

How to Prevent Motorbike Attacks in the Sahel?¹

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Abstract

Widely spread in the Sahelian zone for reasons having to do both with economy and mobility, motorcycles have become an element of social prestige for youth in the region. At the same time, their use has been partially diverted for criminal purposes, leading to an increase in swarm attacks. This may be the most recent manifestation of an ancient nomad technique employed against sedentary populations. Facing this danger, should we attempt to hinder these vehicles by “strangling” their circulation or, on the contrary, counter them with an even greater mobility? This essay discusses the origins of the problem, describes the ways in which it manifests itself, and considers possible responses.

Motorcycles in Africa, a Versatile and Popular Tool

Fluid, concealable, popular and cheap, motorcycles have spread throughout Africa over the last thirty years. Their uses are multiple: 1.5 million motorcycles are used on the continent as taxis, transporting passengers and goods, particularly in rough terrains. Furthermore, farmers have been using them to deal with the problem of having to travel back and forth as they irrigate their fields; a simple pump run by a motorcycle has proven an innovative solution in this case.

Since the 1990s, a whole culture based on motorcycles has developed in the cities of northern Nigeria and Cameroon. In a market that was at first dominated by the Japanese motorcycles, the popularity of specific models varies by city, while locals apply nicknames reflecting their own cultural preferences. For example, in Cameroon, the Honda CG125 is

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called “Bazooka,” the Suzuki A100 “Chagari” and the Suzuki AS100 the “black cat.” These Japanese motorcycles were very popular until the arrival of their Chinese competitors in 2004, including Nanfang, Lifan, Jingseng, Carter, and (the fastest) TVS125. Equipped with a lengthened seat, these latter can carry three to four riders at a time, as well as up to six plastic cans of sixty liters each, convenient for gasoline smuggling. Their gas mileage is low, but this disadvantage is offset by the purchase price, which is 50 percent less than that of Japanese vehicles, making it possible for young people to acquire a motorcycle by saving up, without relying on help from their families.

Giorgio Blundo has studied the circuits of distribution of the Chinese motorcycle in Africa.² According to his findings, the city of Cinkassé, in the north of Togo, appears to be a dry port for the import of Chinese motorcycles and the biggest market for the vehicles in western Africa. Situated on the border with Burkina Faso, Cinkassé has become a center to which buyers come from the whole of the Sahel. In Togo, Chinese motorcycles are delivered in spare parts before being assembled by African workers benefitting from the assistance of Chinese technicians.³ Because of the very modest cost of the Chinese motorcycles, local production is almost impossible.⁴

Before moving on to the security problems posed by motorcycles in Africa, their importance in the context of that continent may be seen in a few illustrative examples. For instance, the vehicle serves all of the commercial circuits of smugglers (known as “stuntmen”) in the Mandara mountainous region of Cameroon. It provides easy access to suburbs via serpentine mews, and has affected even small villages, opening them up to the wider world and allowing for easier seasonal movement of livestock. One could in this sense

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³ Yishuang Liu et Wai Shan, “L’importation des motos chinoises a permis une circulation technologique au Sahel,” French.people.cn, October 7, 2017.

⁴ Paul Starkey, *The Rapid Assessment of Rural Transport Service*, report prepared for Intermediate Technology Consultants, March 2006, 2.

see the motorcycle in Africa as a tool of spontaneous development; unfortunately, it has also become an engine at the service of armed criminals.⁵

The Operating Mode of Motorcycle Combat: A Trio of Fighters

Motorcycle banditry is a widespread phenomenon that can be found from the Balkans⁶ to Afghanistan.⁷ It can take the form of assaults on police⁸ or gendarmerie⁹ stations by a few armed men on motorbikes; sometimes motorized bands surround villages in order to loot them,¹⁰ resulting in victims among both civilians and representatives of law and order.¹¹ Motorcycle attacks may also involve several men armed with AK-47s committing a kidnapping,¹² storming a marketplace,¹³ or successfully carrying out a suicide attack.¹⁴ In some cases, hundreds of fighters erupt seemingly out of nowhere on motorcycles, commit an assault lasting only a few minutes, and suddenly disappear.¹⁵

The most frequent operating mode is as follows. Seated on the fuel tank, the driver holds the slightly raised handlebar while a second passenger seated on the metal extension of the seat at the rear takes the role of gunner. A third passenger, in the middle, points out targets and provides the gunner with ammunition. Modifications to technique are employed depending on local conditions. For example, Mandara “stuntmen” have adapted their Chinese motorcycles to the mountainous terrain, giving them double rear shock absorbers and protecting their inner tubes from the needles of Balanite trees with a metallic ribbon.¹⁶

⁵ Christian Seignobos, “Boko Haram: Innovations guerrières depuis les monts Mandara,” *Afrique contemporaine*, no. 252 (April 2014): 149–69.

