8

Trans-Border Banditry and Integration in the ECOWAS Region

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Introduction

Twenty-first-century West Africa within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is best described as a period of the battle for integration. According to Olutayo, Olutayo and Akanle (2012), this is because regional integration has become a unique and distinctive characteristic of development efforts of nations in recent years. This explains why ECOWAS has struggled to change its focus from being just a body of *states* to being a body of *people*. The emphasis will be on integration drive and agenda for the ultimate advantage of the 15 member nations with a sense of nation-community for the over 300 million people making the ECOWAS region. This is against the realization that the orientation of community of people, rather than community of inanimate states that may not even recognize and accommodate the integration agenda, will ultimately drive the achievement of integration which is central to ECOWAS's vision. A lot of effort and attention have been directed at the integration subject within the commission and beyond. However, evidence on the ground shows that these have tended to be just mere rhetoric since effective actions have not matched the words especially in their actual consequences.

For example, according to Adeniran (2012), since the inception of the Commission, free movement of persons and goods within the sub-region is still a mirage traceable to incompatibilities in immigration and customs policies, monetary zones, and official languages among member states which have ultimately impeded positive integration within the ECOWAS framework. The ECOWAS drive for integration is to largely strengthen internal solidarity among member states to enable the body and the nations in the sub-region harmonize positions and articulate them as collective agenda within the global political economy where unity of purpose is fast becoming a necessity within global-regional bloc formations. The integration

drive within the sub-region is necessarily the melting pot for the focus of ECOWAS. For instance, on the economic front, integration is to stimulate and fast-track the mechanism of a common market through free movement of commodities, markets, people and currency.

While the idea and practice of integration is noble and huge investments are placed on it in the sub-region through ECOWAS, trans-border banditry poses a huge threat to security and integration in the sub-region and this is a big paradox within a region and *community* with the goal of facilitating free movement of people without any clause. Acts of terrorism, armed robbery, cross-border sharing/trading of illegal arms and mercenaries are particularly real and endanger the integration of the ECOWAS region. In fact, since the establishment of ECOWAS on 28 May 1975 for the defence and development of the sub-region, never has trans-border banditry been as vehement as it is now. Of the 15 member states, many were either just coming out of crises or are still mired in crisis or are just about to be enveloped by it. The recipes and likelihood of crisis laden with trans-border banditry are rife. Cases of these abound but the cases of Sierra Leone, Liberia, Nigeria, Guinea Bissau and Mali are very important and worth noting as threats to the ECOWAS dream of collective vision of a peaceful, stable and economically prosperous and integrated sub-region. This also brings into focus the cases of trans-border banditry and robbery common along the Chad, Cameroun, Niger and Nigeria borders as will be shown below. Yet, while much have been written on the theory and practice of migration, free movement and integration in the ECOWAS sub-region, not much exists on the actual free movement of people and the elimination of trans-border banditry. At the same time, the cherished ideal of integration has largely remained elusive even when peace and security are fundamentally acknowledged as critical to ECOWAS, especially relative to the ultimate goal of sustainable development. It is against this backdrop that this chapter engages the problematic.

Banditry in the ECOWAS Sub-region: The Clustered Case Studies

This section of the chapter discusses the domains of major clusters of trans-border banditry in the ECOWAS sub-region. The main clusters are; aided rebellion, armed robbery and terrorism. Let us begin with aided rebellion in Mali.

The Case of Aided Rebellion

The case of Mali remains the most daunting threat to the very essence of ECOWAS. northern Mali has been hijacked by Islamic fundamentalists and Tuareg rebels and it is far out of control of the Malian Government and, in like sense, ECOWAS. Given the topography of Mali and incursion of Al-Qaeda coupled with the ultimate threat to the Mali state, resolution of the rebellion has become very problematic. This has been further compounded by the lukewarm attitude of Nigeria, who has the region's strongest army, to deploy troops in Mali. The Mali mission becomes even more complicated when other factors like the language barrier, the financial crunch and insurgency in Nigeria itself are taken into account. Given the Nigerian

deployment challenge, it has also become evident that ECOWAS could not rush into action. This is why the French took the lead by deploying troops and air power in Mali; they have been reported as alluding to the unanticipated strength of the rebels. While the French originally deployed 1,500 military personnel in Mali and were ready to send more, Nigeria deployed an initial 900 while ECOWAS prepared for 3,000 troops (see Karimi 2013).

