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Terrorism: Countering the Boko Haram extremist narratives in Nigeria.

Abstract

The March 28 attack of the Kaduna-bound train provides this paper with the opportunity to the analysis of the battle of narrative between Boko haram and Nigeria using Miskimmon's strategic narrative approach. It will examine the narrative war between Boko Haram and Nigeria. The analysis will illustrate how these contesting strategic narratives and frames can be used strategically by Nigeria to appeal to Boko Haram's master narrative and how its messaging can be projected to garner support from the international community – the US. Attention is also given to how Boko Haram is framing its narratives through released videos to project its strategic narrative of propaganda.

Introduction

The media ecology has strengthened the strategic narrative of the terrorist group Boko Haram, which emerged in Nigeria in 2009. The reach of terrorists has expanded dramatically over the past few years, controlling territories in northern Nigeria, attempting to supplant the state, ruling with coercion and force, and limiting citizens' liberties and freedom (International Crisis Group, 2016), based on Tawhid – an Islamic state only ideology. Countering Boko Haram's narrative and reversing its gains requires the Nigerian state to have an understanding of its master narrative and reduce the opportunities for its narrative to be projected. (International Crisis Group, 2016). According to Miskimmon, (2013) 'Strategic narratives are an instrument of power in the traditional sense of a state getting another state to do what they would otherwise would not'.

How Nigeria shapes and wins the narrative contestation between it and Boko Haram is the strategic narrative challenge of this thesis.

Narrative Contestation Between Nigeria and Boko Haram.

Boko Haram extremist narratives are not difficult to discern, it is driven by the master narrative of 'Islamist extremism,' which informs how the group thinks about where they come from, where they are going, how they should organize, and the goals they should pursue in the light of their belief as true followers of the prophet' Nigeria's master narratives are rooted in its being a former British colony. It existed as the northern and western, and eastern regions and a people with different cultures and religious leaning. Despite all of that, the regions were amalgamated in 1960 and together struggled to gain independence in October 1960, under a parliamentary system of government that gave each region some degree of autonomy. Ethnic competitiveness, educational inequality, corruption, and economic imbalance amongst the federating regions culminated in a civil war with three states of the Eastern region, fighting a civil war for their secession under the name of the Republic of Biafra. In order to forestall the regional restiveness for power at the center, although not in the constitution a rotational power structure was adapted by political parties that were to see power at the center rotating among the three major political regions of north, west, and east. Nigeria's attempt to transition to a democratic government and the struggles to revalidate the annulled presidential elections of June 12, 1993, have shaped Nigeria's narrative for a united country despite its shaky past after independence. The shared value of a country made up of 320 ethnic groups and drawn majorly across a majorly Muslim north and Christian south dictated a strong master narrative. According to Miskimmon

(2013), a master narrative is a transhistorical narrative that is deeply embedded in a people's shared culture' (Miskimmon, et al p. 104), which should serve as a strategic narrative to counter Boko Haram's projection of its narrative against the Nigerian system, and identity. Why does this not happen to be the case?

Nigeria's Master Narrative

Nigeria's identity and master narrative as an independent state that gained its independence from British colonialists in 1960, has been tested with political instability and mistrust amongst the regions and ethnic groups that make up the country. At the outset, the federating regions mainly the north, southern and western regions were going to be autonomous and contribute to the federal purse at the center. The amalgamation of the regions and the subsequent discovery of oil, which later became Nigeria's major export product began to bring rivalry and tensions among the regions which were based on religious and ethnic leanings, mistrust, and corruption. The ensuing trust issues ushered in a period of military rule, the unity that brought the regions together to fight for independence from the British colonialist was fractured. Nigeria's returned to democratic governance after 33 years of military rule, and the fourth attempt at a democratic system of government. The political instability combined with other socioeconomic problems, weak economic growth, decaying public infrastructures, endemic poverty, and chronic political instability and injustice, have come to be part of the Nigerian narrative. (Africa Confidential, 2004). It is through this identity that democratic instability and social and weak economic growth brought the rise of Boko Haram and its narrative battle with Nigeria.

