

## Language Use in the Propaganda-Driven Boko Haram War in Nigeria



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**ABSTRACT:** For about two decades now, Boko Haram, whose real name is “Jama`at ahl al-sunna li-da`wa wa-l-qital”, has been waging war against the Nigerian nation in a bid to carve an Islamic state (a caliphate) out of Nigeria. The group is opposed to any form of Western education as its name; Boko Haram, means “(Western) education is forbidden.” Pursuant to this, the deadly group has attacked schools where hundreds of students were kidnapped. Hundreds of people have also been killed by the group. However, the Nigerian government, through its well-oiled propaganda machine, is wont to make Nigerians believe that it is winning the war against Boko Haram. For example, the Nigerian government has, at one time or the other, said that Boko Haram had been “technically decimated” or “defeated several times.” The reality, however, is that the insurgents are the ones having the upper hand as they resurfaced (even with more viciousness and brutality) each time government claimed the group had been defeated. Therefore, this paper looks at how both the Nigerian government and the leadership of Boko Haram deploy language in the propaganda-driven Boko Haram war with the aim of exposing how effectively or otherwise the government of Nigeria and Boko Haram have employed language in dishing out propaganda to the public. It concludes that for the fight against the insurgents to be effective, the Nigerian government must show its readiness to fight crimes and criminality instead of relying on propaganda. Among others, the paper recommends that the Nigerian government should not take Boko Haram messages as “mere propaganda” because the insurgent group has on many occasions lived up to its threat.

**KEY WORDS:** Boko Haram, General Insecurity, Language, Nigeria, Propaganda

### INTRODUCTION

Security is very key to a peaceful and prosperous nation. Its importance to the survival of the Nigerian nation is underscored by the constitutional provision that the security of the lives and property of her citizens shall be the major responsibility of her government. Although absolute peace is not obtainable virtually anywhere in the world, the level of insecurity in Nigeria since the return to democratic rule in 1999 has, however, gone beyond what is condonable. Though there are other forms of security challenges facing the Nigerian nation, the Boko Haram insurgency has been the longest, the deadliest, and the most difficult to overcome. Beginning from July 2005, the Boko Haram insurgents have stepped up their campaign of violence against the Nigerian nation and her citizens, especially in the north-eastern part of the country.

The insurgents appear to be undefeatable as they continue to wreak serious havoc on the people of the North-East where the group has awesome presence. Some factors can be blamed for the seeming invincibility of Boko Haram. A cursory look is taken at these factors. The first factor is the failure of the government to address the root causes of the insurgency which include poor governance, corruption, official neglect, poverty, illiteracy and unemployment among others. All these have left many Nigerians, especially the youths, frustrated and desperate. Adamu, cited in Khalid (2021), is of the opinion that the military approach alone cannot effectively tackle the Boko Haram insurgency.

Another factor is the ability of the group to continue to recruit new members. Unemployment, endemic corruption and indoctrination have made it possible for Boko Haram to continue to recruit new fighters. A security expert, Abdullahi Yalwa; cited in Khalid (2021), says “People are readily available for recruitment just to survive.” The need for survival pushes many youths in the north into joining the group not minding the dangers involved. This explains why the group could still boast of sizeable number of fighters in spite of the high number of casualties suffered regularly by the insurgents in the hands of the military.

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Corruption is another factor that is aiding the resistance of Boko Haram. Monies meant for the procurement of arms have been alleged to have been misappropriated by government officials. The arms fund scandal involving top officials of President Goodluck Jonathan's government is a good example in this case. There is lack of sincerity and transparency in the counter-insurgency war. In some cases, correct allowances of the fighting soldiers are not paid them leading to poor motivation. In the words of Yalwa; cited in Khalid (2021); "... some people have turned it into merchandise and are into self-enrichment."

