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Regionalism and Local Colour in Helon Habila's *The Chibok Girls*

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides the lens to analyse regionalism and local colour as an important topic in African literature. Helon Habila's exploration of regionalism and local colour in *The Chibok Girls* helps to achieve the aim of the story: to tell the world, from an eye-witness account, of the insurgency in the northern region of Nigeria. As a former local journalist, Habila understands that the narratives being presented by the nation's media are distorted to preserve the country's image, to the detriment of the locals who contend with the horror and displacement that Boko Haram fighters mete out on them on daily basis. While the text reflects the Boko Haram insurgency, the indifference and ineptitude of the central government in tackling religious fundamentalism in the Muslim majority North, Habila's ultimate intention is to draw the world's attention to the region by telling a story that reflects the environment, the customs, the language and the aspirations of the local inhabitants. Habila believes that when the attention of the international community is drawn to the region, some of the major problems that the North is facing – like bigotry, poverty, disease, political thuggery, ethnic crises, and lack of access to education, good roads, clean water, and decent shelter – will be solved. To

achieve this in the story, Habila's story details the environment, the experience of the victims of Boko Haram kidnappings and assassinations, as well as those things that make diverse communities in the region different from the other, like religion, mother tongues and local dialects. This paper examines some of these issues as characteristics of the region and tries to establish the argument that *The Chibok Girls* is a northern narrative instead of a national story of the country. This article shows that literature can offer a better perspective to reality than media reports, geographical map, or historical documents.
Keywords: Boko Haram, Community, Local colour, Northern, Regionalism

1. Introduction

1.1. A Survey of Regionalism and Local Colour

One of the functions of literature is to propagate culture or people's way of life. Adjacent to that function is to serve as the mirror of society. Going by the former or latter, the function is fully realised with the ideology of regionalism. Regionalism is the expression, celebration and presentation of cultural identity of a geographical entity in art, music and literature. In literature, regionalism describes the peculiar features of a place and the relationship between the natives and the environment. While the literature shows its relationship with a larger segment of a population, its aim is to draw attention to a particular section of society in order to solve the problems bedevilling the region.

Many authors acknowledge that regional novels reflect the verisimilitude of space, a habitat of real men and women living out their culture and fending off natural or man-made challenges. According to M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Harpham, "The regional novel emphasizes the setting, speech, and social structure and customs of a particular locality, not merely as local color, but as important conditions affecting the temperament of the characters and their way of thinking, feeling, and interacting" (202). Abrams'

use of the word "locality" shows that a regional novel sacrifices the expectations of the external and embraces those of the internal and lifts them up for the outside world to see vividly. Regional novels are often regarded as historical documents of a region, because they serve as reference sources for researchers, journalists, historians, sociologists, and political scientists. This is in tandem with Kari Meyers Skredsvig's assertion that "Place and space are components of human reality at its most fundamental level" (141). Human beings cannot be separated from their environment, whether in existence or in their recreation of that existence.

Although writers like Abrams regard regionalism as distinct from local colour, local colour provides us with the same meaning. According to Encyclopaedia Britannica, local colour is a "style of writing derived from the presentation of the features and peculiarities of a particular locality and its inhabitants" (https://www.britanica.com/art/local-color). Both regionalism and local colour have to do with the presentation of features related to a locality in literature.

While the history of regionalism or local colour in literature can be traced in every culture and society, some sources claim that the experiment started in America. Philip Joseph also sees the literary ideology as an American experience. He says: "In American literature, regionalism refers to works that describe a distinctive local geography and culture, and to movements that value smaller-scaled representations of place over representations of broad territorial range" (Introduction). Joseph further notes that regionalism is born of the "modern geographic plurality," or "a larger unit of space" characterised by topographical dimensions, including "economy, history, dialect, and manners." In a heterogeneous society, to talk about only a single region would mean to ignore the others. That is why, as Joseph observes, critics of regionalism submit that the idea is too parochial in this vastly cosmopolitan age. But for Joseph and other defenders, regionalism

emerged as a tool for self-expression for minority writers in America, including the women, blacks, Latinos, as well as rural writers, not just a parochial, interior, introverted way of writing.

