Nigerian interfaith couple perseveres in the city where Boko Haram began

Aisha and Vincent Anibueze, a Muslim and a Christian, have found ways to thrive despite violence in Maiduguri.

by Ryan Lenora Brown in the July 18, 2018 issue

Aisha and Vincent Anibueze. Ryan Lenora Brown/*The Christian Science Monitor*.

(*The Christian Science Monitor*) On the dusty floor of his tiny pharmacy, Vincent Anibueze was waiting to die.

Outside, gunshots came like bursts of static from an untuned radio. He heard screams and heavy footsteps. “Gashinan!” someone yelled. *There he is*.

Vincent lay face down where he had dived to the ground when the first shots rang out. Inches away, a man was slumped across the consultation table. Not long ago, that same man had walked brightly into the shop, gripping the hand of his young son, asking about this and that treatment.

Vincent thought of what his wife would do when he was gone. Aisha was quiet but she determined. When her mother had forbidden her to marry him because he was a Christian, Aisha had stood her ground. She wouldn't let this destroy her.

Fifteen minutes after the first shots, the men came back. *This is my last moment in the world*, Vincent thought as he lay on the cement that day. But then the attackers seemed to notice something. Hunched on the floor, weeping quietly, was a little boy. The son of the man slumped across the table.

Wordlessly, the two men with guns turned for the door. Vincent heard a motorcycle starting up, and then they were gone.

A few seconds later, Vincent was, too. He didn't stop running until he reached a friend's house.

The next day, in April 2012, Vincent left town, and then looters carried off what was left of his shop.

For decades, Maiduguri had been northeastern Nigeria's melting pot: a cosmopolitan hub on the edge of the Sahel. In the city's main commercial drag, traders from Nigeria's largest city, Lagos—as well as Cameroon, Chad, China, India, Lebanon, and Niger—hawked everything from bananas to Samsung refrigerators. And on the campus of the University of Maiduguri, students from across Nigeria and beyond threw parties, crammed for botany exams, and debated feminism.

Its welcome sign, though faded, proclaimed Maiduguri "The Home of Peace." For most residents of the predominantly Muslim city, religion was not divisive.

"It has always been said of Maiduguri that you can come in the middle of the night as a stranger and no one will fear to give you a place to sleep," said Muhammad Muhammed, a local Muslim cleric.

Vincent, a devout Anglican from Nigeria's southeast, had worked for years in Kano, a mostly Muslim city in the northwest. But a series of religious riots in the early 2000s had begun to wear him down.

"I wanted to live in a free place and I heard Maiduguri was that," he said.

Not long after he arrived in 2005, he joined a local soccer team. At the house of one of his teammates, he locked eyes with the man's younger sister.

After a few months, Aisha was lingering in his small shop long after she had paid, translating for him what customers were saying in the local language, Kanuri, and offering advice about the city.

He would tease her to make her laugh, he said, “and she could really laugh.”

Soon, both of them realized where this was headed. But for their families, a Muslim girl and a Christian boy was uncharted territory. At first, Aisha’s mother told her no, absolutely not—he’d try to convert her.

It was Aisha’s grandparents who convinced her mother. This girl knows what she wants, they told her. Without her family’s blessing, she’d simply run away with Vincent.

In 2008, the couple got married. But then Maiduguri began to fall apart.

The rumblings of trouble had started several years earlier, when a local cleric named Mohammed Yusuf had begun preaching an angry, anti-establishment brand of Islam. Northern Nigeria had been abandoned by the country’s government, he said, and poisoned by Western education. It needed its own Islamic state. In a poor region with many listless men, that message quickly took root. Local observers dubbed Yusuf’s new group “Boko Haram,” often translated as “Western education is forbidden.”

At first, the movement was largely nonviolent. But in 2009, Nigerian police opened fire on a group of its members, ostensibly after they refused to comply with a motorbike helmet law, setting off a bloody retaliation. Eight hundred people died in the fighting, and soon Boko Haram was flogging the city of its birth, indiscriminately attacking public spaces and bombing schools, hospitals, and mosques.

In the middle of it all, Aisha was pregnant.

“That was when I started begging Vincent to leave,” she said. She’d heard rumors that Boko Haram was targeting pharmacists and thought being Christian alone seemed like wearing a target on your back.

But the community had always treated Vincent as one of its own, he reassured her. Their business thrived. Aisha gave birth to their first child, and then, two years later, their second.

“People were surprised that our marriage worked,” she said. “But I told them that when you come from different places, you have to be open to understand each other. You can’t have any secrets. It makes you stronger.”

After Vincent left Maiduguri in 2012, he stayed away until late 2014, Boko Haram was mostly gone, driven out by the army and a civilian militia. But the couple had no money, and they were scared. When Aisha’s grandparents asked them to send their three small children to stay with them in their village in Chad, they reluctantly agreed.

Back in Maiduguri, Vincent opened a new pharmacy. Aisha gave birth to another baby.

And the city around them seemed to be rising again too. The streets, once deathly silent after dark, filled again with shopping women and loitering teenagers. Freed from military curfews, families queued up at a Chinese-run bakery to buy sweating tubs of ice cream for dessert on hot Sahelian nights.

Boko Haram still sporadically lashed the city, and many of the roads in and out of Maiduguri remained littered with explosive devices planted by the group. In other parts of the northeast, meanwhile, attacks and kidnappings continued, despite the government’s insistence that it had defeated the insurgents.

For Vincent and Aisha, visiting the older children in Chad was nearly impossible. Aisha had begun to think of bringing them back.

Vincent started imagining that when the insurgency was over, he would train to become an Anglican priest and open a church.

“I’ll preach tolerance,” he said. “I’ll tell people, marry who you love.”

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