

Situation Report on Kwaya Kusar Local Government Area of Borno State, 2015-2016

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Due to the fighting between Boko Haram and the security forces, Kwaya Kusar is the only local government area in Nigeria that researchers of the "Invisible Violence" project were not able to visit. Failing any better option, the following report is consequently based on interviews undertaken in Maiduguri in October 2015 and May 2016, with residents originating from Kwaya Kusar, in the South West of Borno State, comprising two civil servants from the ministry for public works, an officer from the immigration department and a school teacher born in the neighbouring local government area of Hawul. Their testimonies show that, despite a bank attack which was without victims in 2012, the local area was "miraculously" spared by the violence which struck the rest of the region.¹

In late 2015, the local government area was one of the only ones in Borno State which continued to operate, with Maiduguri, Bayo, Biu and, according to contested official statements, Hawul, Chibok, Gubio, Jere and Kaga. In the neighbouring local government area of Shani, which included Kwaya Kusar until its partition in 1996, civil servants had not returned since the Emir fled after escaping an ambush in 2014. In the suburbs of Maiduguri, even the administrative centre of the local government area of Jere had not reopened. The South East of Borno was still prey to chaos despite the reassuring statements made by the army about the situation in Bama, Gwoza and Chibok. In all instances, it should be noted that the public service in rural areas of Borno has always been deficient. Prior to the crisis, government employees posted in the countryside were already living in Maiduguri, either by consent or by fear to escape extortion or retaliation, for instance because the residents of Chibok allegedly bewitched foreigners.

In such a context, the particular case of Kwaya Kusar questions the resilience of certain communities when faced with a crisis situation. The South West of Borno has been quite heavily affected by fighting. The question is to know how and to ask whether Kwaya Kusar could be used as a model for reconstruction. Indigenous people believe that they are blessed by God and protected by spirits. Other explanations could, however, be put forward.

1- Interviews undertaken first and foremost highlight the level of **social cohesion of rural communities** where everybody knows one another and easily identifies the arrival of any intruder. Distant from the centres of power, local peasants saw Boko Haram growing and had more time to prepare against any attempted infiltration by Jihadists. In April 2015, for instance, they succeeded in arresting in a market a man disguised as a woman and suspected of working for the insurgents. However, Kwaya Kusar is no more homogeneous than other rural government areas in Borno, quite the contrary. In addition to the presence of Fulani pastors, it is populated by non-Kanuri minority groups, namely the Tera, known as "Kwaya Tera", "Jara" or "Dera", sometimes likened to the Hinna and Pildimdi, as well as the Bura, Babur or Pabir, who are also found in the neighbouring local government areas of Hawul,

¹ Also, camps of internally displaced persons in Maiduguri did not shelter any people originating from Kwaya Kusar in October 2015.

Bayo, Biu and Shani. With the exception of the Bura, generally Christian farmers and culturally close to the Kanakuru from Shani, these groups are deemed as primarily Muslim. The more urban Babur, for instance, are mixed with the Mandara Kanuri clan and practice Islam; one of them is currently the Emir of Biu, under whose aegis is the district head of Kwaya Kusar². In other terms, the residents of Kwaya Kusar differ from the Christian or 'pagan' minorities who are found in the local government areas of Askira Ubar, Hong, Madagali and Michika on the border between Borno and Adamawa, such as the Higi / Kapsiki, the Chibok, the Kilba / Hona and the Margis.

2- The issue of **religious allegiance** is clearly fundamental to understand why Kwaya Kusar has been spared by Boko Haram. Unlike the Kanuri of the Kanem-Borno Empire from the 11th Century, Islamisation of the sub-region has been late, shortly before the appearance of Christian missions in the 20th Century. For a long time, the Biu Plateau was indeed a buffer zone that was not conquered and which was considered by pagans a safe refuge. With the colonial indirect rule, it was in fact the British who consolidated the Biu Emirate, which included Kwaya Kusar and which was built on a non-Islamic tradition of chieftaincy³. An Emir from the Babur / Pabir minority was thus nominated to administer a non-Muslim Bura majority. In 1907-1918, British military expeditions even burnt Bura villages that resisted to Pabir tax collectors⁴. So when Christian missions arrived from 1923, they converted and helped the Bura to resist against their overlords and oppressive taxing policies. Such revolts lasted until 1946, when Christian missionaries succeeded in removing the Garkida area from Biu and placing it under Adamawa. As a result, Muslim residents of Kwaya Kusar today still have the reputation of having superficially converted to Islam in order to integrate large trading networks, an opportunistic move that could have caused the wrath of Boko Haram against so-called "fake" believers. On the other hand, locals argue that the presence of Christian missions allowed them to be more educated than in northern Borno and, consequently, less likely to suffer indoctrination by the Jihadists preying on the ignorance of the rural masses.