In African scholarship and critical debates, regionalism is not an obscure word. There have been discussions about regional politics, intergovernmental coalitions, issues of land, common boundaries and common currency to reflect the coveted African unity. However, nothing much has been discussed about regionalism in African literature, even though there are so many regional literatures like South African literature, East African literature, Anglophone literature, Francophone literature, etc. A few attempts have been made to look at regionalism in East African literature, which heavily relies on local vernaculars like Swahili, Gikuyu, etc. While the literature of East Africa has the objective to promote the Swahili or Gikuyu language, as we see in Ngugi wa Thiongo's' works, its main objective is to document the colonial experience and to expose the horrors of colonialism and its aftermath. For instance, the Mau Mau uprising is peculiar to Kenya, just as apartheid is peculiar to South Africa and its neighbours, like Botswana and Namibia. According to Carol Eastman, East African literature, written in Swahili, is different from the known African literature because it has no definite identity as is often seen in African literature. She says: "East African literature in Swahili, as it is developing, appears to differ from what is being referred to as African literature in both non-vernacular and other vernacular languages. It is a regional literature in an African language with a character which is neither tribal, national nor continental" (53). For Eastman, what classifies this literature as regional is the language which is only spoken and understood in East African countries like Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda.

What we call regional literature in Africa today is the literature that reflects the cultural and historical experience of a particular tribe or section of a society. So many African writers established

themselves as pioneer writers by vividly describing their localities and the natural landscape they witnessed as children. In Camara Laye's *The African Child*, we see the romanticisation of the natural environment and totem worship used by the author to paint the picture of Guinea as of the time he was growing up. In Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom*, too, we see the glory of the fishing villages of South Africa where Mandela's ancestors lived and fished before the advent of colonialism, and the natural and pastoral beauty of the velds where Mandela tended to his flock. And like most other African writers, they used their stories to reflect the political, religious and economic experiences of their people.

Through regional literature, the reader can discern where the author is coming from, even when they are writing from diaspora, as Habila did in *The Chibok Girls*. Regional literature does not only reflect the environment of a locality, it also reflects the language. When Ngozi Chimamanda Adichie published *Purple Hibiscus*, it was easy to know the region the *novel* focused on, with the mention of the Biafran War, the names of the characters and the places the characters live. But her language and style of writing echoes the voices of Chinua Achebe, John Munonye, Elechi Amadi and Chukwuemeka Ike, who are known for representing the language and culture of the people of the Igbo tribe in their novels. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in particular is a novel that clearly reflects the culture of the Igbo tribe before colonialism as well as the people's reaction to it. The relationship between the western invaders and the natives is given prominence in *Arrow of God*, which Achebe uses to recreate traditional politics. Achebe's description of the wrestling matches, new yam feasts and others in *Things Fall Apart* indicates unique rustic life of the Igbo folk and points to the locality the story is coming from. His use of transliteration in *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease* and *Arrow of God* seems to be something that is typical of modern Igbo communities and their writers, and Adichie toes that line, not just

in *Purple Hibiscus* that focuses on the eastern part of the country but in *Americanah* as well, which is rather a diaspora story.

Although Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* are novels, created only from the writers' imagination, they also serve as veritable materials for researchers working on Igbo experience. That is the same purpose that Habila's *The Chibok Girls* serves. It is a useful material for anybody that wants to know more about the history of the Northern Nigeria and the Boko Haram insurgency in the region. The narrative journey into the development of fundamentalism and radicalism in the northwest state of Kano and the northeast state of Yobe, Gombe, Bornu and Bauchi States, as well as its weaponisation by politicians, shows that the problem is not really an ethnic crisis, as the story shows that there are many other tribes, languages, in the North who had been living in peace before radical Islam set in. In Habila's view, it is a religious cum political war – a war designed by fringes of society to gain relevance, hijacked by overzealous and greedy politicians to get into power to gratify their desire for wealth. More especially, he sees it as a coordinated war to complete the jihadist conquest of West Africa by the descendants of Usman dan Fodio.

