

Recall of Politics of Identity in the Narratives of the Nigerian Press

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ABSTRACT The phenomenon of differentiation in Nigeria is pervasive as a result of the nation's ethnic and religious diversities. Again, the strand of religion is usually intertwined with that of ethnicity in Nigeria as each of the two major religions in the country – Christianity and Islam – are usually identified with a particular broad division of the country. In clear terms, while the majority of Northerners are Muslims, a large number of Southerners are Christians. This ensures that practically all conflicts between any of these groups of people could easily degenerate into religious or sectarian conflict. During conflicts, propaganda is a major tool; and the various groups in Nigeria employ the tool well against their opponents whenever there is a conflict. A major technique of propaganda used in this instance is the selective recall of past misdeeds of the opposing group or individual(s) in the group. Using Selective Retention as a theoretical framework, this paper considers a number of instances where selective recall of past misdeeds of a group or a member of a group has been used as a technique of propaganda in a conflict with the group. Significantly, the Nigerian Press abstracted from the ethnic configuration of the Nigerian nation, and they therefore become veritable sites for the selective recall of the past misdeeds of opposing groups. For instance, this paper looks at recall of past events in the Nigerian press during ethno-religious conflicts.

INTRODUCTION

In Nigeria, there is a growing phenomenon of differentiation based on ethnicity. There is also the religious dimension to this phenomenon. The conflict here is usually between the two major religions in the country: Christianity and Islam. Because of the nation's configuration, however, the strand of religion is usually intertwined with that of ethnicity. Odiase-Alegimenlen (2001: 48) explains that the two-pronged nature of the problem is compounded by the fact that while the majority of Northerners are Muslims, a large number of Southerners are Christians. This ensures that practically all conflicts between any of these groups of people could easily degenerate into religious or sectarian conflict.

The media as a social institution are also involved in conflicts in the society either as a harbinger, channel of information and analysis of the conflicts, or as part of the escalation or resolution of the conflicts. Obviously, the media themselves get involved in this ethnic drama. The Nigerian newspapers, variously, narrate the stories and comment on the conflicts based on their own ethnic nature. The ethnic identity of a Nigerian newspaper is determined by the location of its headquarters, the ethnic identity of the publisher (Uduak 2000: 78) and the main market that the paper seeks to cultivate and patronise (Abati 2000: 91 - 92). For instance,

the way *New Nigerian* and *Daily Trust*, both Northern-based newspapers will narrate and comment on events of religious riots will be different from the way *Nigerian Tribune* and *The Punch*, both Southern-based and owned by Southerners will do the same. The issue is even more apparent with indigenous language newspapers. Obviously, indigenous language newspapers are ethnic based newspapers, which of course, have primordial interests in the ethnic groups whose (indigenous) languages the newspapers use. These newspapers can lead and modify the opinions of their peoples forming stereotypes for them about other ethnic groups, thereby fuelling further the social conflicts (Salawu 2004).

A propaganda technique used in conflict situations is recall of biases against opponents based on perceived past wrongs. This is very much used by different sides to the ethno-religious conflicts, as indicated in the writings in the Nigerian newspapers. Thus, this paper looked at past events in the Nigerian press during ethno-religious conflicts. This study becomes more important against the background of current insurgency of the Islamic militant group widely known as Boko Haram in the northern part of Nigeria (Abubakar 2012; Musa 2012). This group, which is demanding for the application of Sharia law throughout the country, has killed more than two thousand people through bombing and gun attacks. This phenomenon has both

religious and ethnic connotations as many of the people killed during the insurgency were people from the Southern part of the country.

