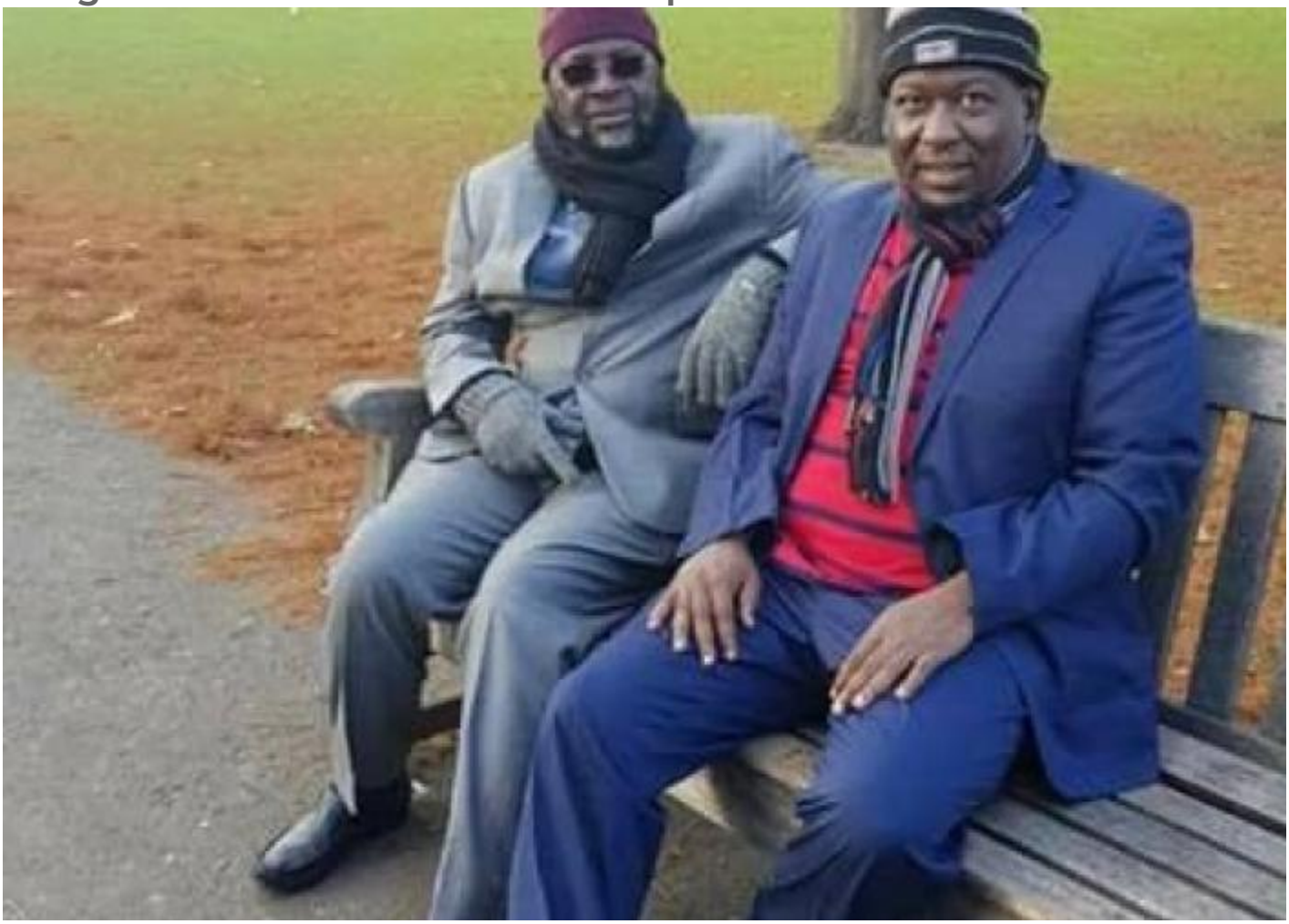
Modernity and morality in Northern Nigeria

Why Salafi clerics' London visit sparked a debate



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Dec 15, 2017

The two clerics were in London to attend an Islamic conference and squeezed in leisure and tourism into their itinerary. Their touristic adventures in the British capital, which, in the rhetoric of many puritan clerics, is a bastion of an immoral modernity, Western education, and cultural trends antithetical to righteous Muslim living, surprised many Northern Nigerian Muslims.