Following as a concomitance of the above factor is the issue of ill-equipment of the personnel of the military. It is being said that the Boko Haram fighters are better-equipped than men of the Nigerian army and this puts the military at a disadvantage in the theatre of war. The United States' government anxiety over human rights abuse led to the placement of embargo on arms sale to Nigeria. This embargo was, however, lifted by the United States in 2018 and Nigeria has been able to buy some Super Tucano aircraft since then. However, the fighter jets are yet to be put into active use against the insurgents.

Wrong tactics or approaches to the fight are also helping Boko Haram to continue to stage attacks on vulnerable targets. For instance, the army used to have its men stationed in small numbers in rural communities and this used to help stave off attacks or provide prompt responses to attacks by the insurgents. In early 2020, this strategy was changed and the army began to have super camps where large number of soldiers are camped. The conviction that this approach would stem the tide of increasing attacks on soldiers stationed in communities and subsequent loss of weapons to the insurgents. The withdrawal of soldiers from those rural communities has, however, made these communities to be more vulnerable to attacks rather than helping to curtail the insurgents (Adamu; cited in Khalid, 2021).

Closely related to the above is the of infiltration of the military by criminals who divulge critical military intelligence to Boko Haram. The way and manner Boko Haram allegedly lay ambush for the military can only go to confirm that the insurgents do have intelligence on the planned movements of troops. This divulgence has led to the military suffering huge losses in the hands of the insurgents. The rumoured recruitment of "repentant" and "deradicalized" Boko Haram insurgents into the military might be responsible for this.

There is also the factor of widening scope of influence of Boko Haram. Until recently, the activities of Boko Haram insurgents were confined to the north-eastern part of the country. Sometimes in 2020, Boko Haram released a video which claimed its presence in Niger State; hundreds of kilometres away from its usual area of operation. The state issued a statement after this in which it says that Boko Haram fighters had infiltrated the state and were already occupying some forests in the state (Khalid, 2021).

Lastly is the apparent non-comital of the government to the prosecution of Boko Haram sponsors. The Nigerian government has stated that it has been able to identify some Nigerians who have been alleged of being sponsors or financiers of the deadly terror group. Some of these alleged sponsors have been tried and jailed in the United Arab Emirates. Till now, the Nigerian government is still foot-dragging and has not been able to find the courage to prosecute any of them ostensibly because they are people close to Nigerians in the corridors of power.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The social identity theory (SIT) provides this work with the required theoretical underpinning. Before we discuss social identity theory, it is apt we first understand what identity is, especially as it concerns this study. Alubo (2009: 9) sees identity as "a combination of socio-cultural characteristics which individuals share, or are presumed to share, with others on the basis of which one group may be distinguished from others." Ikelegbe (2005: 73) views identity as that subsisting sense of belonging and attachment to a group or institution, or other social, cultural and political entities.

Korostelina (2007) explains SIT as that feeling (by us) of belonging to a social group, or of having a strong connection with a social category and which has become an important part of our minds and which affects our social perceptions and behaviour. At its core, social identity theory suggests that people tend to see themselves and others in terms of groups. The main thrust of SIT could be summed up thus: (i.) Social identification is a perception of oneness with a group of persons; (ii.) social identification involves the forming of in-groups and out-groups; and (iii.) social identification leads to activities that are congruent with the identity, support for institutions that embody the identity, stereotypical perceptions of self and others, and outcomes that traditionally are associated with group formation, and it reinforces the antecedents of identification (See Agbibo, 2015: 4).

In the words of Agbibo (ibid.), terrorist organisations typically see themselves as being bastions of the values and interests of the ethnic or religious communities to which they belong, and their self-identification as members of a much larger community will help them to fulfil their avowed goals. The social identity theory is applicable to Boko Haram and its

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operations in Nigeria. The Boko Haram insurgents in Nigeria see themselves as belonging to an Islamic group that is more pious than other Muslims in their practice of Islam, and that is desirous of breaking away from Nigeria and establishing a caliphate run purely on Islamic principles and devoid of any form of Western civilisation.

