

Boko Haram as a Discourse Topic in Nigerian Print Media from 2011-2012

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Abstract

Sequel to the unsavory events in the recent times across the country, especially after the swearing in of President Goodluck Jonathan on the 29th May, 2011, Boko Haram becomes a choric refrain in the interactional use of language by opinion writers in the Nigerian print media. There have been many articles on Boko Haram but few borders on the language use of the opinion writers and newspaper commentators. Even the few articles on language use were peripherally discoursed, and to the best of the researcher's knowledge, none applied critical discourse analysis to the treatment of Boko Haram as a discourse topic in Nigerian print media in this part of the globe. This paper therefore, adopts the critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach to the treatment of Boko Haram and its soaring threatening prominence as a topical discourse in the realm of Nigerian print media and online news. The paper draws data from current news reports and opinion articles in the national newspapers such as Daily Sun, Newswatch, The Nation and online news. The results of the analysis show some commendation and condemnation of the Boko Haram phenomenon in Nigeria. In addition, some newspaper commentators and opinion writers often use manipulative language through choices of words and constructions to take a particular position in relation to Boko Haram activities in Nigeria. The paper concludes that the manipulative use of language to obliterate the truth about the lucid and incisive newly created political wing of Boko Haram can only depict a veritable ground for disintegration, inevitable violent change, rancorous, and mortally lethal struggle for power and control in Nigeria. The paper therefore concludes that the language of truth, unity, love, and peace geared towards enhancing the spirit of oneness and socio-economic sustainability should be adopted by the opinion writers and news paper commentators in the Nigerian print media.

1. Introduction

The swearing in of Goodluck Ebele Chukwu Jonathan on 29th May, 2011, provoked the Boko Haram sect with extremist Muslim ideology to embark on an organized warfare against western ideology. Founded in 2002 by Mohammed Yusuf, the name Boko Haram, given to the group by residents in the north eastern city of Maiduguri, is translates to mean "Western Education is forbidden" in the Hausa language. The group's official name is Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad, which in Arabic means "people committed to the propagation of the prophet's Teachings and Jihad". Hence, Boko Haram (BH) promotes a version of Islam, which forbids Muslims to take part in any political or social activity associated with western society. Yusuf, as Sani (2011) reports, has described this group as non-militants, that is, a group of youths who are bent on upholding the words of Allah. The group has also stated and demonstrated their willingness to die for an Islamic state and educational system. There have been a number of attacks by BH sect recently and just recently, the sect bombed and tore apart the U.N. headquarters in Abuja, Nigeria which houses 26 different UN agencies, leaving 23 dead and injuring scores. On the Christmas day, (December 25, 2011) the Boko Haram sect carried out the most dastardly attack on Christian worshipers in Suleja, which left scores of people dead (Yusuf Alli, 2011). Continuing, he said that, about 30 Christians were killed, 13 cars burnt and 9 apartments shattered by explosions at the frontage of St. Theresa's Catholic Church in the town. On June 12, 2012, 15 church goers were killed in a church bombing in Bauchi State. Boko Haram claimed responsibility through their spokesperson Abu Qaqa. The above bombings and killings are just a few of the Boko Haram activities in Nigeria. In the face of the ugly attacks and killings, Boko Haram (BH) became a topical discourse in many Nigerian print media as well as online news. In sociolinguistics and the social science, the role of context is extensively discoursed but without much explicit work on discourse analysis in this part of the globe (see Wardhaugh 2006, Jee 2011, Holmes 2008, Mayr et al 2008, Van Dijk 1999 for details). This paper, therefore, assesses the ways language in discourse production and comprehension is used by newspaper commentators and opinion writers in Nigerian print media. Essentially, the way newspaper commentators use language in the Nigerian print media needs a special knowledge of their discourses and hence, needs to be accounted for in a theory of context model - critical discourse analysis.