The innocuous photos of two Nigerian Islamic clerics shopping and relaxing in London circulated in Northern Nigerian social media communities two weeks ago. These photos and the debate they sparked in these communities open a window onto an ongoing but little noticed ideological struggle over modernity, morality and

piety in Muslim-majority Northern Nigeria, which is in the throes of Islamist group Boko Haram's violent insurgency.

The photos in question were unremarkable, familiar banalities in the age of social media and online visual culture. One picture shows the two men sitting on a park bench; another shows them in a clothing store wearing cowboy hats. In both pictures, they are dressed in suits. To protect themselves from the elements in cold, wet London, they are wearing cloves and scarves.

Why were these images so controversial, and why did they become touchstones for debate in online communities of Western-educated Northern Nigerian Muslim men and women? In a Muslim-majority region in which Islamic clerics attempt to define the boundaries of private and public morality, modes of dress, the sexual conduct of adults, and their engagements with modernity and Western goods, there is a constantly present cloud of judgmental scrutiny on the conduct of clerics. This reverse judgmental gaze is heightened by the fact that the clerics routinely espouse a neat moral binary between supposedly Muslim material cultures and those of the West, which they condemn.

Given this policing of morality that conservative clerics thrive on, there is often a silent collection of Muslims waiting to call the same clerics out on acts and choices perceived to contradict their teachings. As clerics have come to wield an outsize influence over the body of Muslims and to act as moral enforcers of an increasingly puritan religious order, the sartorial choices of the two clerics — they were wearing what in Northern Nigerian is considered Western dress — touched off debates between Muslim youths who long resented the growing intrusions of the clerics into their lives and those who continue to look upon the religious figures as revered exemplars of piety.

The two clerics were in London to attend an Islamic conference and squeezed in leisure and tourism into their itinerary. Their touristic adventures in the British capital, which, in the rhetoric of many puritan clerics, is a bastion of an immoral modernity, Western education, and cultural trends antithetical to righteous Muslim living, surprised many Northern Nigerian Muslims. It polarized online Northern Nigerian Muslim communities into two broad camps — those who accused the clerics of hypocrisy and those who defended their sartorial choices as consistent with Islamic prescriptions on decent dressing and their London activities as personal choices that do not violate any Muslim precepts.

As the debate progressed, some Northern Nigerian Muslims wondered if the two clerics were preemptively ingratiating themselves to the British and priming their followers for an impending moderation occasioned by the moderate turn in the foreign and domestic policies of Saudi Arabia, the country that funds most conservative preachers in Northern Nigeria. In this reading, the clerics were signaling a new willingness to moderate their stand on Western cultures in line with the pro-Western reforms of Saudi Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman.

One interlocutor, Marzuq Abubakar Ungogo, a lecturer in Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, who wrote a long Facebook update on the controversy, described the clerics'

London vacation as a "handshake with reality," asking rhetorically, "with the London trip, should we expect more moderate and realistic positions from Izala [Salafi] henceforth?" Ungogo described the Izala sect, to which both clerics belong, as "one of the most intolerant and inconsiderate movements in the Muslim north," adding that the sect "often appears to be completely oblivious of our social and geographical realities." Finally, he contended that it was ironic that clerics who are quick to label fellow Muslims heretics for making innocuous personal sartorial and ideational choices have now fallen afoul of their own arbitrary standards by merely going to London, dressing up in suits, and engaging in British pastimes.

Tukur Mamu, the editor of *Desert Herald*, a local newspaper, berated the clerics for misleading the Muslim masses or *ummah*. He accused them of living a life of opulence in cities and indulging in the amenities and conveniences made possible by Western modernity while feeding their poor, largely unlettered followers with a diet of extreme, puritanical doctrines.

The Salafi wave in Northern Nigeria

The sectarian loyalty of the two clerics exacerbated the controversy. Sheikh Kabiru Gombe and his mentor, Sheikh Bala Lau, are Salafi clerics belonging to the Izala sect. This fact carries much significance in a region in which the puritanical Wahhabi-Salafi literalist creed of Islam is on the ascendance at the expense of the traditional Sufi brotherhoods, a doctrinal confrontation in a volatile religious marketplace that plays out in several arenas and has now travelled online to social media, blogs, and web forums.

