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Final Paper
June 2016
Completed in the United States

How can Ethnic Nepotism Help to Explain the Boko Haram Conflict

Summary:

This essay is going to be looking at the theory of ethnic nepotism and how that theory contributes to many conflicts around the world on both a small scale and a bigger scale. If we think about it we can see how ethnic nepotism may cause problems with getting a job, or joining a club, this essay will talk more about that later though. The main conflict that I will be looking at is Boko Haram in Northern Nigeria and the spillover into some of the surrounding countries. This essay looks into some articles like the BBC to look at Boko Haram's mission and some general information, but my main research was done through Tatu Vanhanen's essay *Domestic Ethnic Conflict and Ethnic Nepotism: A comparative Analysis* which gives a great, in depth analysis of Ethnic Nepotism in general and talks about Pierre L. van den Berghe who started this theory of Ethnic Nepotism. Vanhanen also talks a bit about Darwin's theory of the survival of the fittest, which contributes into this essay a bit as we will be looking at how far a group of people will go to help their own community— their own people. We will be exploring why Boko Haram may have started and why they have the followers that they do. It all comes back to a kin group, an extended family, which I will be talking about. If we look at the history of Boko Haram, but more importantly the history of Borno, their main base, we can see where they are coming from. This conflict comes from much more than just the last few years when Boko Haram has been so violent. They have come from a long history of a kin group that has worked together to create a lifestyle that works for them.

Content:

The theory of ethnic nepotism says that groups of people tend to stay together based on things like skin color, religion, kinship—they want to help their own and give each other a leg up. Pierre L. van den Berghe first introduced the idea of ethnic nepotism in 1981 and did his research through 1987. Berghe argued, "ethnicity is defined in the last analysis by common descent" and said "ethnic and racial sentiments are extension of kinship sentiments." This idea means that usually people favor kin over nonkin. This theory can come from Darwin's theory of survival of the fittest. If your community is in a tough situation and needs to survive, in most cases, people will come together, for both the good and the bad, to allow one another to survive. Ethnic nepotism is usually unconscious, people may not think that they would want to help someone just because they have the same family,

nationality, religion, or so on, but in reality it is what we do as humans. The question is when do we go too far? It should be okay to help someone with whom you feel closer to, for whatever reason, but when will that turn into a conflict? When does it cross the line of being too small minded?

We live in such a globalized world today and can easily see what is happening just about everywhere. If we look at some of the conflicts today we can see that this theory of ethnic nepotism may work to explain those conflicts, or at least to a certain extent. It makes sense, we may even be able to think of our own lives, has a family member ever hired us for a job, or think that we could have been hired based on our religion, nationality, or even skin color? The opposite could have happened too, maybe we were not hired for the job even with all of the qualifications based on similar things (nationality, religion, etc.). Berghe even argues that ethnocentrism and racism are extended forms of nepotism, which seems to make sense if we look at it like that. We all do it though; it is comforting to be around people like ourselves, but again, how far can we go without it turning into a conflict? I am sure we can see small conflicts happening all of the time that can be explained by the theory. You may get upset at a hopeful employer because he or she hired the person that was more like them, rather than you, which could turn into a conflict. We can also see how the theory could explain conflict on a much larger scale. This is where we can talk about the conflict in Nigeria with Boko Haram and how this could be explained by ethnic nepotism. The group is based on recruiting like people, those who have come from a similar belief and background to go against those who are different from them. This conflict is mainly about religious beliefs at a core, which happens to branch out into cultural and education conflicts as well.

If we look back at how this conflict started, it happened with the British colonizing Nigeria. They, the like-minded people from Brittan, who all had similar ideas about religion and ideology came in and tried to tell the people of Nigeria how to live their lives. So we have two groups of like-minded people fighting against each other who have basically opposite opinions about how life should be lived. If we have the theory of ethnic nepotism in our minds, it is not a crazy idea that another group of people would start to fight back. This is what Boko Haram did.

The group of like-minded, religious, people of Boko Haram are all opposed of the same thing; the like-minded, religious (or non religious) people of the "West". The theory of ethnic nepotism can help explain why these conflicts happen. Our (the West) ideologies contrast with those ideologies of those who follow a strict belief of Islam where men tend to have more rights than women, Western education is thought of as a bad thing, they oppose Western culture, science, and religion (Islam in this case) leads the nations. This causes conflict and political violence.

Boko Haram is based in the Northern part of Nigeria where there are far more Muslims, than in the Southern part of Nigeria which consists of many Christians. The two parts of the country fight often, and get into many conflicts. This is another way that we can look at the conflict that Boko Haram creates and how it is out of ethnic nepotism. They created this group of like-minded, kin people to fight for what they believe is right and they have many supports around the area because they like to stick to who they grew up with, their kin group.