The study which is essentially descriptive draws data from various news reports and opinion articles in the Nigerian print media. In this case, the news reports and opinion articles were drawn from the most widely circulated news papers in Nigeria such as *The Nation*, *Daily Sun*, *Newswatch*, and *Vanguard*. The choice of the selection of these news prints is based on the fact that aside from their being widely circulated across the country, they are often available and widely read by people from various ethnic groups in Nigeria.

2. Theoretical Framework

Discourse analysis relates to the way people use language principally as a tool to do things, that is, the study of language in use. Descriptive and critical discourse analyses are some of the major approaches to the study and analysis of language use. Descriptive analysis includes conversation analysis (CA), ethnography of speaking, politeness strategies and so on. On the other hand, critical discourse analysis includes forensic, historical, ideology, mind control and so on. Linguists, philosophers of language, and psycholinguists pay particular attention to the use of language for the transmission of factual propositional information. Brown and Yule (1983) note that, the analysis of discourse is necessarily the analysis of language in use. As such it cannot be restricted to the restrictions of linguistic forms independent of the purposes or functions which those forms are designed to serve in human affairs. Hence, while some linguists may concentrate on determining the properties of a language, the discourse analyst is committed to an investigation of what that language is used for (see Agbedo and Ugwuon 2010, Ugwuon and Nweze 2011 for details). While the former approach has a long tradition manifested in innumerable volumes of grammar, the functional approach is less well documented. Van Dijk (1996) notes that critical discourse analysis (CDA) is an interdisciplinary approach to the study of discourse that views language as a form of social practice and focuses on the ways social and political domination are produced in text and talk. Holmes (2008) also notes that CDA is explicitly concerned with investigating how language is used to construct and maintain relationships in society. The aim is to show up connections between language and power and between language and ideology. She emphasizes that a CDA approach seeks to identify ways in which readers or listeners are manipulated through choices of particular words and constructions to take a particular position in relation to the topic of discussion and effectively position a reader or listener in one group and distancing a reader or listener from them. In his own view, Gee (2011) notes that the goal of CDA is not just to describe how language works or even to enter deep explanation but also intervene in issues, problems and controversies in the world. He also believes that people who take descriptive approach often think that critical approach is unscientific because the critical discourse analyst is swayed by his or her interest or passion for intervening in some problem in the world. Conversely, people who take a critical approach often think that purely descriptive approach is an aversion of social and political responsibility. Van Dijk's (1996) and Holmes (2008) model are adopted in this paper because they emphasize on both the structures and the social context of media text. They can also expose the taken for granted ideological assumptions that underlie most of contemporary discourse topics in Nigeria print media.

3. Origin of Boko Haram

Wikipedia (2011) notes that, Book Haram (BH) exists before the beginning of their brutal politically motivated attacks in Nigeria. BH's official name is Jam a'atu Ahlis Lidda' awati wal- Jihad, which in Arabic means: "people committed to the propagation of the prophet's teaching and Jihad". But residents of Maiduguri where it was formed in 2002 dubbed it Boko Haram. Loosely translated from the local Hausa language, this means Western Education is forbidden (wikipedia 2011). Residents gave it this name because of its strong opposition to Western Education, which it sees as corrupting Muslims. The term Boko Haram comes from Hausa word 'boko' meaning Animist western or other non-Islamic education and the Arabic word haram figuratively meaning 'sin' (forbidden) Gambrell Jan (2011) also reports that, BH became known internationally following sectarian violence in Nigeria in 2009. As of 2011 it is thought to be responsible for increasing violence and sophisticated attacks with at least 327 people killed in 2011. In this regard, the use of the bomb attacks in Nigeria as a strategy of tension and the constant killing of some set of people (especially the Christians who are mainly Igbos) seems to have a hidden political and power struggle agenda. For instance, Toni (2011) in his report of the origin of the BH sect says that, Ustaz Mohammed Yusuf formed BH in 2002 in Maiduguri. He established a religious complex that included a mosque and a school. Many poor families from across Nigeria and from neighbouring countries enrolled their children in the school, which also served as a recruiting center for Jihadist to fight the Nigeria state. In 2004 it moved to Kanamma, Yobe State, where it set up a base called "Afghanistan", used to attack nearby police outposts, killing police officers. Yusuf is hostile to democracy and the secular education system, vowing that "this war that is yet to start would continue for long" if the political and educational system was not changed. The group includes members who come from neighbouring Chad and speak only in Arabic.