### SITUATING/CONTEXTUALIZING BOKO HARAM IN NIGERIA

The Islamic history of northern Nigeria provided Boko Haram with the enabling environment to thrive. For about 800 years, powerful sultanates were established around Hausa land and Borno up to parts of modern-day Chad. These sultanates constituted high Muslim civilizations (Cook, 2011). Between 1802 and 1812, Sheik Usman Dan Fodio challenged these sultanates by way of jihads and he was able to create a unified caliphate which stretched across northern Nigeria and into neighbouring countries (Hiskett, 1994). In 1905, Dan Fodio's caliphate was conquered by the British and brought under the Northern Protectorate. At independence of Nigeria in 1960, the largely Muslim populated Northern Protectorate was amalgamated with the largely Christian populated Southern Protectorate.

The British colonialists helped tremendously in strengthening the hegemony of Islam in the north. For a very long time, the colonialists did not allow Christian missionaries into the core northern parts of Nigeria in apparent concession to the request of Muslim leaders in the areas. Islam was thus more or less being taken as the state religion in the north. When Christian missionaries eventually began to penetrate the north and spread the Gospel of Christ, the stage was being set for conflicts between the majority Muslims and the minority Christians. So, the Muslims who had never for once wanted Christianity to get to most parts of the north began to get into conflicts with Christians.

The colonialists also helped in building particularistic forms of identity and consciousness which emphasize ethnicity and religion among the Nigerian people. Unfortunately, this phenomenon has continued to be further entrenched by post-independence Nigerian leaders. Without any form of prejudice, this phenomenon is more pronounced in the northern part of the country than in the other parts "where disgruntled politicians and other sinister actors, far from building a coherent nation, adroitly cash in on religious or ethnic identity to incite wars" (Agbiboa and Maiangwa, 2013).

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, a major Islamic uprising erupted in several parts of northern Nigeria. This uprising was led by Muhammad Marwa, popularly known as "Maitatsine." The uprising was named "Maitatsine" apparently after the man that led it. Muhammed, Ayinla and Adeoye (2006) state that between 1980 and 2005, well over twenty-eight religious crises had occurred in Nigeria. One noticeable thing about the crises is that virtually all of them had happened in the northern part of the country.

Religious intolerance among the majority northern Muslims is usually blamed for the high rate of religious conflicts in northern Nigeria. Ekanem and Ekefre (2013) are of the opinion that religious intolerance is deeply rooted in northern Nigeria because the region has the highest level of illiteracy in the country. In their explanation of the deep-rootedness of religious intolerance in the North, they posit that northern Moslems see everything from the angle of religion to the extent that their culture is tied to Islamic religion. Because of this, an average northern Muslim cannot separate culture from politics and religion.

All the religious conflicts that have broken out in the northern part of Nigeria (starting from the Maitatsine religious crisis in Kano and other parts of the north) have been caused remotely by the desire of conservative northern Muslims to institutionalize Sharia codes throughout the country despite the nation's constitutional provision that the country shall not adopt any religion as a state religion as contained in Section 10 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended). The actions of some northern state governments at the return of democracy to the country in May 1999 lend credence to the argument above that the north (especially the core north) has for long been planning to adopt Islam as the state religion in spite of the nation's avowed secularity.

Shortly after being inaugurated as the first executive governor of Zamfara State, Governor Ahmed Sanni Yerima introduced Sharia law into the state. In spite of opposition to this based on its unconstitutionality, the governor went ahead with its implementation thus becoming the first northern state to take Sharia beyond mainly personal status issues and into the criminal justice system. In introducing the Sharia code, Governor Yerima was quoted by Agbiboa (2013a) to have said: 'Whoever administers or governs any society not based on Sharia is an unbeliever.' Other states in the north soon followed the path of Zamfara State. There was desperation on the part of northern political elites in the core northern states to introduce Sharia and it was the vogue between 1999 and 2002. The polity was heated up and it was the grace of God and the rare statesmanship displayed by the then sitting president, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, that doused the tension and helped in averting crisis. As of today, twelve states; Zamfara, Kano, Katsina, Kaduna, Sokoto, Niger, Borno, Yobe, Kebbi, Jigawa, Bauchi and Gombe are Sharia states.