The analysis of regionalism and local colour focuses on the setting, which is the unique environment of the region, issues peculiar to the region, the language and dialects of a locality, etc. *The Chibok Girls* offers us the opportunity to take interest in the northern region of Nigeria and learn more about it. The author explores a region in despair, not merely the harsh weather conditions, the uneven landscape, but especially the insurgency that has crippled activities in the region. To understand the current state of things in the region, the author ruminates about a time in the past when the region boomed and glowed in its diversity and somewhat obscurity.

1.2. Overview of *The Chibok Girls*

While some literary works produced with the peculiarities of some parts of Africa are described as regional literature, Habila's *The Chibok Girls* fits more into that nomenclature, focusing only on a particular part of the country, instead of a particular part of the continent, but deep into the locality of the northern region, and takes the reader around it. In other words, *The Chibok Girls* is more of a local literature in Nigeria, exploiting the local colour, the bush parts, the mountainsides and valleys, the village huts, the customs and traditions. The author wants his reader to see the story as his self-appointed journey into the heart of Boko Haram insurgency. The beginning is the entrance into the region while the end signifies the exit. With the help of the narrator, the reader has just made a journey into that region and has seen and heard what the people have been going through, which the outside world does not really understand. To understand a story, you need to be familiar with the recreated experience. No wonder the American congressman, Christopher H. Smith, has to jet down to Nigeria to listen to the victims in order to fully understand what is actually happening there.

Styled as *The Chibok Girls: The Boko Haram Kidnappings and Islamic Militancy in Nigeria*, the social novel was written to shock the conscience of the international community, to move them to act. The red painting on the cover page drawing and the title shows that the region is soaking in blood, is drowning in the blood of innocent men and women just like us. As an American-based Professor who is returning to his once cherished peaceful, tolerant homeland, now battered and gored by Boko Haram, Habila is asking the world to imagine what the fate of the girls could be in the hands of those who place no value on human life. The courage the author has mustered to embark on this journey is rooted in his closeness and many years of living in the North. Even though he has become an "Americana" (46), he knows the terrain more than

the jihadists, many of who are new to their target towns and cities they raid in the name of doing "God's work" (59).

The story begins as the narrator leaves the town of Maiduguri with his two greatest allies – Abbas, a native of Chibok's neighbouring town of Lassa, and Michael, a trusted "member of the civilian Joint Task Force" (14) – for Chibok, a remote town in Borno. It is a journey that forces them to touch almost all the north eastern states to get to their destination, meeting so many rigid checkpoints on their way. Like the travellers in T. S. Eliot's "The Journey of the Magi," the narrator and his two friends encounter many challenges, but they make a satisfactory stop as they find the place and locate Pastor Madu who has been assigned to receive him and furnish him with the first-hand story of the kidnapping of the girls. They are not only told how the school girls were kidnapped, but also how incessant killings and sporadic attacks have been going on in that region, even before the kidnapping took place.

Numbering 276, the girls were kidnapped on the night of 14 April 2014 and taken away in "twenty-five parked cars and trucks" (*The Chibok* Girls, 46) into the Sambisa Forest in Borno. The narrator admires some of the girls' sensitivity and courage to plot their own safety after their kidnapping, as fifty-seven of them successfully escaped from the grip of Boko Haram. The stories narrated by some of the girls help the writer in his investigation and the American congress to learn of the stark horrors of the kidnapping that sparked the Bring Back Our Girls hashtag. There was a precursor to Chibok Kidnapping. Two months before the incident, Boko Haram arrested and later released the female students of "Federal Government College, a co-educational secondary school, in the town of Buni Yadi in Yobe State" (22). They taught the girls to detest Western education and to see marriage as their greatest achievement as women. The boys of the school were unlucky though, as "fifty-nine boys were murdered in cold blood" (22).