Media, Conflict and Politics of Identity

Psycho-Cultural Conflict Theory posits that identity, especially the one that is based on people's ethnic origin and the culture that is learned on the basis of that ethnic origin is one of the most important ways of explaining violent conflict. Social conflicts that are perennial become a possibility when some groups are discriminated against or deprived of satisfaction of their basic material and psychological needs on the basis of their identity (Faleti 2005: 50). A history of humiliation, oppression, victimization, feelings of inferiority and other forms of experiences which wear away a person's dignity and self-esteem and lead people to resort to vengeance constitute part of what has been referred to as the 'pathological dimensions of ethnicity'. Violent conflicts resulting in situations where passions overwhelm reason are attributed to threatened or actual attacks. Conflicts that are caused by a crisis of identity are usually the most dangerous and most violent because identity is an unshakable sense of self-worth, which makes life meaningful and includes the feeling that one is physically, socially, psychologically, and spiritually safe (Faleti 2005).

Tichenor et al. (1980:17) note that social conflict is a principal ingredient of much newspaper content since conflict is a central component in community life and social change. Tehranian (1996:3) explains this further by saying that the media are naturally attracted to conflict. *Media Development* (1996:2) elaborates: "conflict is the bread and butter of journalism. Conflict sells". Arno et al. (1984:2) assert:

I would go so far to assert that news is defined by its conflict focus and that there is nothing deplorable about the fact.

The media are justified in reporting conflicts because it has the responsibility of recording events as they unfold, part of which is conflict. In other words, conflict is a part of reality and the media have the task of portraying reality. In fact, the provision of information about conflict in the media is a step towards resolution. Tichenor et al. (1980:2) provides an insight:

There is the traditional viewpoint that resolution of social problems is related to inputs of

information. Accordingly, if a system is sufficiently saturated with information, a general understanding of the topic will develop within the system. Once understanding is at hand, resolution is assumed to be at hand.

Viewed differently, newspapers' and other media's reports of conflict are said to be contributory to the legitimating of the conflict (Nnaemeka 1976). Olorunyomi (2000:5), with background knowledge of the genocide in Rwanda, further, contends that the media can act as an accomplice to genocide not only through its indifference but also through active collaboration. He asserts: "In every communal or ethnic conflict, the positions of the media can significantly impact the outcome".

(Olorunyomi 2000:7) again notes that the problem associated with media coverage of diversity or conflict is not normative, but rather ontological. He argues:

To isolate the problems associated with covering diversity as simple matters of norms is to suggest that only endogenous factors influence the practice of the media. The fact of diversity in concrete editorial terms always assumes a pluralism that also include the exogenous variables of ownership, employees, content and sources (Olorunyomi 2000:6).

He, thus, counsels that the media's capacity to respond to its own structural weaknesses would strengthen its capacity to better promote tolerance and help manage diversity in the communities they serve and beyond.

Internal diversity in media organisations or not, individual media owners and journalists need to appreciate the tensions between globalisation and primordial feelings and between the notions of totality and heterogeneity (Olorunyomi 2000:5).

Mass Media, Propaganda and Agenda Setting

Even though the first theoretical thinking about the effects of mass communication deriving from various analyses of propaganda has appeared to be out – of – place, yet two important areas of communication theory have their roots in this early thinking about propaganda, and they are: *attitude change* and *general effects* of mass communication (Severin and Tankard 1992: 90).

Lasswell (1927), quoted in Severin and Tankard (1992) says "propaganda in the broadest

sense is the technique of influencing human action by the manipulation of representations. These representations may take spoken, written, pictorial or musical form". Similarly, McQuail (2000:50) defines propaganda as the "process and product of deliberate attempts to influence collective behaviour and opinion by the use of multiple means of communication in ways that are systematic and one-sided".

McQuail (2000:446) however notes that the first association of propaganda is generally with *conflict* (emphasis mine) between states, noting, however, that the term can be applied to religion, politics and other matters of strong belief. He adds that it usually occurs on some *strongly contested issue* (emphasis mine); often coercive and aggressive in manner.

Lasswell (1927:195), referred to in Severin and Tankard (1992:91) highlights four major objectives of propaganda viz: to mobilise hatred against the enemy; to preserve the friendship of allies; to preserve the friendship and, if possible, to procure the cooperation of neutrals; and to demoralise the enemy.