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In the opinion of Cook (2011:6), the move to introduce Sharia was triggered by a 'messianic fervor and belief in the efficaciousness of Sharia as a panacea for Nigeria's problems, and most especially for the country's growing corruption and lawlessness.' The pertinent question here is: "Are these Sharia states faring better than the non-Sharia states?"

Another explanation given for the desperation of the state governors to introduce Sharia in their states was offered by Adesoji (2010: 103) when he submits thus:

... the adoption of the Sharia appeared to be an effort to pacify a section of Muslims (the 'conservatives') who had consistently agitated against the secular nature of the country and who perhaps were seen either as a threat to the tenure of the political office-holders or as a support base that could not be neglected on the basis of political calculation.

As it is evident from the foregoing, the ground had already been prepared for the emergence of Boko Haram by the actions of some northern Muslim leaders. Boko Haram began in Borno State as a religious movement around 2002. The group was then being led by one Muhammed Yusuf. The group was not violent at inception. However, the group gained international notoriety in July 2009 when this group of Islamic fundamentalists pronounced a *fatwah* (a religious decree) on Western education (Okedigba, Shittu, and Tiamiyu, 2018). That year, the group was able to hold the state hostage for about five days before the Nigerian military dislodged it from the state. Muhammed Yusuf was eventually arrested and taken into custody where he eventually died. The death of Yusuf led to the emergence of splinter groups with the group becoming very violent. This was the beginning of Boko Haram insurgency.

There are two main factions of the Boko Haram insurgents that are still active and that continue to wage a campaign of insurgency against the government and the people of Nigeria. There is the Abubakar Shekau-led faction of Boko Haram which operates mainly in southern Borno while the faction of Abu Musab al-Barnawi (ISWAP) is mostly found around Lake Chad. From 2009 when the group turned violent, Boko Haram has staged numerous deadly attacks on communities, schools, police and military formations, the United Nations' building in Abuja among others. Because of space constraint, a mention of a few of such high-profile attacks will suffice here.

On 16 June, 2011, the group bombed the Headquarters of the Nigerian Police in Abuja. The group followed this up two months later with the bombing of the United Nations building in Abuja. That was the first time that the group would attack an international institution. On 4 November, 2011, the motorcade of then Borno State governor, Kashim Shettima, came under Boko Haram's bomb attack in Maiduguri on its way from the airport to the Government House as the governor was returning from Abuja. On that same day, around 150 people were killed in coordinated Boko Haram's bombing and shooting attacks on police facilities in Damaturu and Potiskum in Yobe State. On 25 December, 2011; a Christmas day, Boko Haram's bomb attack on Saint Theresa Catholic Church in Madalla town, near Abuja, killed 42 worshippers.

On 15 April, 2014, Boko Haram terrorists abducted about 276 girls from Government Girls' Secondary School, Chibok, Borno State (Maclean, 2014). This abduction drew international condemnation and protests with protesters carrying placards with the "#BringBackOurGirls" inscription. Similarly, on 20 May, 2014, two bombs which killed at least 118 people and injured more than 56 others were detonated by some agents of Boko Haram in the city of Jos, Plateau State. The bombs exploded 30 minutes apart; one at a local market place at approximately 3:00 pm and the second in a parking lot next to a hospital at approximately 3:30 pm, where rescuers responding to the first accident were killed (Fox News, 20 May, 2014).

The town of Baga in Borno State, Nigeria was attacked by Boko Haram between 3 and 7 January, 2015 where the deadly group killed around 2,000 people (Belfast Telegraph, 2015). This is perhaps the largest massacre by Boko Haram in a single onslaught on a town so far (Amnesty International, 2015). In 2018, specifically on 19 February, Boko Haram again kidnapped 110 schoolgirls from Government Girls' Science College, Dapchi, Yobe State. However, many of the girls were later released after negotiation with the insurgents. On 29 July, 2020, the convoy of the Borno State's governor, Babagana Zulum, was attacked by Boko Haram. Though the governor was not hurt, five people, including three policemen, were killed in the attack (Sahara Reporters, 2021).