The narrator also delves into the chronicle of religious crises in the North and the origin of Boko Haram. These crises caused by religious differences had existed before colonialism, but the British were able to use their divide and rule system to bring them together, introducing education which produced "vibrant middle class of civil servants, entrepreneurs, and university professors" (54). Religious crisis was not apparently felt again. However, after independence, extremist Muslims in power like "Ahmadu Bello, a scion of the Usman dan Fodio dynasty and first Premier of the Northern Region, sought to convert the "pagans" of Northern Nigeria" (54). Preachers of radical Islam, like Mohammadu Marwa, founder of Yan Tatsine, behind the Maitatsine uprising of 1980s, "Boko Haram founder Mohammed Yusuf" (58), and "the Salafi preacher Abubakar Gumi" (63) would spring up in many quarters in Bornu, Bauchi, Gombe, Yobe and Kano. These radical bigots spread fundamentalism in the North and turned it into a Boko Haram heartland.

In spite of learning the horrors of the insurgency and the somewhat insurmountable network of the jihadists, the narrator believes that no group of people, no matter how powerful they are, can overpower the government. The government has the might to pulverise any threat to national security. For him, the Boko Haram insurgency is not just a regional crisis orchestrated by northern elites to make Nigeria ungovernable for President Goodluck Jonathan; it is a cancer that may metasticise to other regions if it is not rooted out and destroyed. However, the fight against Boko haram is not only fought by sending troops to the Northeast. The people there, especially the girls, need rehabilitation. The locals need food and water, electricity and access roads. Finally, they need education, especially the girls, because one of the tools that the jihadists use against the region is denial of education to the girls.

The story is told through multiple narrators: Habila (often referred to as the narrator in this paper); Pastor Philip Madu, "the chairman of the Christian Association of Nigeria in Chibok, and head pastor of Good News Evangelistic Ministry" (26); Yana Galang, "one of the leaders of parents association" of "Chibok Girls Secondary School" (29); Ruth, "a teacher by training, and had herself gone to Chibok Girls' Secondary School ten years ago" (29); Foni, a local Chibok man, who "had been drinking in a dark and squalid beer joint" (33); Mallam Kyari, "The Chief Imam of Chibok" (41), and the trio of Hauwa, Ladi, and Juliana, three of the 57 girls that escaped from Boko Haram.

2. Regional Issues Explored in *The Chibok Girls*

2.1 The Environment of the Northern Region

Setting is one of the most important aspects of regionalism. In a regional novel, setting is treated as what defines every action and it can also be seen as a character. In literature, setting is the time and place of a story. Every human activity is subject to the environment and that is what literature intends to teach. In *The Chibok Girls*, we learn of the circumstances surrounding the Boko Haram insurgency, the origin of the mayhem and the part of northern Nigeria that suffers it the most. The Chibok Girls story reminds us of Eliot's "The Journey of the Magi," the nature of the journey taken up by the men and the natural and harsh environment they endured.

The story is set at the height of Boko Haram insurgency. The main part of the story is the year that the Chibok school girls were kidnapped by Boko Haram; that is 2014. But the time that the fact-finding journey starts in the story is 2015. As the narrator puts it, "It was January, the middle of the season of Harmattan, a wind that blows in from the Sahara, carrying with it dust from the great desert" (13). While the kidnapping happened during Goodluck Jonathan's regime, the writing of the story took place immediately Buhari was sworn in as Jonathan's successor in 2015. The author

reflects on his childhood days "in the late 1970s and early 1980s," the history of fundamentalism in the North, which started in 1804 when Usman dan Fodio with his disciples ousted the Hausa leadership class from power and established his caliphates, together with the radical sermons of "the Salafi preacher Abubakar Gumi" and "the influential Izala Society" in the 1960s and 1970s targeted against the doctrines of "the Sufi brotherhoods" (63), and the advent of colonialism in the region. There is also the mention of the precursor of the civil war of 1967, the government's reform of 1974, 1975 and 1979 (see pages 53-54); the introduction of the Sharia Law by Governor Ahmed Yerima of Zamfara State in 1999. The circumstances surrounding the growth of Boko Haram are not only linked to the jihadist agenda of Usman dan Fodio and his scions; they are also linked to the West's campaign against the Middle East, especially in the aftermath of 9/11. According to the narrator, Boko Haram sympathisers believe that the "Israeli occupation of Palestine (which started in 1967); the Iraq war (from 2003 to 2011); the US invasion of Afghanistan (in 2001)" are all a war against Muslims around the world (63). The temporal setting and the backdrop of the story can be located within the precolonial, colonial and post-colonial periods in the Nigerian history. As real as radical Islam and jihad is, and as fresh as the kidnapping of the Chibok girls is, the temporal setting of the story is the contemporary times.