The United States Institute for Propaganda Analysis identified seven propaganda devices viz: name calling, glittering generality, transfer, testimonial, plain folks, card stacking, and bandwagon (Severin and Tankard 1992:93-104). From scientific evidence, the propaganda devices can be effective, *but only on some people* (Severin and Tankard 1992:105). As an explanation, factors for effectiveness of propaganda including characteristics of the person getting the message, such as education level and initial attitude toward the topic, and the characteristics of the setting, such as whether the group holding a view different from a person's is unanimous or not. Brown (1958:06) remarks that propaganda devices are "contingently rather than invariably effective".

Similarly, McQuail (2000:47) posits that for propaganda to work, it has to reach people and be accepted (if not believed). According to him, acceptance depends, amongst other things, *on the inherent plausibility of the content in the light of information available and on the emotional and ideological climate of the time* (emphasis mine).

In the light of the contingent effectiveness of mass media and propaganda, Klapper (1960) suggests that the general effect of mass communication is reinforcement of attitudes.

Though, the effectiveness of mass media as the sole agent of opinion formation, attitude change and mass mobilisation can be quite suspect, what is, however, certain is that the media can set agenda in the sense of determining the issues the public thinks and talks about, that is, raising people's consciousness.

Selective Retention

Selective retention is the process by which people tend to remember best and longest information consistent with their preexisting attitudes and interests (Baran and Davis 2012: 182 - 183). Severin and Tankard (1992: 143) also note that selective retention is the concept which says that people tend to remember material that agrees with their "prevailing frame of reference" or attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours and forget material that disagrees with them. The different ethnic groups in Nigeria already have a frame of reference for one another. The frame of reference is borne out of perception that each ethnic group has of the other. When a crisis occurs, an ethnic group would choose to select those perceptions that are not pleasant about the other group. It is this perception that will then be focused upon; and thus whatever utterances are made about the opposing group would be borne out of this negative perception.

This recourse to selective recall of negative conducts and practices of the opposing is actually borne out of selective retention of those conducts and practices. The fact that there is mutual animosity among the different groups propels the retention of only the real or imagined negative conducts and practices of the opposing groups. The said conducts and practices are selectively retained because of the perennial acrimony. Thus, when there is a crisis, the tendency is for each ethnic group to go into the reservoir of perceived negative conducts and practices of the opposing group and recall such. This is a device to paint the opposing group bad and establish the justification for the verbal or physical attacks on the group. In this situation, everything positive about the group is deliberately forgotten. This is a major plank of the rhetoric of conflict in Nigeria. Each crisis is seen as an opportunity by one group to inveigh into the other group with a recall of the perceived misdemeanours of the other.

The Miss World Beauty Pageant-induced Crisis

At the wake of the Miss World Beauty Pageant which was being planned to hold in Nigeria in 2002, *This Day*, a Nigerian newspaper published a story written by one of its Style writers. The story, published in the November 16, 2002 issue of the newspaper was said to have been cynical of the Prophet Mohammed for it insinuated that if the Prophet had seen the beauty queens who converged in Nigeria for the pageant, he would have admired them and taken some of them as wives. This story did not go down well with Muslims in some Northern cities of Nigeria; hence they resorted to violent attacks on Christians and churches, killing, maiming and burning. As already mentioned in this paper, most Christians in Nigeria are Southerners. So, the attacks were on Southerners, especially the Igbo stock residing and doing business in the Northern cities.

Depending on their locations and the ethnic origin of their owners, newspaper establishments had different views of the mayhem. While newspapers based in the South and owned by Southerners were critical of the reactions of the Northern Muslims to the publication, their Northern counterparts did not see much wrong in the action as the only issue they were critical of in the whole imbroglio was the "irresponsible and insensitive journalism" of *This Day*. For instance, the *Nigerian Tribune*, a Southern-based newspaper, in its editorials of December 12 and 18, 2002 (respectively entitled 'Zamfara's fatwa: Matters Arising' and 'Still on the Miss World Pageant Riots'), though critical of the contents of the offensive article for being insensitive, however, condemned the resultant riots and the fatwa (death sentence) issued on Isiomia Daniel by the Zamfara State Government.