On 11 December, 2020, more than 330 students were abducted from a secondary school in Kankara, Katsina State by Boko Haram. A midnight attack on a secondary school in Zamfara on 26 February, 2021 also resulted in at least 279 schoolgirls being kidnapped by Boko Haram insurgents. In fact, the list of Boko Haram's deadly attacks is too lengthy to be exhausted in this paper.

### PROPAGANDIC LANGUAGE USE IN THE BOKO HARAM WAR

There have been claims and counter claims of victories by both the Nigerian government and Boko Haram insurgents. Despite the increasing number of attacks being launched by Boko Haram fighters on military formations and the Nigerian nation in general, both the Nigerian government and the Nigerian military are wont to make the world believe that the war

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against the Boko Haram terror group is being won by the military. Leaders of Boko Haram also do come out to claim victories over the military, oftentimes via short viral videos. All these reinforce our own opinion that the war is propagandic. A critical look at the claims of victory over the insurgents by the government and the military, and vice versa, shall help prove this. But first, let us very briefly look at what propaganda is.

In this work, propaganda is explained as an act whereby individuals or groups of people express opinions or carry out actions with the deliberate aim of influencing the opinions or actions of other individuals or groups to achieve predetermined goals or objectives usually through psychological manipulations. It is a form of communication (usually subjective or half-true) with the sole aim of influencing an audience and promote an agenda. It is found in journalism, advertising, government, politics, war, etc. With this understanding of what propaganda is, we can now go ahead to analyse the propagandic use of language by the government and Boko Haram. Selected speeches of President Buhari, military chiefs and Shekau (Boko Haram leader) are sampled.

President Buhari, being the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, does speak, albeit seldom, on the progress being made by the military in the war against Boko Haram. Some of his statements considered propagandic are looked at below.

... So, I think technically we have won the war because people are going back into their neighbourhoods. Boko Haram as an organised fighting force, I assure you, that we have dealt with them.

President Buhari made this statement in an interview with the British Broadcasting Corporation in December 2015 (BBC, 2015). With what the President said, the question to be asked here then is: How come that the war which the president said had been won continues to rage, and the insurgents continue to grow bolder and more daring? The number of attacks staged by Boko Haram between 2015 and now, and the fatality of such attacks have confirmed that the Nigerian military has never for once defeated Boko Haram, be it technically or otherwise, let alone win the war.

In the same interview with the BBC, the president had also said that Boko Haram could no longer stage "conventional attacks" against security forces and population centres. But today, can we count the number of times that military formations and civilian populations have been attacked from 2015 till now? The propagandist intent of the President's statements had thus fell through as many Nigerians were not fooled by the President's claim of victory over Boko Haram. This is because the President had not effectively used language to achieve his set propagandic goal.

Ndahi, in *Vanguard Newspaper* of 30 April, 2021, reported the late Chief of Army Staff, Lt-General Ibrahim Attahiru, to have said this about the Boko Haram war:

Even though some of our troop locations in Mainok and other formations were attacked by members of Boko Haram sect, we will not accept defeat. In war, there is no way troops would always claim victory over its enemies. The Nigerian Army under the support of President Muhammadu Buhari will take on Boko Haram decisively as troops have defeated Boko Haram severally.

Lt-General Attahiru seemed to be speaking from both sides of his mouth in the statement above. In one breath, he had conceded that the military had been attacked by Boko Haram at different locations while in another, he said that the military would not accept defeat. It is not difficult to read into the statement that Boko Haram had at different times been victorious over the military. He unwittingly admitted this fact in the second sentence when he said that there was no way the military would always claim victory over the enemies.