The Chibok Girls is set in the northern region of Nigeria, mostly northeast and partly northwest and Middle Belt. While foreign observers may look at the story as an account of insecurity in Nigeria, the author wants their attention to be paid to that part of the country. Perhaps so many people see Northern Nigeria as an arid savannah with unsuitable weather condition, a place inhabited only by the hybrid tribe of Hausa/Fulani, and a place that Islam permeates everyday life. In some respects, that is very true of the North. But there is much more about the region.

As the narrative starts, we see an interesting town "hidden behind rocky hills and baobab trees" (13). That is Chibok, the most important locale of the story. It is a remote town in Bornu State, inhabited only by a small population of Christians in a predominantly Muslim state. According to Wikipedia, the Chibok landscape has an area of 1,350 km2. With an estimated population of 66,000 tribal Kibaku indigenous people, Chibok represents the relics of the old North before the incursion of Islam. Its local government chairman is the only Christian among the twenty-seven local government chairmen in the state. Remarkably, Chibok is "a sleepy, dusty town where nothing ever seems to happen, and it would have continued its peaceful and obscure existence but for the event of April 14, 2014" (24). But Chibok used to be a place of remarkable beauty for the locals. It used to enjoy access to "Electricity, which came from the Damboa grid" and "A Union Bank branch," which apparently supported many small businesses. But right now, everything is gone, courtesy of Boko Haram's wanton destruction. There is another important city in the state: Maiduguri. When in Maiduguri, the author lodges in a hotel, Straus, "Located off a busy, gridlocked street" and "hidden behind huge walls, like most buildings in the area" (58). In spite of the considerable calm in the city, Maiduguri has also been battered and left almost desolate with some landmarks. As the narrator is driven around Maiduguri by Abbas, he points to him some of these landmarks, including a house "where a famous preacher, Mallam Ismail, was gunned down" (59); "some neem trees in which Boko Haram fighters hid overnight and came down in the morning and attacked the barracks" (59); "University of Maiduguri where Abbas, who's twenty-seven, had graduated," "The University Teaching Hospital … where, during Boko Haram uprising, there were so many bodies in the streets they had to be brought by dumpster trucks to the mortuary, which overflowed so that the dead were piled up in the yard" (59). The horror that all this has created in the environment is so shocking to the narrator. The narrator observes that "The decomposing bodies smelled so bad

that people in the neighbourhood deserted their homes" (59); he mentions the Nigerian Railway Corporation residential quarters which was once occupied by the Boko Haram fighters "but were now riddled with bullet holes" (62). Boko Haram has also carried suicide bombings in another town called "Dikwa, some fifty-five miles from Maiduguri" (67). While so many towns and cities have known the horrors of the deranged killers, the hardest hit is Damboa, "the last major town before Sambisa Forest" (71). The narrator says of Damboa: "By the side of the road, a church stood, the roof burned down, the huge front door blackened by smoke" (72). Sambisa Forest seems to be the headquarters of Boko Hara. The narrator observes that lack of access roads in Borno makes it hard to fight and crush Boko Haram fighters who know how to traverse the "untarred and impassable" roads "on foot or motorbikes" (46).

The narrator navigates the reader around other parts of the North to show how the insurgency started and the vast areas that the group controls. One of the states in the region, Yobe State, boasts as the birthplace of Boko Haram. The founder of Boko Haram, Mohammed Yusuf, built his ideology from the influence of Nigerian Taliban, born out of a "professed admiration of Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan" (63), made up of 200 young students who move from Maiduguri to a small desert town in Yobo called Kananma and practiced their quiet worship, aiming to one day unleash their brutality on non-observers of their belief in Kanama and neighbouring Damaturu, the capital city. We are told that Boko Haram also maintains camps in other north eastern parts, like Yola, Bauchi, Gombe, Kano in the northwest and neighbouring countries like Chad, Niger, and Cameroon (67). Gombe which used to be a bustling city is now a deserted town since Boko Haram carried out its brutality across the state. The narrator notes: "In all the villages the school buildings – usually consisting of about two or three rectangular brick structures with zinc roofs, and a yard in the centre – had been all burned down" (51). It is now a