Sheikh Gombe in particular is known for his ultra-radical Salafi theological positions and pronouncements. He is one of many Salafi clerics who have captured the imagination of some Muslim youths in Northern Nigeria with a blend of populist interventions in local and global sociopolitical debates and an edgy, rejectionist theology of puritan Muslim living. A staple of their teachings is hostility toward a plethora of modern and Western institutions, practices, and goods considered capable of polluting the piety of Muslims.

Northern Nigeria's Salafi Islamic wave, as I call it in my ongoing research project on the historical roots of Boko Haram, began with the slow but well-funded arrival of Wahhabism into Northern Nigeria in the 1980s and 1990s. The Wahhabi-Salafi wave's most visible face was and still is the Izala sect, with which Sheikh Gombe and Lau are associated. The Jama't Izalat al Bid'a Wa Iqamat as Sunna (Society for the Removal of Innovation and the Reestablishment of the Sunna), Izala for short, was founded in 1978 in Jos by a group of followers of the late Sheikh Abubakar Gumi. Sheikh Ismaila Idris was the leader of the group. Sheikh Gumi was at the time studying and mastering the Wahhabi doctrinal canons in Saudi Arabia. He returned to Nigeria in 1987 to take organizational and spiritual control of the anti-Sufi reform movement, leading the group through an explosion in its followership but also through internal fissures over leadership and doctrines.

Sheikh Gumi was an ironic leader of a reformist fundamentalist sect. In the 1960s, when he worked in the Northern Nigerian secular government as the chief judge of

the region's Islamic court system, he had been seen by other clerics as a moderate scholar compromised by his role in the government. Other clerics who shunned the state called him and institutional clerics like him *malamain boko* or *malamain zamani* (modern or Westernized clerics). Gumi's religious (re)education in Saudi Arabia in the 1970s and 1980s redirected him toward a more fundamentalist path, although his Izala sect believed in engagement with the Nigerian state and its institutions rather than in its jihadist overthrow.

The Izala group set up a network of Islamiyya (Islamic) schools, whose graduates where shepherded through multiple layers of Islamic instruction with a view to identifying future scholars among them. The best graduates of these schools were then sent, on generous Saudi Arabian scholarships, to prominent Saudi universities for advanced study of Islam under a Wahhabi curriculum with a tinge of ultra-radical Salafism. The University of Medina was a particularly popular destination for these Nigerian students.

From Wahhabi/Izala to Salafi puritanism

In the 1990s, Sheikh Ja'afar Adam, who mentored Boko Haram founder, Muhammad Yusuf, returned to Nigeria, along with several other Saudi scholarship recipients from the University of Medina, after the completion of his studies. The University of Medina graduates, equipped with an ultra-radical Salafi reformist agenda, found the Izala movement stunted by hierarchical strictures and by a leadership considered compromised by secular and existential pursuits outside the world of theology and religious propagation.

The young Izala zealots returned with little appetite for pragmatism, insisting on a puritanical adherence to a doctrinal canon faithful to the literalist interpretive tradition of the Wahhabi-Salafi school of Islam. Rather than reaffirm their membership in and loyalty to Izala, Adam and his Medina-trained cohort carved a new identity for themselves as bearers of a fundamentalist literalist brand of Salafism, and as reformers committed to entrenching a piety grounded only in the Quran, the prophetical example of the Sunnah, and the examples of the first generations of Muslims (the al-Salaf).

This was a clear rejection of the established Izala Salafi consensus, and an advocacy for a more literalist path to piety. The Medina cohort inaugurated a new Salafi wave which derived its appeal from a critique of the existing Salafi clerical establishment as compromised by secularity, sin, and ignorance. The Izala establishment, they charged, was a haven of *munafunci* (hypocrisy) because the older clerics had sold out their reformist mandate.

In the 2000s, Medina-trained clerics succeeded in ideologically upstaging the old Izala clerical order through a mix of youthful charisma, theological novelty, and populism.

The mainstreaming of this new Salafi wave required a strident critique of the existing order, an ideological coup founded on a strictly literalist interpretation of the Islamic

canons, as well as a healthy dose of moral and theological certitude on the part of new Salafi preachers like Adam.

Backed by Saudi money, the Medina alumni set up their own mosques and acquired a following, each preacher seeking to attract and keep a following by espousing more extreme versions of the Utopian literalist staple of Salafi doctrines. These clerics also began to reproduce themselves, taking on and mentoring students. The current proliferation of Salafi clericalism in Northern Nigeria, and the vocal domination of the Northern Nigerian Islamic marketplace by Salafi clerics and theologies are products of that ideological moment.