On the other side of the war, propaganda video messages are also being released by Boko Haram leadership. Let it be said here that in spite of their opposition to Western civilisation, leaders of Boko Haram make use of smart phones and video recorders (which are products of Western technology) to send out their propaganda. It is, however, worthy of note that these messages are produced with the objectives of showing that: (i). Boko Haram is strong and powerful while the Nigerian government is weak and feeble; (ii). Boko Haram is a professional army while the Nigerian soldiers are cowardly and incompetent; (iii). Boko Haram fighters live in luxury; (iv). Boko Haram leaders are truthful and honest while Nigerian leaders are untruthful and dishonest; (v). Boko Haram is contemptuous of Nigeria as a nation; and (vi). Boko Haram leader, Abubakar Shekau, is invincible and unpredictable (Mutsvairo, Ogbondah and Agbese, 2017). Some of the (video) messages are sampled below to illustrate some of the sect's objectives:

We are safe. We have not been flushed out of anywhere. And tactics and strategies cannot reveal our location except if Allah wills by his decree... You should not be telling lies to the people. If you indeed crushed us, how can you see me like this? How many times have you killed us in your bogus death?" (Shekau, as reported by *Firstpost*, 2016).

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The statement above was allegedly made by Abubakar Shekau via a viral video to debunk the claims of President Buhari that the group had been defeated and routed out of Sambisa forest. When compared with President Buhari's own statement, it could be seen that Shekau's own propaganda was more effective as it was laden with words which reinforced the group's propagandic claim of invincibility: "... tactics and strategies cannot reveal our location except if Allah wills by his decree." The two rhetorical questions in the statement; "If you indeed crushed us, how can you see me like this? How many times have you killed us in your bogus death?" were so powerful that they could easily puncture the President Buhari's claim of victory over the insurgents. Shekau, assuming the role of a moralist, even admonished President Buhari to stop lying to Nigerians and the world at large; a reinforcement of the untruthfulness of the Nigerian leadership.

In another thirty-six-minute YouTube video message released by Boko Haram in 2015, Shekau boasted that the quantity and quality of the weapons seized by Boko Haram fighters from the vanquished Nigerian soldiers during the invasion of Baga town in Borno State were enough for the insurgents to successfully prosecute its war against the Nigerian nation. The video was out to reinforce the claim that Boko Haram fighters are more professional than the Nigerian soldiers who are cowardly and incompetent. The video can be viewed from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MgdKblgzggQ>

Shortly after the abduction of the Chibok girls in 2014, Boko Haram released another video. In the video, the abducted girls were seen squatting on the floor. The video was meant to puncture the argument of the Nigerian government that no students were abducted from any school in Borno State. In the video, Shekau reiterated Boko Haram's disdain for Western education while at the same time painting the insurgents as being strong, and the Nigerian government as being a liar. He said; "... Western education should end. I abducted your girls. I will sell them in the market by Allah. I will marry off a woman at the age of twelve. I will marry off a girl at the age of nine." The video can be viewed from: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2014/may/06/boko-haram-sell-girls-market-video>

### CONCLUSION

Our examination of samples of propaganda messages from both the Nigerian government and Boko Haram has shown that Boko Haram has been more professional in its use of propaganda in its war against the Nigerian nation than the Nigerian government has been. This has largely made Boko Haram's propaganda to be more effective. This work thus concludes that for the fight against the insurgents to be effective, the Nigerian government must show its readiness to fight crimes and criminality instead of relying on ineffective propaganda.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are offered as recommendations to the Nigerian government and the military in their bid to win the Boko Haram war: First, messages that are being released by Boko Haram should not be viewed as "mere propaganda" by government because the insurgent group has on many occasions lived up to its threat.

Secondly, the military should be more discrete in the management of its intelligence so that such intelligence will not get leaked to the enemy. Moreover, there is need for the military to do some sort of self-cleansing where-in saboteurs will be fished out and punished accordingly.

Lastly, official propaganda (messages) should be well-crafted by professionals who know the art of propaganda (writing) so that the messages will look credible and convincing. Where possible, pictorial evidences should be provided like Boko Haram does.

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