The rebellion in Mali has come to be popularly known as the Tuareg Rebellion of 2012 and it has covered the whole of northern Mali and has come very close to the capital which explains why the government demanded immediate international assistance. The Tuareg rebellion caught international attention for four main reasons: the involvement of Al-Qaeda, the trans-border involvement of other nationals from the West Africa (especially those who fought against the late Colonel Ghadaffi in Libya) and the colossal destruction of lives and property, destruction of historical sites, as well as wanton violation of human rights of the Malians. The world and ECOWAS did not interfere when it was totally a Malian affair but when it became trans-border in nature, ECOWAS had to pay attention especially as the international community and the United Nations Security Council had already indicated it would count on ECOWAS to take the lead. The Malian Rebellion threatened to destabilize the sub-region as the neighbouring nations were beginning to be adversely affected as seen in the cases of Niger, Senegal and Nigeria. The Malian mercenaries were moving in and out of Mali into and through the neighbouring nations, thus threatening their peace and security. Although the Malian crisis started as a war of independence against the Malian government in the Sahara desert region of Azawad as led by the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), being part of insurgencies by traditionally nomadic Tuaregs beginning in the early twentieth century that were joined by the Islamist group Ansar Dine, it has since escalated beyond the local to that which now threatens regional and global peace due to the infiltration of opportunistic external and trans-border groups.

The trans-border dimension of the rebellion has made the crisis more difficult to resolve as it has assumed ethnic and sophisticated dimensions in terms of tactics, personnel and equipment. Socio-psychological trajectories as well as political undercurrents further complicate the crisis. Unfortunately, as it destabilizes the nation and the sub-region and further blacklists the continent as the *Dark Continent* and *the Continent of War*, lives and property of the ECOWAS nationals are being lost and this is grave when viewed in the context of the ECOWAS intent to become 'an ECOWAS of people'. For instance, due to the incessant attacks by the rebels and the government troops, the number of casualties has increased tremendously. Over 30,000 civilians remain internally displaced while many remain refugees in Mauritania and Niger (see UNHCR 2013). For instance, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees released figures on 4 April which showed a grim picture of the crisis. According to UNHCR, there are estimated 200,000 displaced persons in Mali with not less than 400 people desperately entering Burkina Faso and Mauritania per day for fear of being caught in the crossfire while hundreds have actually been killed in the crisis

(UNHCR 2013). It is, however, important to note that there are mostly *unaccounted for, displaced Malians* who are now burdened populations across West Africa. The Malian crisis has led to the proliferation of arms and armed groups, preponderance of violence and crimes; rape, murder, kidnapping, maiming and the phenomenon of child soldiers in the West African sub-region with huge negative consequences for the peace, security, integration and development of ECOWAS. The crisis has also led to the near collapse of the Malian state, destruction of the world heritage site, Timbuktu, and forceful imposition of Islamic Law (*Sharia)* on the people.

The Case of Terrorism: A Look at *Boko Haram*

Boko Haram means *western education* (civilization) *is a sin.* For this reason, members of the *Boko Haram* sect have a mandate among themselves to resist anything western, especially education, through whatever means including violence as a form of *jihad* (warfare in defence of Islam). *Boko Haram* is an Islamic sect that has held Nigeria hostage for years (since 2009) with no sign of resolution. In fact, the most formidable problem confronting Nigeria today after poverty is the *Boko Haram* insurgency. The insurgency has paralysed Northern Nigeria's economy and has destroyed the secure existence of the region while it has also strained the national security apparatuses. Reports by senior security officers claim a lot of *Boko Haram* foot soldiers come from countries contiguous with Nigeria in the West African sub-region. The main strategy of *Boko Haram* is violence and guerrilla warfare with the ultimate aim of Islamizing Nigeria or at least the North just as in Mali. Interestingly, just as in Mali, trans-border gangs and mercenaries drive the *Boko Haram* as fighters come and go through the Chad, Niger, Cameroun and other neighbouring countries.