ghost town, "with no sign of people and livestock – only tall grasses growing inside the roofless houses and covering every available space in between the houses" (51) since Boko Haram killed and displaced the people. There is no much Boko Haram's presence in the Middle Belt as of the time of the story, but we are told that Kahalid Al-Barnawi, the leader of Ansaru, "a Boko Haram splinter group responsible for the kidnapping and killing of many foreigners" was captured "in a hideout in Lokoja, Kogi State" (16-17).

The image that the North impresses on the reader is not only a war zone but also a wasteland. So many places have been destroyed and many people displaced from their homes. The region is no more a place where people of different faiths practiced their religion as they chose, went about their businesses and daily life routines without any fear of attacks. People now live in fear, not just the Christians alone but moderate Muslims as well.

2.2 The Narrator's Nostalgia about the Region

Part of what formed this story is the author's nostalgia about the North he grew up in. Born in 1967 to a Christian family in kaltungo, Gombe State, Nigeria, Habila grew up in the northeast when there was religious tolerance among different faiths and tribes in the region. In spite of living "in a large tenement compound of about seven families" (53) in which his family was the only Christians, Habila recalls that people relatively lived in peace and saw no reason to see each other as enemies. The narrator reminisces:

…the version of Islam I grew up with was a tolerant Islam. I remember in the month of Ramadan, after the break of fast in the evening, young Muslim men and women would go out in costume to perform plays in front of audiences, from house to house. The plays in these street theatres were mostly secular, from love stories to slapstick comedies and could be elaborate with singing and

crowd participation. This is one of my best memories of childhood (44).

During this time, too, tradition and diversity were accommodated within the northern region. Religion had not become a threat to life, and the version of Islam of the time "didn't view the rest of the world through a puritanical lens" (44). Unlike how the outside world views the region "as part of a homogenous "north" (53), the region was peaceful and tolerant because the locals who are of diverse ethnic groups believed they were one people united by a common environment and mutual understanding and mutual respect.

Geographically, Gombe is close to Chibok and Maiduguri, and as of the time of the story has "sleepy mud houses, all identical" (51). The state also used to be a place of refuge for Boko Haram-displaced families from rural areas, from Borno and Adamawa. The narrator observes that "Those who still had jobs to go to commuted to work in their states, but lived in Gombe" (52). Gombe was inhabited and controlled by the Jukun people before they were conquered by Usman dan Fodio's student, Buba Yero, who established Gombe Emirate in 1804. Before then, Islam had sparsely been introduced in the state, through trade and migration of Fulani traders and scholars. According to Mohammed Sanni Abubakar, "Peaceful contacts, travels, communication and commerce had existed between the Northern Muslims and the peoples of the non-Muslim areas" (5). Given the strategic location of Gombe, its Christians in the state interacted with ""pagan" communities in the Middle Belt" in which Muslims tolerated non-Muslims "as neighbours without having to choose between offending Allah or converting them forcibly to Islam" (53).

What was true of Gombe was also true of other parts of the region. The north was mostly a Hausa population that lived peacefully and traded with Muslim traders before the settler Fulani jihadists took advantage of the open alms and accommodating spirits of the

indigenous peoples and launched blitz of attacks that ousted Hausa rulers from power. In spite of the jihadist rule, the north had known relative calm brought about by the British colonialism that gave some of the local people the impetus to adopt Christianity as their faith. But, regrettably, that glory is gone. So many people that enjoyed living in the region, including Habila himself and Emmanuel Ogebe, have left the region for other parts of the world in search of a better life.

But still, the duo care and miss the North. Based in Washington D. C., Ogebe is now "a human rights lawyer working to draw the attention of the American government to his homeland by advocating for Christians in the north, "where he believes there's a systematic plan to rid the region of all Christians" (78). Habila himself believes that he needs to use his journalism experience and investigation skills to dig out the secrets of the insurgency and to document the ugly experience of the region that gave him his greatest childhood memories.