Today, Boko Haram's main base is in Borno, in the North of Nigeria. This has been a place of Islamic people and practices for decades. This means that the people who have lived in Borno (assuming most have stayed throughout the years) have had generations and generations of devoted Muslims. According to Kim Searcy from "Origins", "The sefuwa mais (king of the dynasty) of Borno had been Muslims since the 11th century and they traditionally surrounded themselves with Islamic scholars (ulama) who gave them an advantage over other rulers." This place had been filled with Muslim leaders, and Muslim people for so many decades. When the British came in and wanted to change things, and wanted to spread their ideas into the minds of people who have known nothing but what they have been using for so long people got frustrated and angry. The theory of ethnic nepotism would tell us that they wanted to stay loyal to their own people. This is how many conflicts start.

Idris b. Ali was a ruler of Borno in the late 1500- early 1600 and reformed his kingdom to make it more similar to other Muslim states and created diplomatic ties with the sultans of both the Ottoman Empire and the sultans of Morocco. Ali died in 1603. The people that followed him created the Kanuri, which is an ethnic group mostly in Borno, Nigeria. Only about eight percent of all Nigerians are Kanuri, but almost all of Boko Haram is. Kim Searcy said "The Kanuri are distinguished from their Hausa and Fulani neighbors by their language and by the distinguishing vertical marks on each cheek." she also said "This custom of marking the faces of children was done to identify the family and ethnicity of a person". They created this kin that wanted to stay together. The fact that only about eight percent of Nigerians in total are Kanuri yet almost all of Boko Haram is, says something. The theory of ethnic nepotism works well here and makes a lot of sense. They came together as a group, even made clear identify markings on them so everyone would know who they were. They created this super close-knit group of people who began to follow each other become more and more radical, which is not surprising.

According to Alex Thurston from his essay *The disease is unbelief: Boko Haram's religious and political worldview* he talks about the history of Boko Haram, what people may get wrong about the terrorist group, and what the Nigerian government could do to make their place more safe. He said, "Boko Haram claims that its violence responds to what it sees as a decades-long history of persecution against Muslims in Nigeria." This quote tells us that Boko Haram did not just get angry one day and turn into a terrorist group. This has been a long process of other people telling them how to run their place. They have felt like there has been a war against them far before they were a terrorist group. The biggest problem is that from the hatred that they said they were given they reacted with violence.

After looking over research, we can say that ethnic nepotism can explain at least part of the conflict in Northern Africa, especially in Nigeria in regards to the Islamist group, Boko Haram. They have formed a kin group decades ago that was built on their like-minded selves who wanted to keep their culture, their language, and their religion from those who tried to come in and change everything. Of course we cannot say that they had a right to do this, or have had a right to do anything they have done; they have caused so much more harm than good. We can learn from this though. A nation cannot come into another one and invade it without more and more conflicts coming up. We have seen a very similar thing happen when the

United States invaded Iraq and years later ISIL is now fighting. A kin group is going to stay together and is going to fight together and for one another, it is what humans do.

This theory of ethnic nepotism shows that we stick together as a kin group. Unfortunately it seems like there is a fine line between what would be a useful example of the theory of ethnic nepotism and what would cause conflicts like what we see in Boko Haram. It is good to be loyal to your family? Your culture, or your religion? It seems like it should be a good thing, but there can be too much of anything. As the kin group grows bigger and bigger in some ways it seems like the theory of ethnic nepotism becomes more and more prominent and more and more of a problem. Surrounding yourself only around like-minded people, people who grew up all in similar ways, culture and religion can be a dangerous thing that we see in so many places. Unfortunately, when other people come in and tell your kin group that their way should be changed (whether most of the world thinks it should or not), a conflict often appears, which is what we see is happening in Nigeria and other parts of Northern Africa because of Boko Haram.

In *Domestic Ethnic Conflict and Ethnic Nepotism: A Comparative Analysis*, Tatu Vanhanen talks about Darwin and the survival of the fittest theory. If humans have to struggle for survival a community will usually come together and help one another out. People will tend to stick up for their kin group, which goes back to ethnic nepotism. Vanhanen says clearly in his essay, when asked why do so many conflicts take place along ethnic lines? He said: "My answer derives from the idea of ethnic nepotism. If all human populations share the same evolved predisposition to ethnic nepotism, people will align themselves along ethnic lines in political interests conflicts." In looking at this quote and thinking about the conflict in Nigeria and other parts of Africa in regards to Boko Haram, it could be that the people who fight for Boko Haram have not always had that way of life. They were not always violent people, they did not always think it was so important to spread their ideas and ideology onto others; they may have wanted respect for all women and others around them. When people from their community, their extended kin group started to act in a way that caused harm onto others they may have thought in their minds that even if this is not the way that they would normally think was right, they had to play the game like their family and close friends. At some point many people think that family and community is more important than one's individual thoughts. We can especially look at how that differs from one place to another. A place like Nigeria is going to have a much more communal way of life than a place like the United States. It should not be surprising that when one bigger, Western country thinks that they can come into a completely different community tight-knit place like Nigeria, something will go wrong.

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