The war of narrative between Boko Haram and Nigeria and how the Boko Haram narrative of terror has remained an unresolved issue narrative for Nigeria despite its messaging towards Boko Haram for peace and a united country, under a democratic system of government. Nigeria's appeal to convince Boko Haram to return the kidnapped Chibok school girls unconditionally which failed will also fail if Nigeria's strategic narrative doesn't hit at the core of Boko Haram's identity and system narrative. The Nigerian government has stated that it was in touch with Boko Haram and aware of the girl's location and gave an issue narrative of not wanting the girls to be killed as the reason why they cannot rescue the girls – framing the situation by using the belief and justification (epistemology) that 'they believe a rescue will be too dangerous'. Boko Haram has contested its identity narrative as an Islamic state through released YouTube videos of about fifty of the girls with a gunman, giving the condition that its group members should be freed before the school girls can be released. Though Nigeria's strategic narrative was strongly supported by the media ecology (social media) to persuade national actors who helped framed the Nigerian narratives for the unconditional release of the girls with #BringBackOurGirls, the girls have yet to be fully released by Boko Haram with about 219 girls still under Boko Haram's custody (channel4news)

Nigeria	Master & Identity Narratives	System Narratives	Issue Narratives/BH
	<p>Nigerians are notoriously religious people along a Muslim northern, and Christian south</p> <p>Nigeria is Africa's biggest oil producer</p> <p>The largest economy in Africa and army capable to defend its territorial borders</p> <p>National Unity: balance between tribe and region and Muslim and Christian</p> <p>Democratic State</p> <p>Secular State- non religious</p> <p>Political instability</p> <p>Ethnic tensions</p>	<p>Democratic political system</p> <p>Nigeria's national security and region</p> <p>Government lack of National response to Terrorism</p> <p>Rotational presidency</p> <p>Disputes between "indigenes" mostly Christian and "settlers" who are largely Muslim is over land, political power</p>	<p>This ideology still strives for Islamic systems and government to replace democratic one.</p> <p>No to western education/civilization in Nigeria</p> <p>BH goals are incompatible with the nation-state system,</p> <p>Sponsorship/elites benefiting from the Terrorism/crisis</p> <p>Kidnapping, Killing, rejected by people in affected areas.</p> <p>Hard position to accommodate in negotiated settlements.</p>

Boko Haram Master Narrative

Boko Haram Narratives: Boko Harams’ master narrative is actively expressed in the literal translation of its naming – “no to western education”. Taking it further it means the rejection of any western system or culture. Shekau one of its leaders stating their mission said, “Our state is

ruled by the Book of God; our state establishes the Sunna of our Prophet, Muhammad.” Boko Haram’s identity as a group has been focused on war - jihad, unlike other African jihadis like al-Shabab when it ruled Southern Somalia and jihadis controlled Northern Mali in 2012–2013, whose groups made effort to implement Sharia, Boko Haram’s narrative is to fight with the Nigerian state and inflict terror on its citizens. In one of its released videos, Shekau mentioned that “there is nothing between us and the despots of Nigeria except jihad,” (Thorton, A. 2016). Video (Propaganda) from Boko Haram-controlled territory featured battle scenes and seized military equipment that does not shows any civil institutions or made little effort to institutionalize Islamic courts and schools a narrative that does not support its intention to consolidate governance, as it projects. According to Thorton (2016), Boko Haram’s identity narrative “at the ideological level is violence framed by two themes: an exclusivist claim to represent true Islam, and grievances against the state and non-members of the sect”. Boko Haram Salafi theology leaning bears from the middle east and developed roots in northern Nigeria. Its beliefs are predicated on a “Quran-only” doctrine, that strongly rejects westernized culture and it has a commitment to jihad. It has anchored its master narrative under the projection that projects the Nigerian system and identity as anti-Islamic and it sees decades-old inter-religious conflicts, the contentious killing of its founder Muhammad Yusuf in 2009, in the hands of Nigeria’s security forces, and the group clashes with the military and the Combined Joint Task Forces (C-JTF) as part of a unified narrative of anti-Islamic violence. In 2010, Boko Haram pledged its allegiance to al-Qaeda (Okorie,2021), a feat corroborated by Shekau when it declared the formation of an Islamic state on 24 August 2014 a collaboration that glocalized Boko Haram’s opportunities, motivations, and capabilities (Okorie,2021).

Boko Haram has projected itself also, as a group that is has been victimized by the Nigerian state, one which it uses to justify its narratives. Meanwhile, it continues to inflict massive brutality of the killing, kidnapping, child abduction, and violence on civilian communities, many of which are also Muslims. (Thorton, A. 2016).