Wikipedia (2011), also reports that in July 2009, the Nigeria police started investigating the group, following reports that the group was arming itself. He said that several leaders were arrested in Bauchi, sparking deadly clashes with Nigerian Security forces which led to the death of an estimated 700 people. Prior to the clashes as Wikipedia reports, "many Muslim leaders and at least one military official had warned the authorities about Boko Haram." The Islamic fundamentalist group BH has admitted being responsible for the rise of BH, saying it started as a cell of the sect of the northern elite, who under the pretext of sponsoring young stars to study in the middle East, sent them to terrorists training camp. From the above assumptions, it seems that the situations surrounding the origin of BH has secret, political, and odious agenda in the guise of religion.

4. Reporting Boko Haram in the Nigeria print media.

Following the unsavory events and the dastardly attacks perpetrated by Boko Haram in recent times (2011-2012) across the country, news paper commentators, and opinion writers have postulated and unveiled a number of news events in the Nigeria print media. For instance, commenting on BH saga, Henry Umoru of *Vanguard*, on April 17, 2012 reports:

The elders from the north however expressed great concern on the deteriorating security situation in the country and the northern region in particular, even as they noted that the spate of violence being witnessed has several facets and dimensions which have links and were interwoven with ethnicity, religion, politics, crime, and economy...

The main clue to the above sentence is the stance expressed through the choice of grammatical structures. In the first line, the use of the pronoun (elders) distances the reader or listener from them thus enabling the writer or commentator to avoid explicit knowledge of the names of the elders in question. The use of the passive voice is also indicated in the third line and it removes any reference to the actors or agents. This enables the writer to avoid explicit responsibility of the perpetrators of the violence.

Maureen Chigbo in *Newswatch*, October 10, 2011 seems to have also realized the mind control discourses of the northern elders, leaders, expoliticians, and elites when she reports:

Since the beginning of the Boko Haram insurgency in 2010, nowhere has the truth been neglected than in the simulated cold war between the police and the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), over the disappearance of the Aliyu Tishau, a Boko Haram kingpin. On the cause of the event according to Chigbo, the dramatic interview the elusive Tishau granted to African Independent Television, (AIT) on October 10, 2011, Tishau is said to have explained to the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) operatives that he decided to come into the open to explain issues because some politicians from the northern parts of the country had infiltrated the group and created a political faction that they are now using to cause havoc in the country. Apart from funding the activities of the factions, they choose to work with the newly created political wing of the Boko Haram. They were also reported to be involved in issues of strategy and links with external forces. A controversial politician from the North who was also variously involved in failed campaigns for presidency is said to be among those fingered in the secret deal with faction of Boko Haram

In the first sentence of the above report, the use of passive constructions is glaring. For instance, the reporter removes any reference to the actor or agent, i.e. the people that sacrificed the truth were not mentioned, hence avoiding explicit responsibility to those that hide the truth. From Chigbo's report also it can be noticed on line '8' that Tishau in his interview with the AIT avoided mentioning the names of the politicians from the north who have infiltrated the group and created a political factions that they are now using to course havoc in the country. The last sentence, 'a controversial politician from the north, who has also variously involved in failed campaigns for presidency is said to be among those fingered in the secret deal with faction of BH' presupposes the fact that BH sagas have among other things, some political and power control agenda. The commentator also avoided mentioning anybody's name. Another commentator on the issue of BH and poverty in northern Nigeria is Awoyemi on online news on September 9, 2012, his reports:

