

“One Man’s Terrorist is Another Man’s Freedom Fighter”: Construction of Identity and Ideology in Selected Abubakar Shekua’s Speeches

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Abstract. Terrorism as a form of social practice in Africa and Nigeria in particular has received scholarly attention from different perspectives. The inception of *Boko Haram*, a terrorist group in Nigeria, as well as its complexities in modus operandi, tactics, and international linkages has led to the widening cleavages given to its nomenclature. Despite several scholarly researches (both linguistic and non-linguistic) on Boko Haram insurgency, there seems to be limited study on a joint orientation to self as perceived through the sect beliefs, that is, conceptualisations of themselves. This study differs from existing studies in that it considers the identity claimed by the sect which can be tracked from the speeches of their leader. Thus, this study investigates how *Boko Haram* identity is constructed in Abubakar’s speeches from a socio-pragmatic approach in a bid to revealing the sect’s identity orientations and ideology. For data, five video-taped speeches of Abubakar Shekua, the leader of the group, downloaded from the Youtube and transcribed were purposively sampled. The sampled was based on the group’s responses from major attacks and the number of viewers as well as viewers’ comments on the videos. The data would be analysed using qualitative analytical method by adopting the social constructionist theory of identity and critical discourse analysis with insights gained from Systemic Functional Linguistics as theories. Three identity orientations/types of the sect: Islamic adherent, freedom fighter, and revolutionist were identified marked off by transitivity processes of verbal, mental and material with the nationalist, Islamic fundamentalism, separatist, and liberationist ideological projections/underpinnings. The study concludes that the sect’s identity orientations when perceived from the way they see themselves provide a socio-pragmatic approach to ‘war on terror’ in curbing terrorist activities in Nigeria.

Keywords: Terrorism, Identity orientation, Nationalist, Conflict resolution, Freedom fighter.

1. Introduction

The cliché “one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter” has been viewed by many scholars in relation to the two contrasting terminologies of terrorism and freedom fighter. It is used to mean one person’s act which might be characterised in the eyes of some as an act to stop oppression or colonialism or apartheid or discrimination which is an act in order to free that particular person will be seen by another person as a terrorist act. This term, therefore, is operationalised as the inside view of Boko Haram sect as perceived by themselves.

1.1 Boko Haram: History/Origin and Activity

The History of Boko Haram Boko Haram’s origins lies in a group of radical Islamist youth who worshiped at the Alhaji Muhammadu Ndimi Mosque in Maiduguri a decade ago. In 2002, an offshoot of this youth group (not yet known as Boko Haram) declared the city and the Islamic establishment to be intolerably corrupt and irredeemable. The group declared it was embarking on hijra (a withdrawal along the lines of the Prophet Muhammad’s withdrawal from Mecca to Medina). It moved from Maiduguri to a village called Kanama, Yobe state, near the border with Niger, to set up a separatist community run on hard-line Islamic principles. Its leader, Mohammed Ali, espoused anti-state ideology and called on other Muslims to join the group and return to a life under “true” Islamic law, with the aim of making a perfect society away from the corrupt establishment.

In December 2003, following a community dispute regarding fishing rights in a local pond, the group got into a conflict with the police. Group members overpowered a squad of officers and took their weapons. This confrontation led to a siege of its mosque by the army that lasted into the New Year. The siege ended in a shootout in which most of the group’s seventy members were killed, including Mohammed Ali. The group had gained press attention in Nigeria, and interest from the U.S. Embassy, because of the catchy name locals had given it: the Nigerian Taliban. It also caught the attention of the Nigerian media because many of the group’s members were the sons of wealthy and influential people in Nigeria’s northern establishment. They were perhaps not all from the very highest circle of Nigerian society, but one was alleged to have been the son of then Yobe governor Bukar Abba Ibrahim. In a 2004 U.S. State Department cable, revealed by Wikileaks, the U.S. embassy in Abuja concluded the group did not present an international threat and likely had no links to international jihadist organizations. The few survivors of the “Nigerian Taliban” returned to Maiduguri, where they settled back with others from the youth group that had originated at the Ndimi mosque.