Boko Haram	Identity/Master Narrative	System Narrative	Issue Narrative
	Caliphate - political structure (sole legitimate Muslim authority)	Caliphate (all Muslims under rule)	Injustice/victim
	Ummah (Muslim oneness)	World Divided Btw Muslims and Non-believers - kuffar	Corruption
	Pure Islam	Requirement Muslims to return (Hijra)	Education
	Monotheism - tauhid	Muslims under attack	Political entities illegal/ Two major parties cannot produce good and accountable leadership
	Islamic Law	Tawhid (al Hakimiyah) fighting under a belief that is divine and handsomely rewarded by Allah Vs Man-made laws - Democracy	
	Utopia	Borders not Islamic	
	Expanding territory		

The effect of media ecology in the narrative battle

The narrative war is not just a contest between nations, but a struggle over systems and identities, Brandt, J., (2021). The challenge posed by the autonomous media system has become crucial in the hands of terrorist organizations like Boko Haram. According to Miskimmon (2013), the new media ecology has fundamentally changed the projection of narratives and empowered more individual publishers and actors which brings more open challenges to narratives of a country like Nigeria. The Nigerian identity of unity and a democratic system of government has been constantly overwhelmed by Boko Haram. Boko Haram has continued to succeed at using the media ecology to advance its goal of gaining attention and obtaining a certain degree of legitimacy or respect (Okorie, M. 2021). In other words, violence, for terrorists, must carry some performative element or involve a choreographic display of goriness. Since terrorism, despite its varying definitions, must involve "the use or threatened use of anxiety-inducing, extravagant violence for political ends by any group which is autonomous and unconnected with the agencies of the state to influence the attitudes and behavior of a target group" (Okorie, M. 2021), publicity is a vital aspect in its execution. Boko Haram narratives take advantage of the speed of the internet and how its messaging can be recontextualized to gain media interest and maximize its reach of political violence. In narrative war, BH provides the most compelling images of the havoc they are capable of wreaking on society and tactically exposes citizens to the limitations of the Nigerian state at the failure to protect them. The media ecosystem has made sure that the terrorist act of Boko Haram gets spread without unfettered restriction into the public domain and become an important tool for facilitating the activities of global jihadi terrorism. The new media ecology has aided Boko Haram's ability to transfer information, helping it to circumvent

information hierarchies and to tailor its messaging, in a way that promotes its narrative (Entman, 1999). Most of all, what is at stake for terrorist groups like Boko Haram is not just the act of terror, like attacking the Kaduna bound train, but the visual spectacle surrounding the act. Just like we witnessed shortly after the March 19, attack, some Boko Haram have inundated the media ecology with its viral video messages and demands with tersely framed messaging that “we don’t want money, the government knows what we want” The objective is for the press to obtain the stories and consequently recontextualize it and aid it to spread (Dowling 1986) (Okorie, M. 2021). The latest events of terror lead me to analyze both the master narrative of Boko Haram and Nigeria. This is important in order for Nigeria to use the identity and system appeals of Boko Haram to convince it to see things its way.

The Effect of Photography and video Content on Framing

Boko Haram's access to and use of the media ecology has strongly advanced the group's narratives of its Nigeria and global audiences, giving it the combined opportunities to break the news of its activities directly to the public, and making psychologically demoralizing the Nigerian soldiers and citizens have insecure and helpless (Okorie, M., 2021). The instrumentalization of social media in their campaign highlight Boko Haram's understanding of the mediated world. It informs its need for video content creation, especially to confirm events that the Nigerian government is likely to refute. For example, Boko Haram uses video content and photographs to confirm evidence of its activities and atrocities as a strategic narrative to project its wins (Okorie, M., 2021). It has consistently released photographs to frame Nigeria’s security system as inept in its videos and makes demands that the Nigerian system can not meet via the YouTube channel.

Boko Haram also follows other global terrorist organizations by posting scary footage of executions, beheadings, overpowering enemy troops in a firefight, and deadly bombings, mainly to discourage, and weaken the morale and the ability of state forces to fight back effectively (Okorie, M. 2021). The use of electronic mediated platforms in various dramatic ways represents an important tactical weapon for Boko Haram in the projection of its strategic narrative on Nigeria.

Conclusion

Nigeria has to tap into Boko Haram's master narratives of mainstream Islamic culture on education and knowledge, to win the strategic narrative war. The reduction or total removal of the issue narratives that Boko Haram is contesting with Nigeria will bring Boko Haram to the table. One such way is for Nigeria to eradicate a major issue of injustice meted out against the group by the extrajudicial killing of Yusuf, its founder. Subsequently, follow through with a strategic narrative to appeal to the true Islamic injunction as designated by the meaning of Islam, which means peace, strategic use of the media ecology where Boko Haram has fully gained the upper hand against the Nigerian system, and his succeeding in changing the narrative of Nigeria to that of a terrorist state that is unsafe. Said the former military head of state, and president of Nigeria, Olusegun Obasanjo "I am personally uncomfortable with the practice of our politics and our political conversations. We should have outgrown bigotry, tribalism, and ethnoreligious biases. It is time to rekindle the candle of a new Nigeria (...)a new Nigeria of our dreams."

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