Along with the dominance of Salafi puritan and literalist theologies came an insistence on the private and public implementation of a strict moral code conforming to the Islamic Sharia law. The implementation of Sharia criminal codes by several Northern Nigerian states was done at the behest of influential Salafi clerics and their grassroots followers. The codes have been unevenly and only sporadically enforced, but they have empowered Salafi clerics and their agenda, creating a new moral order that is both prescriptive and punitive about the conducts and choices of Muslims in the region.

Clerical intrusions into private Muslim choices

The mainstreaming of Salafism in Northern Nigeria has proven to be suffocating to many Muslim youth desirous of a more pragmatic engagement with the larger world, especially the West, whose cultural products saturate the region, conveyed by ubiquitous satellite television, Western music, dance fads, the educational curriculum, and sartorial trends. Many of the youths believe that these accouterments of modern global youth culture can be reconciled with their Islamic devotion. Salafi clerics and their followers often disagree and see no acceptable compromise.

Increasingly, a determined group of Salafi clerics has occupied the public arena of morality, reaching into the intimate domains of individual lives and dictating the limits of personal moral and bodily conduct — from the realms of the serious to that of the mundane and quotidian. No arena of life has been off limits to Northern Nigeria's Salafi clerics, who often condemn modes of thought, entertainment cultures, modes of consumption, and conducts that they associate with a decadent, permissive Western modernity.

The rise of a moral vigilantism informed by Salafi puritan ethos has extended deep into realms previously regarded as intimate, exclusive zones of life. Notably, this regime of religious morality has extended to the arena of dress, with Salafi clerics and their followers pronouncing with certitude and righteous indignation on what Muslims are wearing, how they are wearing it, and what they are not wearing.

In 2016, Hausa movie actress, Rahama Sadau, received a ban from the Hausa movies section of the Motion Picture Practitioners of Nigeria (MOPPAN) for "indecent" dressing and for hugging a Hausa pop music artiste in a music video. In fact, the ban was instigated by online critics, mostly followers of influential Salafi clerics, who

argued that she had insulted the Islamic values of Northern Nigeria. Prior to that incident, Kannywood, as the Nigerian Hausa movie industry is known, had been routinely criticized by Salafi clerics for debasing Islamic values.

In October 2017 when Aisha Ahmad was appointed deputy governor of Nigeria's central bank, the same online enforcers of puritan Islamic values ignored her resume and criticized her dressing as un-Islamic when photos of her in skirt and blouse circulated along with stories of her appointment. Other recent incidents illustrate the judgmental overreach of conservative Salafi clerics and their online followers, who regularly engage in wholesale condemnation of Western modernist trends, including the wearing of certain kinds of Western clothes.

In this context, the sight of Sheikh Gombe and Lau in Western dress smiling giddily to the camera in London's recreational spaces was a seminal, revealing image for many Northern Nigerian Muslim youth long acclimatized to the view that anti-modern Salafi clerics would only approve of and feel comfortable in Islamic spaces and sartorial ensembles. For them, the problem was not the fact that the clerics visited London. Rather, it was the fact that the pictures in question show Gombe and Lau to be enjoying their time in the British capital, a city which is often portrayed in Salafi preaching, along with other Western domains, as a land of iniquity and heathenism. For many Muslim youths, the pictures capture a Karmic moment that reveals the clerics to be hypocrites possessing, despite their pretenses to the contrary, the human impulse for recreational and sartorial indulgences.

The debate that the photos of the two clerics produced was thus not a trivial conversation about dress and the recreational choices of two Salafi clerics. The photos were loaded with symbolism and contradiction, both of which online interlocutors mobilized in their interventions to make polemical claims, to critique or excuse the perceived tyranny and hypocrisy of a powerful Salafi establishment, and to express personal anxieties and fears.

The democratic and relatively anonymous character of the internet has given a platform to supporters of Salafi clerics and their moral agenda as well as to opponents of the clerics' moral intrusions and prescriptions. This is the reason that the debate about modernity, Islam, and morality has migrated largely to online platforms.