Be that as it may, what is true is that we have a crisis which historically has been a platform for the creation of, and dynamic sustenance of other crises. We have unresolved issues that seek to emphasise our differences more than our common destiny. We operate a system that exposes the weaknesses in the foundation of our unity which the people's representatives shy away from confronting. Yet, if the January protests and related parliamentary probe(s) provided any lesson, it must be the fact that the inequalities and fundamental imperfections in the macro-economic structure of Nigeria are unsustainable; and that our politics cannot crowd out the impending reaction to this unaddressed problem.

One would concede the first sentence of the above report as a reminder that there have been a crisis in the past which greatly underlie the present crisis, for instance, 'what is true is that we have a crisis which historically has been a platform for the creation of, and dynamic sustenance of other crisis.' The second sentence involves the target readers as being part and parcel of those that have unresolved issues that seek to emphasise our differences more than our common destiny. In the third sentence, 'we' is inclusive and refers to the commentator, the reader/listener and the Nigerian populace. In the fourth sentence, the people is referred to in the third person and presented as the people who shy away from confronting the weaknesses in the foundation of our unity. In other words, the writer's use of 'we' in that sentence creates the impression that he- the writer is not directly involved in the people's representative. In effect, the usage thus sets up a false impression of shared responsibility and solidarity. In another stance, Awoyemi reports:

Accordingly, when a young man is poor, illiterate and unemployed, he becomes a clean slate for any kind of brainwashing which, according to Marx, is more potent when it comes from religion and aided by culture...' The reason is very simple. First, this category of persons lacks the intellectual power to logically question or critique what they are told. They live in the world of myths. Secondly, the activity component of the brainwashing given to them provides a quasi-equivalent of employment and thus they feel engaged in acting out

what they have been brainwashed about. Is this not the kind of situation we find with the Boko Haram phenomenon? To understand this clearly is to closely examine the coordinates of Boko Haram and that of poverty in Nigeria. Boko Haram at the outset appeared to have had its operational bases located in the poorest parts of northern Nigeria. It is in such places where people have been denied the opportunity to go to school as well as have meaningful economic sources of livelihood that recruitment is the easiest. Boko Haram leaders are aware of it and of course are maximising the advantages of that obvious truth. It is not any different from the situation that prevailed during the pre-amnesty militancy periods in the Niger Delta. The long and short of it is that with entrenched poverty, illiteracy and unemployment, we cannot eliminate the menace of Boko Haram or similar security threats.

A close inspection of the above report would show that the reporter seems to justify the actions of the BH in the country. In the second but last sentence, the reporter likens the activities of the BH to that of the Niger Deltans, but shied away from unveiling their status and their modus operandi. For instance, *it is not any different from the situation that prevailed during the preamnesty militancy period in the Niger Delta.* In the last sentence, the emphatic statement such as: *the long and short of it is that with entrenched poverty, illiteracy, and unemployment, the menace of BH or similar security threats in some parts of northern Nigeria, must continue,* portrays supportive and assurance statement by the reporter. Reporting under the caption ‘Threat of Boko Haram for Nigeria, Africa, and beyond’, CJ Radin on April 23, 2012 in *Threat Matrix* writes:

Founded in the early 2000’s by Mohammed Yusuf, the group emerged during violence that split Nigeria along ethnic and religious lines. The Christian south receives most of the economic benefits from Nigeria extensive oil resources. The relative poverty in the Muslim north has created increasing dissatisfaction with the government. Boko Haram’s goal has been to establish an Islamic state throughout Nigeria.