3- It is difficult to be sure. In fact, both the Bura Christian majority and the Babur/ Pabir Muslim minority of Biu Emirate speak the same language and have a common set of indigenous beliefs in village shrines (*milim*), witchcraft (*mutu*), sorcery of medicine (*thukula*) and the power of ghosts⁵. **The linguistic argument of an inability to communicate with the Kanuri** or the Shuwa Arabs seems to be more conclusive. At the start of the 20th Century, for instance, almost all Babur people spoke Kanuri⁶. However, they soon sought to move towards Gombe so as to escape from their servile status towards the Sultans of Borno. Consequently, they progressively lost use of Kanuri and learnt Haoussa and, to a lesser extent, Fulani. The Kanuri, who comprise the majority of Boko Haram fighters, were therefore unable to rely on lineage ties or linguistic affinities to gain the trust of the residents in Kwaya Kusar.

² According to legend, the founder of the Biu Emirate, Yamta-ra-Wala, may have originated from the Kanuri stock and succeeded in submitting the Pabir and Tera at the end of the 16th Century. Cf. Hogben, Sidney J. & Kirk-Greene, Anthony H.M. [1966], *The Emirates of Northern Nigeria: a preliminary survey of their historical traditions*, London, Oxford University Press, pp.569-76.

³ Cohen, Ronald [1975], « The pull of opposites: incorporation and autonomy in Nigeria », in Abu-Lughod, Ibrahim (ed.), *African themes: Northwestern University studies in honor of Gwendolen Carter*, Evanston, Ill., Northwestern University, pp.149-73.

⁴ In 1912, for instance, the Bura killed the Fulani district head, a policeman and three village heads. See Tukur, Mahmud [2016], *British Colonisation of Northern Nigeria, 1897-1914: A Reinterpretation of Colonial Sources*, Dakar, Amalion Publishing, p.266.

⁵ See Cohen, Ronald [1977], 'Oedipus Rex and Regina: The Queen Mother in Africa', *Africa* vol. 47, n°1, p.17.

⁶ Davies, J.G. [1956], *The Biu Book*, Zaria, North Regional Literature Agency, 357p.

4- Along with the issues of language and ethnicity, **the economic profile of the population** no doubt constitutes another explanation. Indeed, farmers from Kwaya Kusar left Biu and Maiduguri to sell their animals and groundnut, millet and maize in Gombe State so as to be able to reach the Hausa markets in the Middle Belt and the North West of Nigeria. Such an orientation preceded the crisis which, due to insecurity, then forced them to avoid Damboa and make a lengthy detour via Damaturu to reach Maiduguri, with a day of travel instead of two to three hours through Biu normally. From an economic perspective, the testimonies gathered also insist on the role of farming activities which employ the youth and distract them from idleness and indoctrination by Boko Haram.

5- In addition, the local government area of Kwaya Kusar does not have any major **strategic interest** for the insurgents. Made up of forests and green hills from which it takes its name (*kusar* means "grass"), it is indeed protected by the Biu Plateau and is more difficult to access than the Borno savannah, even by motorcycle. Admittedly, the only surfaced road which crosses the area is heavily used as it joins Borno and Gombe States via the town of Biu. Aside for a bifurcation towards Shani, it is however easy to control as it does not have any other points of entry. From a strategic perspective, moreover, the residents of Kwaya Kusar have not organized a self-defence militia likely to lead to any retaliation by the insurgents. The Emir of Shani refused to let the military establish outposts which may have attracted Boko Haram attacks.

6- Relative peace in Kwaya Kusar questions the effectiveness of the **self-defence militia** in Biu along the road heading towards Maiduguri. Vigilantes, which existed before the Boko Haram uprising in 2009 and the creation of the CJTF (*Civilian Joint Task Force*) in 2013, allegedly helped to prevent the insurgents from spreading in south-western Borno. Biu Local Government Area, however, was not spared by the indoctrination and the attacks of the sect. As soon as 21 July 2009 in the town of Biu, the security forces arrested nine members who manufactured explosives in the home of a Boko Haram commander, Inusa Ibrahim Sabo⁷. On 24 July 2009, a retired prison warder hailing from Biu, Hassan Sani Badami, also died in a popular district of Maiduguri while handling explosives for the sect. That was just before the uprising and military repression which led to the extrajudicial execution of Mohammed Yusuf and his followers going underground⁸. Since this time, the situation has continued to worsen. In September 2011, fighting opposed supporters of Boko Haram with security forces in Biu. The insurgents were led by Kashim Imam, the son of Biu's Chief Imam and a commandant who came to negotiate peace in 2012 but was extra-judicially killed by soldiers for vengeance. The sub-region then experienced a rising number of attacks against mosques, churches and government buildings. In July 2015, a Boko Haram commando for example went to the local government area of Mirinda to execute around fifteen members of the sect who had defected and accepted to join forces with the government.

⁷ Gusau, Isa Umar [2 Aug. 2009], "Boko Haram: How it all began", *Daily Trust*; Galtimari, Usman Gaji (ed.) [Sep. 2011], *Final Report of the Presidential committee on Security Challenges in the North-East Zone of Nigeria*, Abuja, Federal Government of Nigeria, p.19.

⁸ Without evidence, some observers actually allege that Mohamed Yusuf was himself a Bura. Interviews in Maiduguri, May 2016.