility: *I am nothing, therefore I cannot be stopped*. In this final phase it became the precondition for martyrdom: *I am nothing, therefore I am ready to die*. The emotional temperature was entirely different. A man who had spent years mocking his declared deaths was now composing himself toward an actual one.

In his last recording, Shekau welcomed what was coming. When ISWAP forces cornered him in the Sambisa Forest, he detonated explosives. The sacred warrior persona's final performance was its own death: chosen and given theological meaning by the framework that had grounded everything preceding it. The servant gave everything back to God.

There is another document to set alongside the videos. It is an open letter, circulated between the summer of 2015 and the spring of 2016, written by Mamman Nur, one of Boko Haram's most senior figures, a man who had known Shekau intimately. Nur describes the inner workings of the core group around the leader. His portrait is stark: Shekau as *"an arbitrary and capricious person, indifferent to civilian and military needs, who regularly murders close associates for trivial offences."* Nur adds that he himself had only barely avoided this fate. The gap between this description and the video persona is the most analytically significant fact about Shekau's twelve years of self-presentation. The video Shekau — composed, theologically articulate, certain in his divine mandate, performing the dialectic of nothingness and invincibility with remarkable consistency — is a construction. The Nur portrait — arbitrary, capricious, indifferent, murderous over trivial matters — describes a person. Between these two documents is the sustained, careful work through which the video Shekau was built from whatever the private Shekau actually was.

The relationship between the persona and the violence it enabled is not incidental. When a man has claimed that his authority derives not from reason or consultation but from direct divine mandate, he has also constructed a framework inside which it becomes theologically impossible for anyone to correct his judgments. His followers cannot tell him he is wrong. There is no institutional check on his decisions. The arbitrary violence that Nur describes is, in this sense, an internal institutional consequence of the same theological constructs that shape the external persona. The sacred warrior's self-annihilation before God is, translated into organisational terms, a claim to absolute authority over everyone else.

The persona may also have served purposes that were less theological than psychological. A man who kills associates for minor offences is, within the framework of the sacred warrior persona, someone who enforces divine law with impartiality. The loner who communicates with only a select few is a prophet who does not seek worldly approval. Indifference to civilian welfare becomes the divine warrior's transcendence of worldly concern. The persona offered a theological language through which they could be expressed, elevated, and insulated from criticism. Constructing that language took twelve years of video addresses, each one adding another layer to the architecture of the sacred warrior, and the man and the persona, over that time, became impossible to separate.

What Shekau corrupted, specifically, was the tradition's relationship to Islamic scholarly authority. The *wali* and the *mujahid* of Northern Nigerian Islamic tradition derived their legitimacy from demonstrated Islamic learning. Usman dan Fodio, whose Sokoto Jihad of 1804 – 1808 established the foundational template for divinely mandated military authority in the region, wrote extensively. His scholarly credentials were public, assessable, and capable of being debated. Mohammed Yusuf, Shekau's own predecessor, engaged Islamic scholars in argument. His texts were contested on their merits. Shekau claimed divine mandate without the scholarly apparatus that the tradition required to validate such claims. The consequence was consistent. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb wrote him a rebuking letter, which he ignored. Mamman Nur denounced him. ISIS eventually deposed him. Every significant Islamic authority

that examined his theological claims rejected them. The sacred warrior was real as a performance. He was hollow as a theological construction.

The rejection was not confined to transnational jihadi competitors. The indigenous custodians of Northern Nigerian Islam, the Sultan of Sokoto, the scholarly hierarchies of the *Qadiriyya* and *Tijaniyya Sufi* orders, and the Board of the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs all issued jurisprudential rebuttals. They condemned his violence, his spurious claims to direct prophecy, and his abandonment of the established conditions for jihad. They understood the *fana* tradition more deeply than Shekau ever did, and they recognised in his performance a grotesque parody rather than a legitimate continuation. Their arguments were not merely political; they were theological dissections that exposed the hollowness of his claim to divine mandate from within the very tradition he purported to represent.

The dialectic of self-annihilation and self-glorification continues to be imitated by a subsequent generation of Northern Nigerian jihadist communicators who draw on the vocabulary Shekau developed without possessing, perhaps, the theological personality that made his construction credible to his followers. The performance, however, was never solitary; it required an audience. Shekau's followers were not passive recipients but active interpreters, negotiating the rhetoric of annihilation through the lens of their own dispossession and hope. Did they parse the fine distinctions of *fana*, or did they respond to the overwhelming charisma of absolute certainty? The historical record suggests the latter, a reception that rendered the theology secondary to the spectacle of unassailable conviction. And the spectacle has outlived its originator. The template Shekau refined is now wielded by fragmentary commanders in the Lake Chad basin, splinter groups who have appropriated his visual grammar and his dialectical structure while discarding whatever residual constraints the *fana* tradition might have imposed. Their names and their territories shift, but the architecture remains, waiting to be inhabited by the next man who would be nothing before God in order to be everything to his followers.

He is dead now, in the Sambisa Forest, where he detonated a device rather than submit to capture. The performance is over, but the tradition it corrupted is still available, and the template it produced is still being used. Understanding the architecture is the precondition for understanding what comes next. He said he was nothing before God and could not be stopped. He was, in the end, stopped. But the man who performed himself as nothing became, through that performance, something that outlasted him.

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