From the above report, it seems that Radin sees the activities of BH as a result of bad government and poverty in the Muslim North while other reporters such as Awoyemi see it as a necessary action geared towards islamizing the country. In contrast, the Potiskum man in *Threat Matrix* on May 7, 2012 reports:

One false information in this piece (the above report) is that, the South of Nigeria benefits most from the oil wealth. This is absolutely false. The oil comes from the south, while the north controls the oil wealth. Northerners are predominantly Muslims, but with a sizeable Christian minority. Some states in the north are mostly Christians. The Christian South is peaceful- no religious violence as such.

We can then deduce from these commentators that there are essentially different ideologies by different people about the activities of BH in Nigeria. On the cause of the attacks by the Boko Haram sect Bulama in the *Sunday Sun*, 13th November 2011 writes:

It was submitted that the government failure to give responsible and responsive leadership, the bias and want of objectivity of the media and the socio-economic condition of the north-east provided the socio economic political and religious context of the tragedy.

In the above, the reporter’s use of passive construction is very glaring; thus he removes any reference to those that submitted the above information. In other words, he avoids allocating explicit responsibility to those who gave him the report.

Similarly, the president General of the Igbo Welfare Association in Maiduguri, the Borno State capital, Elder Nneka Okere (2011) also laments that, “the sect members were some Muslim youths and hoodlums assembled by some religious fanatics to kill Igbos and, destroy their business”. It can also be noticed in the above report that the use of pronoun, ‘*some religious fanatics*’ enabled the author to avoid mentioning the names of those religious fanatics. Reporting the interview between *Sunday Tribune* and some section of people in Maiduguri, Bulama comments:

Sunday Tribune spoke with a cross section of people in Maiduguri on the activities of the group. Some of them said that Boko Haram was a name given to the Yusufiya sect. The sect according to them is now terrorizing the people of the state and is believed to be sponsored by highly placed politicians in the country, judging by their modus operandi which lives no doubt that politicians are using the name for cover to penetrate evil in the state”.

The above assertion implies that some highly placed politicians are behind this sect and probably they are working toward certain set objectives exclusively known to them. Moreover, the reader is presented with emphatic and assuring statements about the sponsors, ‘*the sect is believed to be sponsored by highly placed politicians in the country, judging by their modus operandi which lives no doubt that politicians are using the name for cover to penetrate evil in the state.*’ The commentator also avoided the names of the highly placed politicians through the use of passive constructions as can be observed in the last sentence.

5. Summary of Findings and Conclusion

The Islamic sect has been the source of incessant crisis in Nigeria. They employ diverse means in fighting for their ideology. The most recent is the use of bombs on churches and places of Christian worship. Also targeted by this sect are the police, military and para-military establishments. Consequently, these incessant attacks have

caused the lives of thousands of people in this country especially the Christians. Properties worth billions of naira also have been destroyed. The attacks have instilled fear and insecurity in the minds of people in Nigeria and even beyond. The erupting violence in the North has made many Igbo people flee from the north and many foreign investors also have vacated Nigeria due to the BH insurgency. Our findings conform to Holmes (2008) and Van Dijk's assertion that a CDA approach seeks to identify ways in which readers or listeners are manipulated through choices of particular words and construction to take a particular position in relation to the topic of discussion. In other words, pronoun choices, for example, can quickly and effectively position a reader as one of us, observing the behaviour of them thus including the reader or listener in one group, and distancing the reader or listener from them.

The paper also discovers that mind control technique and manipulative use of the language are often used to obliterate the truth by some political commentators and opinion writers in the Nigerian print media and online news. If the situation is not brought immediately under control, the result might be serious reprisal from other ethnic or religious groups which might get out of control as the religious environment in the country is becoming increasingly intense. In effect, it is my humble submits that, mind control through manipulative use of the language to obliterate the truth by some political co opinion writers in text (the Nigeria print media) or talk can only Consequently, the paper recommends that newspaper commentators and opinion writers in the Nigerian print media should resort to the language of truth, peaceful dialogue, respect, justice, fair play, love, good governance and reconciliation as the only path to lasting peace in Nigeria.

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