⁶ See the work of professor Alfredo Nunzi, from 2018.

⁷ Colonel Jean-Louis Dufour, “Terrorisme en essaim,” *Revue L'économiste*, no. 2981, March 13, 2009.

⁸ “Aguel-hoc: Les casques bleus visés par une attaque terroriste,” *Studio Tamani*, April 6, 2018.

⁹ Human Rights Watch, “Abus commis par des islamistes armés et par des membres des forces de sécurité au Burkina Faso,” May 21, 2018.

¹⁰ Seignobos, “Boko Haram: Innovations guerrières.”

¹¹ Bamanda.net, “GAO: Trois individus tués par un groupe armé sur six motos,” June 29, 2018.

¹² Human Rights Watch, “Abus commis par des islamistes armés.”

¹³ Seignobos, “Boko Haram: Innovations guerrières.”

¹⁴ Robert Johnson, “La campagne de contre-insurrection en Afghanistan,” *Revue Stratégique* no. 103 (2013).

¹⁵ “A Swarm of Motorbikes, Then Heavy Fire: Witnesses Shed New Light on Niger Attack,” *The Guardian*, November 15, 2017.

¹⁶ Seignobos, “Boko Haram: Innovations guerrières.”

Motorcycles are also used as tool in the recruitment of young men into jihadist movements. For example, in Burkina Faso, participation in jihadism enables simple shepherds to get access to weapons and to a motorcycle.¹⁷ But it is the case of Boko Haram that is particularly instructive.

Two elements are favored by Boko Haram in attracting young men into its ranks: the gift of a motorcycle and the offer of one or several women. These two elements are far from trivial. In fact, obtaining a motorcycle is both a condition of spatial mobility in the regions affected and a form of social recognition. For instance, after the proclamation of a state of emergency and the prohibition of motorcycles in Diffa, the promise of a motorcycle has become an even greater factor of attraction for the local youth. In the minds of these young recruits, Boko Haram gives them that which the Nigerian state and society no longer offer.¹⁸

Indeed, the Chinese motorcycle has become inseparable from Boko Haram. It is present in all of the group's actions: attacks, kidnappings, rapid strikes, raids, and open battle with the army. After the fighting, photographs published in the press always show the ground strewn with burnt motorcycle carcasses.¹⁹ The entire logistics of Boko Haram are based on packs of motorbikes. In each motorized unit, one usually find a mechanic, a repairman, and an artificer responsible for ammunition and explosives; the bike itself belongs either to the fighter or the squad leader. In practice, the two-wheeled vehicles are used for small, rapid strikes but also enable the quick concentration of hundreds of fighters, the encirclement of a village, and rapid dispersion. Furthermore, attacks combining Chinese motorcycles, Kalashnikovs, and the mobile phone have proved particularly efficient.²⁰ The following and other actions of Boko Haram in Nigeria, as in Cameroon, were perpetrated thanks to this combination: Waza on May 17, 2014, Izage soon after, Kolofata and Hile-Alifa on July 26,

¹⁷ Associated Press, "In Heart of West Africa, Burkina Faso Faces Rising Extremism," August 15, 2018.

¹⁸ Mathieu Pellerin, "Les trajectoires de radicalisation religieuse au Sahel," *Notes de l'Ifri* (February 2017): 26.

¹⁹ Seignobos, "Boko Haram: Innovations guerrières."

²⁰ "Boko Haram: Innovations guerrières."

2014, the capture of the big market of Banki in August 2014, Ngala in September 2014, among others. The same may be said for the group's hostage-taking activities.²¹

Making Good Use of an Ancient Swarming Tactic

For millennia, swarming attacks have been conducted by nomads against sedentary farmers. For example, this was a favorite tactic of the Scythians. During the siege of Samarkand, Spitamenes used swarming against the army of Alexander the Great. Small groups of horsemen would appear, empty their quivers, then disappear to resupply as another group came in. Reacting to this effective tactic, Alexander had to split his army and attack the enemy supply line, forcing them into hand to hand combat.²² Later, the Parthians crushed the Romans at the battle of Carrhae, using mobile tactics to saturate the enemy and prevent them from being able to maneuver.²³ The Mongol invasions provide another example of swarming attacks, but on a far larger scale. Indeed, the Mongolians relied on the combination of mobility and intelligence to rapidly gather together several armies by making them pass by areas where the enemy was not present, in order to then attack en masse at a previously agreed upon location. A large network of messengers capable of traveling quickly over great distances to collect intelligence enabled the Mongols to keep the initiative on an almost permanent basis.