2.3. Language and Ethnic Diversity in the Region

The Northern Region of Nigeria is a heterogeneous society, mainly made up of Hausa, Fulani, Nupe peoples as well as other subgroups like the Jukun, Kibaku, Gadzama, Kanuri, Igala, Gwari ethnic groups. Hausa and Fulani have for years formed a formidable unit through Islam and Fulani's adoption of the Hausa language. Other minor ethnic groups are either moderate Muslims or mainly Christians. The author himself speaks Hausa, which is his mother tongue, alongside Abbas, Michael, and some of the people that furnish him with first-hand accounts of the kidnappings and assassinations.

While Hausa is spoken in the areas that the narrator and his company touch down in the story, the language spoken in Chibok is different. According to the narrator, "The Chibok people call themselves the Kibaku, which is also the name of the language

they speak" (24). Ruth and the three escapees of Boko Haram that have come to talk to Habila – Hauwa, Ladi and Juliana – are indigenous Kibaku people of Chibok and Mife. Although the three girls that meet the narrator in Ruth's house in Jos understand Hausa, they are more fluent in Kibaku. The narrator notes that during his interview with them in Jos, Ruth had to interpret some complex things he said in Hausa: "I was speaking Hausa, and whenever I asked something complex, Ruth would step in to translate into Kibaku in which the girls were more fluent" (81-82). Another girl that escaped from Boko Haram, Amina, also spoke a different language when she met an old woman on her way as she was forced to help Boko Haram carry their bullet bag into their target town. She spoke "in the local language, one that the two men did not understand" (80).

One of the things that Habila wants to correct with *The Chibok Girls* is the perception that Northern Nigeria is only made up of indigenous Muslims, with strangers serving as the Christian population. Another wrong perception is that Hausa is the only language spoken in the North. As it turns out in the story, there are indigenous Christian population in the region and other languages spoken by a sizeable number of the northern peoples. What keeps them together, however, is their ability to speak Hausa together with their local languages.

2.4. Insecurity and Boko Haram Insurgency in the Region

The core objective of the author is to expose Boko Haram insurgency and to provide a better coverage of the facts. As an indigenous northerner, the narrator and the victims provide clues to how the jihadist militants operate and possibly the best way to tackle the insurgency. The insurgency has ripped the region apart since the group started its militancy in 2002 against the government in Maiduguri. According to Saskia Brechenmacher, "the Boko Haram insurgency and the government's response have killed tens of thousands of civilians and displaced millions across

the Lake Chad" (2) since the campaign started in 2009. There are also attendant food crises and famine in the region. Although the Federal Government of Nigeria has severally boasted about crushing Boko Haram, insecurity still continues in the North, especially the northeast. So many towns and villages have been destroyed and deserted, and those who continue to stay back in the region still live in fear.

At different borders in Nigeria, there is tension, as the group exploits the porous condition of the borders to bring in ISIS fighters, plan and execute attacks and create splinter groups in neighbouring countries. Writing about the impact on the Nigeria-Cameroon relationship, Viviane E. Foyou, Peter Ngwafu, Marbel Santoyo and Andrea Ortiz say: "Because activities of the insurgency have spilled over into Northern Cameroon and parts of Niger and Chad, the need to contain this ruthless group of militants has taken on a regional dimension" (73). The talk of defeating Boko Haram is going on not only in Nigeria, but also in those neighbouring countries.