The colonial precedence

The struggle to reconcile traditional Islamic values to Western modernist ones is not new in Northern Nigeria. It has a history that goes back to colonial times. After the conquest of Northern Nigeria (1900-1903), British colonizers faced several Islamic insurgencies. As I explained in an op-ed several years ago, many of these anti-British uprisings were organized by Muslims who were unwilling or unable to accept the new modernist order and instead sought to recreate what they understood to be ideal Islamic communities governed by Islamic moral prescriptions.

Despite these troubles, Northern Nigeria's Islamic clerics and emirs eventually reconciled themselves to colonial institutions and modernity. They mastered

imperial protocols and rituals, and constructed a productive relationship with metropolitan influences and modernist goods, all the while maintaining their traditional Islamic legitimacy.

As my ongoing book project titled *Emirs in London* will show, many of Northern Nigeria's emirs and Muslim aristocrats traveled regularly to Britain and were at home in metropolitan cultural, political, and ideational circuits. Like Sheikh Gombe and Lau, they shopped for British goods, posed for photographs, and enjoyed the sights and sounds of London. Others visited the English monarch in Buckingham Palace, played Polo, watched and gambled on animal races in London's racetracks, and then brought back British consumer and luxury goods to impress their subjects. Some, such as Muhammadu Dikko, the emir of Katsina, even redesigned the front façade of his palace to look like that of Buckingham Palace.

Northern Nigeria's Muslim leaders of the colonial and early postcolonial period saw no conflict between their Islamic identity and devotion and British (and American) modernity. They navigated metropolitan spaces with ease and confidence. Because the emirs did not condemn British-borne modernity, their followers did not criticize their London adventures. Instead their subjects continued to look up to them for moral example. Despite the emirs' entwinements in British culture and their copious consumption of British goods, their followers in Northern Nigeria regarded them as models of appropriate engagements with modernity and as Islamic arbiters of what constituted the acceptable limits of participation in Western culture.

The shift towards a more adversarial relationship with Western modernity and culture is thus recent, a product of the mainstreaming of the Salafi tendency in Northern Nigerian Islam.

At the same time, colonialism is implicated in the current struggle to define the relationship of Northern Nigeria's Muslims with Western goods, ideas, and spaces.

Withholding Western education from the Muslim emirates, British colonizers had hoped to appease emirs and Islamic aristocrats whose support and cooperation they needed to rule the region. Instead, the decision saddled the region with a high rate of illiteracy in a postcolonial nation in which credentialed Western education still presents the most viable path to upward socioeconomic mobility. The resulting deficit of Western education has also provided a receptive audience to the anti-modernist, anti-Western ideologies espoused by Salafi clerics.

Lacking an educational pathway into the Nigerian economy, many Northern Nigerian Muslim youth are preys in the orbit of radical Salafi preachers. They are easily seduced by the Salafi clerics' offer of Utopian moral escape from a corrupt society, and by their wholesale denunciation of a plethora of unfamiliar Western goods and cultural influences.

The ongoing ideological struggle in Northern Nigerian Islam, which the recent online debate encapsulates, is thus partly one between those entrenched in a modernist ethos and thus defensive of it and those suspicious of modernity and the unmediated influence of Western education and culture.