The development of urban warfare in the twentieth century necessitated the evolution of military swarming tactics. Thus, in the battles of Grozny between Russians and Chechens (1994, 1996, 1999), the insurgents defended the city by quickly infiltrating the enemy rear via tunnels, ruins, and constructed passages in order to brutally engage the enemy by surprise and at a short distance, before breaking contact and retreating. The Russians lost many tanks destroyed by RPG, saw their positions threatened, and were defeated during the first and second battles of Grozny. They ended up setting up a "spider's web" made up of advance

²¹ Seignobos, "Boko Haram: Innovations guerrières."

²² Sean J. A. Edwards, *Swarming and the Future of Warfare*, RAND, 2004, 183.

²³ Edwards, 185.

outposts in order to limit the enemy's mobility. Despite these efforts and overwhelming Russian numerical superiority, the Chechens inflicted heavy losses on the Russian army, frequently encircling the outposts.

Swarming has also been used in terrorist attacks. For example, during the bombings in Mumbai (2008, 179 dead), five teams of two men each led simultaneous attacks against several objectives. It should be noted that the United States has been strategically preparing for enemy naval swarm attacks for two decades now. Thus, *Exercise Millenium Challenge 2002* opposed an Iranian-style "red force" commanded by the American general van Riper and using a flotilla of small boats against a conventional "blue" naval force. This simulation resulted in the destruction of sixteen warships, including an aircraft carrier, two helicopter carriers, and five troop transport vessels with 20,000 men on board. Today, Western armies are working on the formation of swarms of drones.²⁴

"Strangling" the Enemy or Fielding an Even More Mobile Response?

In the face of a swarm of enemies, responses have been varied. The most common counter tactic consists of quashing the swarm by strangling its supply chain. Alexander did just that during his siege of Samarkand. Some African states have attempted to use similar tactics to hinder biker gangs by forbidding the circulation of motorcycles at night. As far back as 2011, the local government in the Nigerian federal capital city of Abuja instituted a ban on *mototaximen Okada*, out of concern that they could be used by Boko Haram to commit targeted murders.²⁵ In Cameroon, since 2013 the threat from Nigerian motorbikes was so great that the government imposed a curfew from 6 pm to 6 am on the northern border, from Mandara to Am Chidé and Banki. Since then, this measure has been applied to all the regions of Cameroon north of Maroua.²⁶ In Togo in 2014, the national army was

²⁴ Scott Simonsen, "How Swarm Intelligence Is Making Simple Tech Much Smarter," *Singularity Hub* (2018): 1–5.

²⁵ Seignobos, "Boko Haram: Innovations guerrières."

²⁶ "Boko Haram: Innovations guerrières."

ordered to seize all unregistered motorbikes.²⁷ In September 2018, Burkina Faso, which is facing recurrent jihadist attacks in the east of its territory, banned two- or three-wheel night traffic in this regions; since then, the circulation of motorbikes is officially not allowed from 7 pm to 5 am.

The second response consists in copying the enemy and in outclassing it with higher levels of mobility. For this reason, the Iranian counter-riot policemen are equipped with motorbikes.²⁸ For their part, Lithuanian Special Forces in Afghanistan have used powerful Yamaha motorbikes, going so far as to build a special training camp in Lithuania on uneven grounds. Use of the bikes in Afghanistan allowed the Lithuanians to avoid traps set for heavy tanks. There have been some limitations to this tactic, however. For instance, in motorbike fights the Afghans were certainly slower than the Lithuanians, but also lighter because their bikes were not weighed down with body armor and weapons.²⁹ Furthermore, in light of the use of motorbikes by special forces, ambushes in Afghanistan began to be displaced to 1.5 km away from the main roads.³⁰ Finally, in recognition that motorbikes are not by nature discrete vehicles, being loud, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency is currently developing a new two-wheeled vehicle called *Silent Hawk*, in order to meet the needs of the special forces seeking to counter enemy swarm attacks by motorcycle.³¹

²⁷ K. Mensah, *L'Alternative-Togo*, May 24, 2014.

²⁸ Mohammad Javad Shafiei, "Affronter les forces de l'ordre en Iran l'année 2009," *Revue Outre-Terre* no. 28 (2011): 273–76.

²⁹ Seth Robson, "Soldiers on Motorcycles Might be Most Effective in Afghanistan," *Stars and Stripes*, June 8, 2013.

³⁰ "Why Aitvaras Motorcycle Soldiers Cause Fear for Taliban," *Art of War*, May 14, 2013.

³¹ Kelsey D. Atherton, "Special Forces Are Getting a Stealth Motorcycle That's Silent and Deadly," *Popular Science*, May 26, 2017.