Alaroye magazine (a magazine published in Yoruba, a Southern Nigerian language) of November 2002 played up the politics of identity with this issue. In the story headlined, 'Rogbodiyan ilu Kaduna' ('Mayhem in Kaduna'), published on page 5 of the issue, the following statements were made in part:

What the crisis brought to the fore is the difference between the Hausa and other tribes in Nigeria. The Hausa are greatly different from us; their conduct is not the same as ours.

Referring to the offensive statement in the *This Day* story, the newspaper writes:

If such a statement angers the Yoruba, what they would do is to write a strong rejoinder, and explain issues to the writer ... But the Hausa do not do this, in particular their leaders... The religion of this Hausa is different from that of the Yoruba (p. 5).

Similarly, in its editorial published on page 4 of its December 10 issue, *Alaroye* writes:

We are opposed to the Hausa 's crazy fight, we are opposed to their stupid conduct. We are equally opposed to the idea of perpetrating evil under the guise of Islam... If a Hausa person were to be in power, we know the Hausa would not start the Sharia system ... there are many people in Hausaland who can slaughter their mothers because of politics... there are many Satanic children among them.

The same issue of the newspaper carried a very blunt cover title: '*Ija Kaduna: Yoruba ni Hausa fee ba jagun*', meaning 'Kaduna mayhem: The Hausa want to engage the Yoruba in war'. We shall refer to a portion of the cover story which appears on page 5:

In actual fact, churches and the non-Hausa are the target of (the evil of) the rioters, but the fight was different from those of the past because they say among themselves that the Yoruba were the actual target.

There are outright calls for dismemberment of the nation. This is evident in a letter published in *Alaroye* of November 19, 2002. Yet, a similar letter appeared in *Alaroye* magazine of November. The letter, published on page 3 of the issue has the headline: 'Imoran mi fun gbogbo omo Nigeria' ('My advice to all Nigerians'). A portion of it says:

My first advice to Nigeria is that we should break so that each ethnic group will go its own way because if we say a Hausa, or Ibo or Yoruba will do it well, we are only deceiving ourselves. As Yoruba is doing it now and peace is not allowed to reign, when it is Hausa or Igbo turn, they will do the same. Instead, let everybody answer to his father's name, that is the only way peace can reign.

Newspapers published in the North of the country had a different view about the crisis. They were very critical of *This Day* and the writer of the offensive article, and therefore based their justification of the killings and arson on the insensitivity of the newspaper and

its writer. Northern columnists who did not toe this hard line were heavily indicted by their fellow columnists of extreme view. An article written by a 'guest' writer and published in 'Baitil Hikma' (Wisdom Column) of *New Nigerian*, December 9, 2002, lambasted Northern Muslim columnists "seized by the devil delusion" of defending professional madness or irresponsible journalism by blaming it on the government or alleged distortion of historical facts or misrepresentation of issues or even insulting the readers' senses. The writer cited the "kidding" editor of *Weekly Trust*, Mohammed Haruna (*New Nigerian* columnist), and Garba Deen Mohammed as being culpable of the 'offence'.

From the writings of Northern writers, it was evident that *This Day* story only provided an opportunity for them to inveigh into their Southern counterparts. There had been a deep-seated grudge against the Southern journalists on their writings about Shari'a, the Islamic legal code that was introduced in a good number of Northern states at the wake of the rebirth of democracy in the country. The introduction of this legal code had sparked off a bloody riot in Kaduna in 2000, where lives and property were destroyed. The editor of *Weekend Triumph*, another Northern newspaper had written on the Miss World Pageant-induced crisis:

It is very clear that some newspapers and writers (especially from the South) find it difficult to accept and respect the values of other people... Most commentaries on Shari'a especially have been not only negative but utterly antagonistic... and others are written with unlimited mischief. (cited in New Nigerian of Dec. 9, 2002).