It is also noted that, sometimes, the same set of mercenaries propel the Malian and *Boko Haram* crises as they move through the porous borders of the ECOWAS sub-region especially through the free movement of people protocol. Hence, when the people move across borders, they move with arms for intended crises as they unleash terror on unsuspecting innocent citizens they meet on their paths. Unfortunately, identifying the mercenaries physically is nearly impossible as they have no special features with which they could be identified and this is one of the reasons why it has become nearly impossible to resolve the *Boko Haram* problem. At the same time, the Islamization agenda has caught the fancy of other Muslims across the Maghreb which now support the *Boko Haram* as they have come to be seen as fighting a *Holy War* which they are ultimately part of. This accounts for their free movement through the porous sub-regional borders since 2009. While it is possible to see *Boko Haram* as a militant Islamic group fighting for *Sharia* in Nigeria, they have been declared a terrorist group in Nigeria and across the world (at least in principle).

Boko Haram target government officials and security forces to propagate their crusade against western education and its attributes. Although the target of *Boko Haram* is Nigeria, the epicentre is the widely Islamic north where the battle is fierce and the agenda most prevalent. The sociology of the northern epicentre of *Boko*

Haram is against the background that the northern socio-economic, political and cultural systems provide the most compatible base and structure for the *Boko Haram* agenda. Hence, while *Boko Haram* has been very strong in the north, especially in Borno, Yobe, Adamawa, Kano and Plateau states, the group has not been so *successful* in the south due to large socio-economic, political, geographical and cultural systems' incompatibilities. Generally, however, *Boko Haram* has been the most destructive in the modern history of Nigeria and among the most destructive, disintegrating and destabilizing in the modern history of the ECOWAS. Over 1,000 people have been killed through the terrorism of *Boko Haram* and millions of dollar worth of properties destroyed (Umar (2011).

The activities of *Boko Haram* have been recognized by ECOWAS at several meetings and the helplessness of the Nigerian government to tackle the issue sustainably has been acknowledged. This is why ECOWAS as a body and individual nations in the sub-region, including those out of ECOWAS like the United States of America and the United Kingdom, have offered assistance to Nigeria to curb the *Boko Haram* menace. Nigeria has however not taken advantage of these gestures of help as the government believes that will be an acceptance of its incapability to handle *Boko Haram*. The concern of ECOWAS, which is legitimate, is that the ascendancy of *Boko Haram* comes as a real threat to sub-regional peace and security and integration especially as *Boko Haram* fighters move trans-border to perpetrate their acts of terrorism. Every time they unleash mayhem, they claim responsibility across the world and see it as an achievement. Thus, the more collateral damage they do, the better for them and this is dangerous for the sub-region and the nation that prides itself as the Giant of Africa. Nigeria is the most populous nation in the sub-region. Thus, any problem that destabilizes the nation will certainly have grave consequences for the sub-region. That makes ECOWAS' concern with the *Boko Haram* terrorism quite legitimate.

The Case of Trans-border Armed Robbery

Trans-border Armed Robbery (which we call TAR here) is another case that is very common across the sub-region. Travellers, border town/village residents and traders are frequently robbed and attacked by armed robbers without any protection from law enforcement agents. Borders in the sub-region are either outright unpoliced or poorly policed, making them easy areas of operations for the hoodlums. Part of the reason is that there are no effective ECOWAS protocols to police borders, particularly against armed robbery. Yet, nations poorly cater for and hardly recognize border towns/villages in their security systems. Sometimes, such localities are seen as neither here nor there, except when they are in contention, especially when valuable mineral resources like crude oil are found in those places. Even at that, the interest is usually in the material resources rather than the people. ECOWAS border villages are thus at the mercy of faith and trans-border armed robbers as nations poorly account for the security of the border towns/villages.

Cases of TAR abound in ECOWAS but recent popular ones that occurred in the sub-region are worth mentioning. These are the trans-border robbery incidents in Potiskum, Plateau State and Adamawa. The Potiskum case was actually at the Potiskum cattle market and it was a reprisal attack which left over 50 people dead, most of them innocent cattle traders at the market. The incident occurred sequel to the killing of a trans-border armed robber caught after his gang escaped. The armed robbers then reinforced and attacked the defenceless traders, customers and cattle with sophisticated weapons and explosives in an obvious act of vengeance. The victims had little or no help from the security operatives responsible for the area. This incident was very bloody. These incidents should be of concern to ECOWAS as the robbers move unhindered across the borders of Chad, Cameroun and Niger (see African Examiner 2012) with arms and ammunition, to perpetrate their obnoxious acts, especially during market periods, ceremonies and any time of day.