Boko Haram was born of Mohammed Yusuf's embrace of "Saudi Arabia's fundamentalist Salafist doctrine" and his supposed ties to Al Qaeda (19). He started as an Islamic preacher, preaching "openly at mosques and in squares, travelling widely from his base in Maiduguri to neighbouring states like Bauchi, Gombe, Yobe and Kano" (58), turning neighbours against neighbours, sons against fathers and students against teachers (59). After launching its first open confrontation with the government in 2002 in which a thousand of them were killed and many others apprehended, Boko Haram adopted several strategies to unleash its jihadist mission. The first strategy was prison breaks to rescue their members in police custody. The narrator says that "In September 2010, over 700 inmates were released in Bauchi. More followed in Maiduguri, Kano, Gombe, and other northeastern cities" (20). Another strategy is bombing of government buildings, mosques, churches and

hotels. The narrator recalls instances of bombing in Abuja, including the suicide bombing at the United Nations Headquarters in which "at least eighteen people" died (21), Maiduguri where "two sect members, Hassan Sani Balami and Isa Viga Gwoza, decided to make a bomb and blow up public buildings" (61), as well as in other parts of the region like Yobe and Kano. Another strategy is sporadic attacks on villages and security posts. So many villages like Chibok, Kwaga, Askira, Mbala, Gaglan, Damboa, Mife, Dikwa (the hardest hit), Lassa, and others have suffered attacks by the jihadist, especially at nights, with their houses and schools burnt down, many of them killed and survivors displaced. Aided and abetted by politicians, they also carry out assassinations on political opponents and clerics, whose teaching run contrary to their ideology. Last but not least, and of course the most prominent in this story, the insurgents carry out kidnappings, especially on foreigners and girls in the region.

2.5. Suppression and Objectification of Women in the Region

Islamic societies have a history of suppressing and objectifying women, and that is what Boko Haram is doing in the North, to replicate what is obtainable in Iran and Saudi Arabia, by forcibly denying women opportunity and regimenting them to family life. While women in other parts of the country enjoy relative freedom and equality, Muslim women in the northern part of Nigeria are forced to remain indoors and care for their families. This can be felt in their markets and mosques where there is lesser presence of women. It is this belief that Boko Haram champions by targeting female-only schools and taking the girls hostage, to deny them access to education and to turn them into their baby-making machines.

Founded in 2002 by Mohammed Yusuf, Boko Haram is based on the anti-Western ideology that says Western education is evil. Just like the Taliban did, and is still doing, in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Boko Haram is against the education of women. The first

kidnapping of girls in the story was carried out to stop the girls from going to school. When Boko Haram attacked the Federal Government College in 2014, "…they rounded up the girls, lectured them on the "evils of Western education," ordered them to get married, burned down the school buildings, then left" (22). The kidnapping of the Chibok girls, who were in school to prepare for their O Level physics exam, is the height of this coordinated effort to deny women opportunity and subject them to the rearing of children, who will likely become Boko Haram fighters in the future.

From the story, we learn that many girls, especially those that have stayed in the terrorist camps for a long time, have become so brainwashed and indoctrinated that two of the rescued ones now ask "to be released back to their Boko Haram husbands in the forest" (65). Some of them have turned to "spies for Boko Haram, posing as refugees, while with others it was a case of the Stockholm syndrome" (65). Many of these Boko Haram wives have also become social outcasts, given the stigma they and their children born out of rape suffer in their communities. Most women in the battered towns and villages have also become widows, and now rely on aids from NGOs to survive.

3. Conclusion

The Chibok Girls is a powerful story that focuses on the Northern Region of Nigeria. The text reflects the current state of the environment, the old memories of the North, and the socio-political issues that still bedevil the region. This paper examines those features as issues in Nigeria that are peculiar to the region. It subtly argues that insecurity, fundamentalism, Boko Haram insurgency and the objectification of women are issues unique to the North, especially in the Northeast. However, the paper does not suggest that solving those issues requires only the commitment of the people of the region. It requires the collective will of both the state and federal governments, the bravery of the locals as well as

the sympathy and humanitarian assistance of the outside world. The author believes that part of the reasons why the insurgency escalated, especially during the reign of President Goodluck Jonathan, was because it was viewed as a regional problem created by northern elites to frustrate his administration, instead of a national security issue that needed to be rooted out once and for all. Another reason is that the region has been neglected in terms of development. Habila argues that lack of good roads has always been a problem in Borno State, and that makes it hard to track Boko Haram. The region is rich with cultural diversity and population. If it is given adequate attention by taking out Boko Haram, rehabilitating the victims and making sure the young population are educated, the North will become a beautiful and prosperous region again and contribute meaningfully to national development.

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