Similarly, the 'guest' writer of 'Baitil Hikma', previously mentioned, referred his indicted Northern columnists to two books. One of the books is entitled, *Shari'ah and the Press in Nigeria: Islam versus Western Christian Civilization* by Ibrahim Ado-Kurawa. Another writer in *New Nigeria* of the same December 9, 2002, while reacting to the plea of the management of *This Day* and one of its writers that the newspaper was not anti-Islam, punctured the arguments by referring to the contents of the Ado-Kurawa's book. According to the writer of the article in *New Nigerian*, the 461-page book identified and exposed the propaganda, fiction and bigotry, rather than reason that a part of the Nigerian press feeds the public with, culminating into the tension that the nation perennially experiences.

Ado-Kurawa (2001: 353 - 358) analysed the coverage by *This Day* from October to December 1999, of issues pertaining to Shari'a and Muslims. The author discovered that more than 60 per cent of the items in the *This Day* editions studied over the period were not favourable to Islam and Muslims and were in "conformity with the paper's ideological inclination". A further analysis also revealed that 25 percent of the items were on the front pages of issues of the newspaper. Faruk Sarkinfada, the author of the article in the *New Nigerian* commented that this indicated the importance that the paper attached to propaganda against Islam and Muslims.

Similarly, a Nigerian Muslim contributor from Sweden wrote in the *New Nigerian* of November 27, 2002 (p.8):

Over time, Moslem writers have in the main, at least in Nigerian newspapers been very careful in the way they represent Christianity in their writings. It could be attributed to the place that Jesus occupies in the Quran. But writers like Isioma (the writer of the offending article in This Day) have through their exuberance, caused untold hardship to innocent citizens by their expressions and jaundiced analogies.

The Danish Cartoon Crisis

This crisis started as a protest against the cartooning of the images of Prophet Mohammed in a Danish newspaper, *Jyllands Posten* (Arsenault et al. 2006). The protests took place in a number of countries including Denmark, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, South Africa, Iran, Indonesia, Afghanistan, Kenya, Bangladesh, Pakistan, India and Nigeria (Arsenault et al. 2006; Jorgensen 2006). By far, the Nigerian crisis was the deadliest (Jorgensen 2006), claiming hundreds of lives and a very large amount of properties. The crises rocked the Nigerian Northern cities of Maiduguri, Kontagora, Kano and some others. There were also reprisal attacks in the South-eastern cities of Onitsha and Enugu (Salawu 2009).

Concerning the mayhem, *The Guardian* Newspaper editorial of March 2, 2006 notes:

Nigeria has become notorious for "religious wars", occurring almost on an annual basis, in the Northern part of the country, and, in recent times for reprisal attacks in the South, occasioning the brutal and premature death of

countless innocent lives and the destruction of places of worship and other valuable property (p. 6).

Similarly, in an article published in *The Punch* of March 6, 2006, it was also noted that “Nigeria recorded the highest degree of violence over the offensive cartoons. No fewer than 200 persons were killed in different parts of the country. Besides, churches and mosques were burnt in the orgy of violence visited on innocent Nigerians in the name of religion”. Another article in *The Punch* of March 1, 2006 had put it more succinctly:

It is unfathomable that the resultant deaths in the last few days of altercation in Nigeria are counted in three digits, while the total number of casualties in other parts of Arab, Asia and even European countries put together was less (p. 15).

While it is true that religious conflicts have become perennial in Nigeria, the North-eastern and North-western parts of the country and the Muslims there have become really notorious for this. An opinion piece in the *Vanguard* newspaper (a Southern-based newspaper) of April 17, 2006, published on page 18, noted that most religions claimed to be preaching peace and tolerance. It, however, noted that in the Northern part of Nigeria, the interpretation of this peace and tolerance was different. According to the piece, this is because people of the North do not enjoy anything like peace that the religion leaders talk about rather they experience mostly religious crises. The same reiterated: “Religious crisis persisted (sic) in Nigeria in just one region – the North. Clashes in the Northern part of Nigeria have become an issue of global concern” (*Vanguard* April 17, 2006, p. 18).