Cases of trans-border armed robbery also frequently occur at the Sorou-Belel and Konkol communities in Maiha Local Government Area of Adamawa State, Nigeria, according to Muhammad (2010). The border communities in the northern part of the state are usually victims of trans-border armed robbery gangs, to the extent that the residents had to adjust their culture as coping strategies against armed robberies. A major part of the cultural adjustment, according to Muhammad (2010), is to appear poor even if rich, refusal to count money in public and never to splash money at traditional functions as these could invite armed robbers at any time when there is no protection from security agencies. Due to the failure of state security apparatuses in the area, the residents have instituted a local arrangement of securing themselves and their properties but these arrangements have been largely ineffective as the trans-border armed robbers are always more armed and sophisticated than the local security systems, which suggests the need for sub-regional and national security assistance. Robberies are frequent but are most likely on every market day when the robbers are sure of huge cash collections in the highly cash-oriented economy of the communities like in most African traditional societies with poor banking culture and without other cashless technologies. These communities border Cameroun and the armed robbers move in and out of the Republic of Cameroun and Nigeria to perpetrate their acts to the detriment of the rural people who have suffered scandalous neglect from both governments and ECOWAS. Trans-border armed robbery has, in recent times, accounted for about 30 deaths and many wounded. The casualties included police officers and civilians, not to mention millions of uninsured cash and property stolen at gunpoint by the trans-border armed robbers. The case of trans-border banditry around the Benin Republic/Lagos axis is also common and it has led to a number of diplomatic rows between the governments of Nigeria and Republic of Benin especially under the regime of President Olusegun Obasanjo due to the dare-devil robbery activities of the notorious armed robber, *Shina Rambo,* and many others not so popular but equally dangerous armed robbery gangs.

The Implications of Trans-border Banditry to Integration

As earlier stated, the integration of the peoples of the ECOWAS region remains the most laudable goal of the ECOWAS. As laudable as it is, it is threatened by insecurity occasioned by trans-border banditry (Miles 2005; Willet 2005). The recent happenings in Mali, in particular, present training ground for violent Islamic groups aiming to Islamize Nigeria and other ECOWAS states through jihad and introduce strict versions of the Sharia law. Islamists who have found a safe haven in northern Mali, seemingly proffer the agenda of 'integration through islamization' with serious implications to the peoples and cultures of the region. Across the western African coast there are diverse socio-demographic, economic and cultural groups whose ways of life, freedom and identities would be obliterated through forceful Islamization. Hence, the governments and citizens of other western African states justifiably view migrant Malians with suspicion as potential security threats. The welcoming trust, brotherliness and good neighbourliness which are the bedrock values of African people (Omobowale and Olutayo 2012), and are very germane for peoples' integration, are sacrificed for security reasons. An average Malian (especially) of northern origin becomes a potential security threat that must be handled with absolute caution. Whereas the average Malian does not necessarily belong to the brigandage violent religious sects, the activities of these religious sects threaten West African integration and security.

With huge weaponry and determination to run over not just Mali, but other contiguous countries, the Islamic insurgency in Mali potentially threatens peace in West Africa. Northern Mali without state control is a potential breeding ground for Al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations that could make the vast and difficult topography of the Sahara Desert a vantage terrain for them to thrive (Benjaminsen 2008; Gutelius 2007), plan, organize and launch attacks on other West Africa states. The recent French and Nigerian-led onslaught against northern Mali's Islamic insurgents notwithstanding, it is important to note that while the regular armies of these nations may have superior firepower, they may lack the adequate knowledgeof the desert topography to effectively rout the Islamist guerrilla army and totally annihilate them. They may retreat to their enclaves, to hide from the superior air and land weaponry of the advancing foreign regular armies. It is important to note that they retreat only to attack some other time. Besides, with support from renegade Islamist/terrorist groups along contiguous countries in North Africa, stretching up to the Middle-East, the power base of northern Malian insurgents may not be quickly weakened. What may be happening in the nearest future may be a continuation of eastern-western or Islamist-western proxy wars, in West Africa.