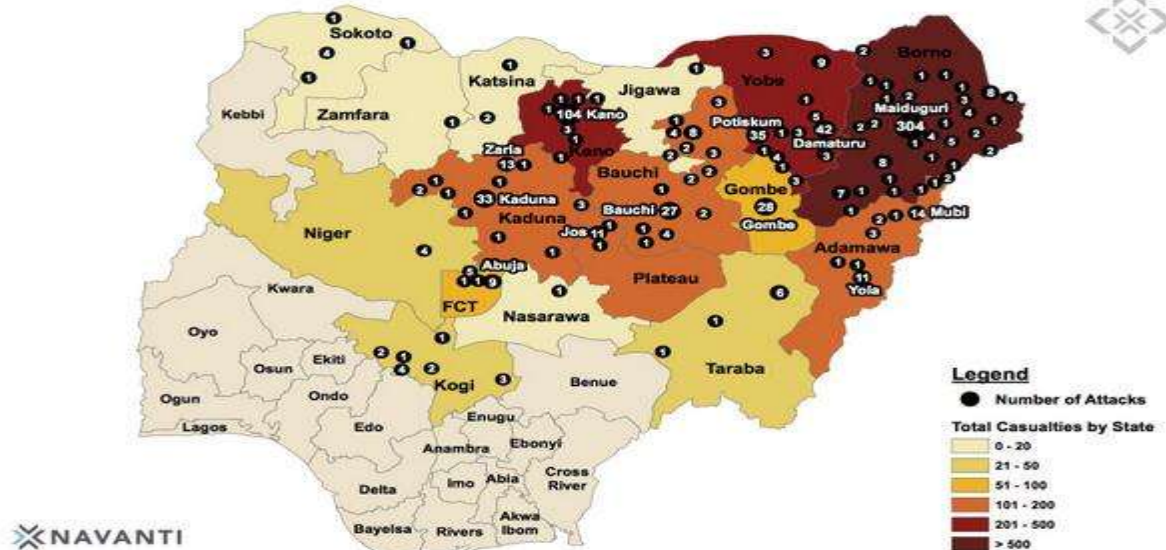
The leader of this Maiduguri group, Mohammed Yusuf, then embarked on the process of establishing the group’s own mosque in Maiduguri. This new mosque, named the Ibn Taimiyyah Masjid, was built on land to the north of the center of town, near the railway station, owned by Yusuf’s father-in-law, Baba Fugu Mohammed. The group was apparently left alone by the authorities, and it expanded into

other states, including Bauchi, Yobe, and Niger state. The group’s neighbors in Maiduguri dubbed the group Boko Haram, which roughly translates as “Western education is forbidden” in Hausa. Observers say the group constructed a “state within a state,” with a cabinet, its own religious police, and a large farm. It attracted more and more people under its roof by offering welfare handouts, food, and shelter. Many of the people the group attracted were refugees from the wars over the border in Chad and jobless Nigerian youths.

Boko Haram caught the world’s attention with its audacious kidnapping in April of nearly 300 girls from a secondary school in Chibok. Over 200 are still missing. The group has also claimed responsibility for devastating bombings in Abuja, the country’s capital, repeatedly striking far from its northeast stronghold in the state of Borno. More recently, the group has changed tack. In August, the group’s leader, Abubakar Shekau, declared a caliphate after capturing the town of Gwoza in Borno. On September 1st, its forces took control of Bama, the second-largest town in the state and have threatened the nearby state capital.

While its recent successes may surprise outsiders, its presence in Nigeria is not new. It has been incubating in northern Nigeria for more than a decade. Initially, it was not violent, yet it adopted violent and terrorist tactics after 2009. More than a year ago Nigeria’s president, Goodluck Jonathan, declared a state of emergency in Borno, admitting that parts of the state were no longer under the government’s control. Since then, his army has failed dismally to defeat the militia.

Boko Haram-attributed Attacks in Nigeria Since July 2009



1.2 Research gap

Terrorism as a form of social practice in Africa and Nigeria in particular has received scholarly attention from different perspectives. The inception of *Boko Haram*, a terrorist group in Nigeria, as well as its complexities in modus operandi, tactics, and international linkages has led to the widening cleavages given to its nomenclature. Despite several scholarly researches (both linguistic and non-linguistic) on Boko Haram insurgency, there seems to be limited study on a joint orientation to self as perceived through the sect beliefs, that is, conceptualisations of themselves. Previous studies on *Boko Haram* activities can be classified into two. These are the non-language-based studies and the linguistic studies (Alao and Oguchi, 2012; Loimeier, 2012; Ajayi, 2012; Chiluwa and Adegoke, 2013; Agbedo et al 2013a; Odebunmi, 2014). The former reveals the history of *Boko Haram*; the sociological, including religious accounts, of their operations, the political implications of their activities; *Boko Haram* insurgency and the widening of cleavages in Nigeria. The latter on the other hand concentrates on the socio-pragmatic implications of *Boko Haram*'s language of insurgency in the Nigerian and global contexts; the pragmatic features of tweets and online comments not of news reports. In all these studies, there is no exclusive focus given to the way the media construct *Boko Haram*'s identity from a critical discourse analysis perspective. This study differs from existing studies in that it considers the identity claimed by the sect which can be tracked from the speeches of their leader.