In a similar vein, a Christian cleric from the North, but based in Uyo, a Southern city, in a report published in *The Punch* of April 7, 2006, page 8, asserted that it was painful that the Moslems were usually the ones who initiated attacks on Christians. Not minding the fact that there had been reprisal attacks in some towns of the South-east, the cleric yet wanted government to begin the immediate trial of those behind the carnage in some States of the North. The cleric maintained that if the Federal Government continued to treat the perpetrators with kid gloves, it was only playing with fire. He, however, opined that Christians ought to have been congratulated for limiting the repris-

als to Anambra State. He stressed further: “As far as I am concerned, any Muslim that (sic) thinks he can just wake up to go and burn down churches is a criminal and should be treated as such. He should be made to face the full weight of the law” (*The Punch* April 7, 2006, p. 13).

A Muslim of Yoruba origin, in his letter to the Editor published in *Sunday Comet* (*Comet* is now repackaged and renamed *The Nation*) of March 5, 2006, page 10, called on Northern Muslims to always find a peaceful way of protesting whenever the need arises. He also reasoned that the offensive cartoons did not call for attack on innocent Christians in Nigeria to the extent of burning their churches which Prophet Muhammed and his successors detest. Meanwhile, a notable columnist of Northern extraction and of Islamic faith did not find the Northern Muslims specifically responsible for the carnage occasioned by the cartoons. Rather, he lumped the Muslims and their leadership in the country together. In his column of ‘People and Politics’ published in *The Comet* (a South-based newspaper) of March 2, 2006, Mohammed Haruna wrote:

Unfortunately many Muslims in Nigeria (emphasis mine) and elsewhere fell for the provocation where it should have been obvious that Christians had absolutely nothing to do with the cartoons. This is why the killings of Christians and Igbos in several towns in the North, starting with Maiduguri, the Borno State capital, on February 18, should have been condemned in the strongest language by every right thinking Nigerian, but especially by the Muslim leadership. Sadly such unequivocal condemnation of the cartoon riots was left to the secular leadership of the equally secular Arewa Consultative Forum. As its Chairman, Chief Sunday Awoniyi, said in a statement the ACF issued on February 20, the killings and burning of churches were “most despicable, thoroughly condemnable and totally unacceptable (p. 12).

CONCLUSION

This paper has catalogued the use of recall of perceived negative conducts and practices of an ethnic/religious group by the other. The practice is observed in the rhetoric of the two major divisions (North and South) during crises. Two crisis situations were highlighted to demonstrate how the technique was used in the narratives

published by various newspapers, each aligning by reason of ethno-religious ownership, to either of the opposing sides. Each crisis is seen as an opportunity by one group to inveigh into the other group with a recall of the perceived misdemeanours of the other. Each crisis provides the outlet for verbal outbursts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Because of the power of the media to set agenda for the public, they must exercise caution and be careful with the 'what' and 'how' of the messages they disseminate to the public. The media holds the power of authority over the public, particularly the non-elite segment. As a result, the thoughts and actions of the undiscerning public are guided by the postulations in the media. The media thus need to rise above primordial sentiments that can colour the hallmarks of journalism viz: objectivity, fairness and balance.

While acknowledging that the above-mentioned hallmarks remain the ideals of journalism, journalists must, irrespective of other considerations, strive towards being objective, fair and balance in their reporting. As members of the society, it is expected that they should also be concerned about peace in the society. Therefore, journalists should emphasise more on issues that bind the society rather than those that divide.

To assist journalists more in their responsible coverage of crises, they should be made to avail themselves of trainings in peace and conflict reporting. Such trainings will help to sensitise the journalists to play more active roles in discouraging conflicts and engendering peace in society.

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