During the Cold War era, many proxy wars were fought in the Third World under the 'canopy' of opposing socialist and capitalist super powers that provided arms to warring sides (Barnes and Farish 2006; Omobowale and Olutayo 2005). The capitalist nations of the United States of America, Great Britain and France on one side, and the socialist state of USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) made money and proved their military arsenals on the battlefields of eastern Europe, Asia

and Africa. The unfolding events in northern Mali may not be different after all. As the battle between the Islamists and the West spreads into West Africa, the West African sub-region economically and culturally disintegrates with grave consequences for the internal security of the West African states.

The *Boko Haram* insurgency in Nigeria is also partly fuelled by trans-border banditry (Onuoha 2010, Danjibo 2009). The common culture, language and religion across the northern tip of West Africa readily blend a people of diverse states, seemingly into common ancestry and brotherliness. Hence, Chadian, Nigerien and Malian migrants alongside other people, freely migrate into Nigeria. Reports claim that the ranks of *Boko Haram* foot soldiers and bombers are actually swelled by non-Nigerian migrants from Chad, Mali and Niger (Sahel Blog 2012) with common ancestry, culture and language with the peoples of northern Nigeria. Hence, the socio-cultural blend between migrants from countries contiguous with northern Nigeria, presents a security challenge for Nigeria whose citizens are exposed to attacks from *Boko Haram*. The mission of *Boko Haram* is simply congealed with those of the trans-border armed bandits who join the ranks of insurgent group to cause havoc in Nigeria.

The *Boko Haram* insurgency and its links to armed groups in countries along the borders of northern Nigeria threatens integration among ECOWAS states. The fear of *Boko Haram* and the spread of Islamic militancy into other African countries potentially portend an anti-migration policy to curtail the possible spread of *Boko Haram* to other countries along the West African coast. On the one hand, the integration of a people of common culture along the northern tip of West Africa, which unfortunately allows a blending into *Boko Haram* insurgency also possibly de-integrates West Africans as the people down south, especially in Nigeria, view Malian, Chadian and Nigerien with utmost suspicion and caution, seeing them as potential assailants. The fear is, of course, not far-fetched as there are speculations that Hausa and Fulani herders from countries along the borders of northern Nigeria cause mayhem along their pathways attacking villagers and destroying crops as they herd animals through northern and southern Nigeria. Many of the trans-border pastoralists are heavily armed herder-bandits, carrying AK 47 assault rifles as they move. The assumption is that they easily access arms because of the illegal free flow of firearms across West Africa's porous borders due to the many civil wars that the sub-continent has experienced over the last 20 years. Liberia, Sierra Leone, Mali, Niger, Chad and Cote d'Ivoire have all experienced civil wars lately and so it is not unlikely that armed bandits are able to access illegal arms from the armouries of former rebels which were not retrieved.

Equipped with assault guns and the technology and knowledge of making home-made explosive devices, *Boko Haram* poses a serious threat to the integration of West Africa's people. The diverse states have recognized integration in their 'letters' largely based on the tenets of the ECOWAS Charter. West Africans can travel within the West African region and stay for beyond 90 days without visas, provided they possess valid identification papers such as the ECOWAS passport (issued by each

member state). Nevertheless, armed groups such as *Boko Haram* negate the ECOWAS 'one people' principle, as the activities of this group and its trans-border network engenders fear and suspicion in fellow West Africans. Finally, the nefarious activities of various trans-border armed groups along the West African corridor, including trans-border armed robbers, Islamic insurgents and *Boko Haram* present debilitating security challenges and are hinderances to the integration of the people of West Africa.

Conclusion

This chapter concludes that the ECOWAS' charter goal of integration of the West African people may not be achievable, after all, due to incessant trans-border banditry and attendant insecurity. Trans-border banditry would continue to de-integrate the people of the sub-continent who would continue to harbour mutual suspicion and mistrust as armed groups inflict pain and destruction on lives and property.

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