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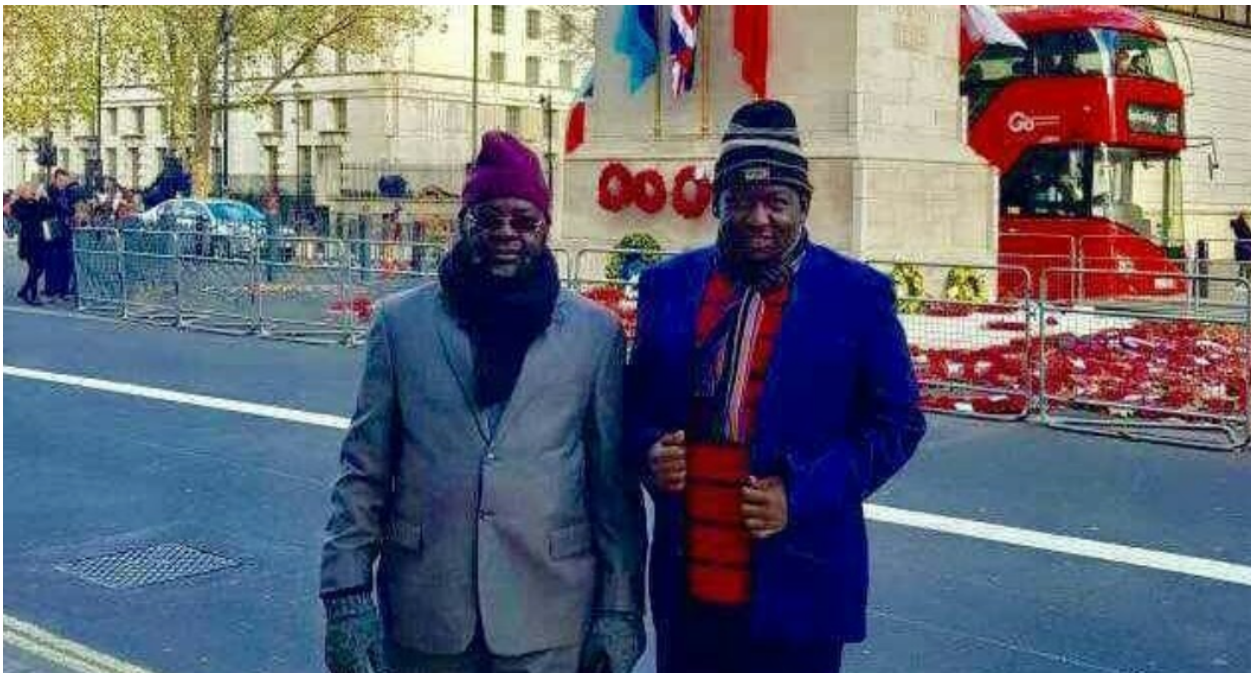

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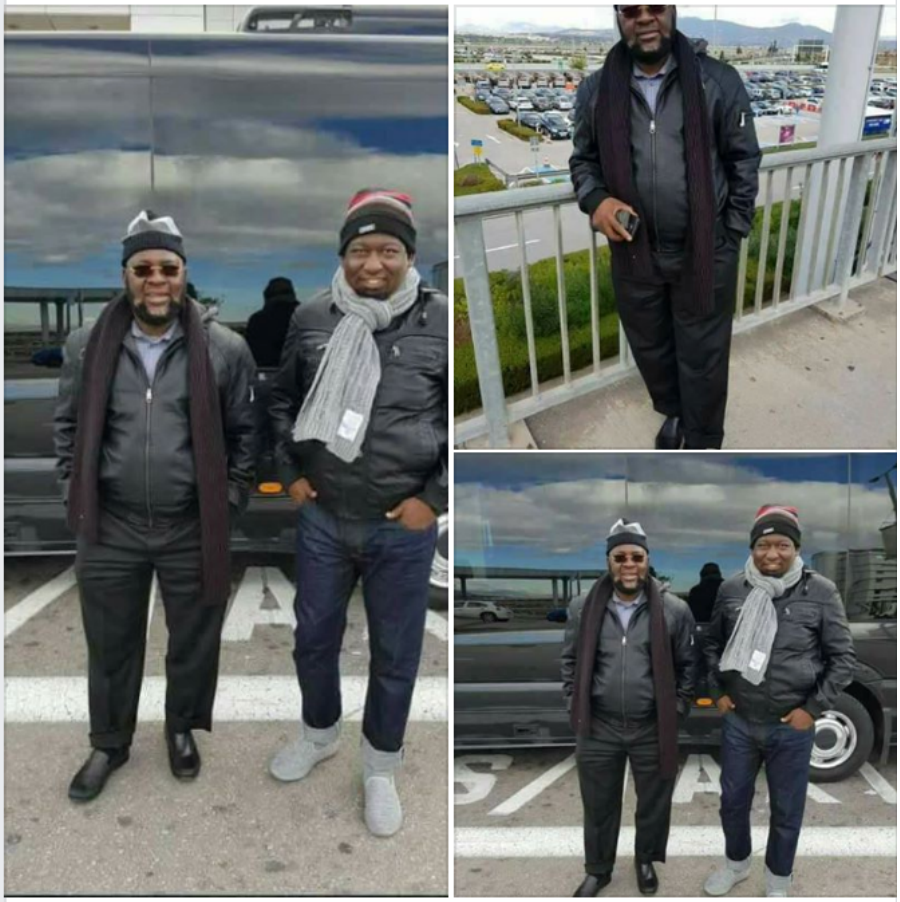

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