1.3 Aim and Objectives

The aim of this paper is to investigate Boko Haram identity construction and the ideology implications in Abubakar Shekau's speeches. To achieve this aim, the following are the set objectives:

- To identify and discuss the identity orientations of Boko Haram in Abubakar Shekau's speeches
- To examine Boko Haram ideological projections as well as discuss the discursive strategies in Abubakar Shekau's speeches.

1.4 Significance and Relevance of the Study

- It provides insights into the different perspectives of terrorist conceptualisations of themselves.
- It highlights these perspectives in terms of sect orientations and ideological implications,

- It provides possible socio-pragmatic approach to curbing and resolving this menace in Nigeria.

2. Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) considering Fairclough's socio-cultural approach to analysing identity construction. For CDA, identity is first a representation in language. It is constituted in the grammar of language. Critical Discourse Analysis incorporates linguistic frameworks in the analysis of identity in discourse. These include Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), Evaluation, identity theories and conceptual metaphor theory.

Systemic Functional Grammar: In Halliday's SFG, the grammatical system of a text is represented at the level of the clause through transitivity. Transitivity refers to the grammatical representation of relationships between participants, processes and circumstances. The process types include material (action verbs), mental (thinking, feeling, perceiving), relational (existence-have), and verbal (saying verbs). The typology of processes corresponds with particular identities such as agent/actor, goal, beneficiary, experiencer, phenomenon, etc.

The interactions of these theories with the constructionist theories of identity in identity construction analysis give more information about text production, consumption and perspectives. In that regards, analysts look at the discourses and ideologies that seem to be echoed in the immediate discourse context relying on the history, social and political resources available on how identity is constructed.

3. Methodology

For data, five video-taped speeches of Abubakar Shekau, the leader of the group, downloaded from the Youtube and transcribed were purposively sampled. The sampled was based on the group's responses from major attacks and the number of viewers as well as viewers' comments on the videos. The data would be analysed using qualitative analytical method by adopting the social constructionist theory of identity and critical discourse analysis with insights gained from Systemic Functional Linguistics as theories. First, the videos are responses to the group's major attacks achieving the goals of refuting the claims made by the government as well as establishing their social presence or projecting media propaganda and justifying reasons for such attacks. Next, they are

selected based on the number or percentage of viewers as well as viewers' comments.

4. Analysis and Findings

4.1 Identity Orientation of Boko Haram in Shekau's Selected Speeches

Identity orientation of Boko Haram is said to be constructed in terms of group identity, that is, what the group/sect orients to. It is the conceptualizations of themselves, the way they see/perceive themselves as against the way others see/perceive them. This classification is supported by the group



4.2 Interacting system of Boko Haram Identities and Ideologies

(a) Freedom fighter identity

This is someone who fights in a war against an unfair or dishonest government, army etc. This is characterised by objectivist identity which is that of freedom for the people affected. In this regards, the sect sees the government unduly marginalising the northern region of the country from benefitting of the nation's socio-economic resources. Hence, the need to employ any means possible in reaching their demands to the government as well as ensuring that such needs are met. Also, the fight goes beyond the demands of meeting the socio-economic needs of the people in the north, it connects discreetly with the fight against civilisation of the north in all its sphere with emphasis on education. In this respect, the name of the group as *Boko Haram* which translates to "Western education is forbidden" has bearing on their violent attacks on any person or system (nation or the world at large) that supports this.

From the data sampled, instances of attacks and violence of Boko Haram are characterised with fight for emancipation of human rights (socio-economic resources), and civilisation (education) or against the

subjectivisation of self and objectivisation of others. This is achieved through the use of the 'us' and 'them' dichotomy in terrorist discourse as substantiated in the use of the pronouns 'us' and 'we' versus 'them' and 'they'.

In the data, three categories of Boko Haram identity orientation are identified, namely, freedom fighter, religious adherent, and revolutionist indexed by the transitivity processes of verbal, material and mental. These will be discussed in turn. Also, the identity of the sect orients to nationalist, Islamic fundamentalism, liberationist, and separatist ideologies.

bondage of the world system at large. These are supported with the excerpts given below.

Excerpt 1:

"...And for your information, *western education is forbidden*. University is forbidden, you should vacate university! You should leave university, I hate university. You should quit university, I hate it, bastard."

Excerpt 2:

"Let me make it crystal clear to you save you from unnecessary distorted newspapers and the radio analysis on issues you don't understand. We are not *fighting* the north, we are *fighting* the world. And you will see us *fighting* the world. This *is* our job."

Excerpt 3:

"...Don't think we are done yet because we are not. We are on our way to Abuja and we shall also *visit* the South, not to look for Jonathan but to *destroy* the nation's refineries."

(b) Religious Adherent Identity

This is the practice and strong belief in Islam, its tenets and way of life and in the total worship of Allah. The sect fights for and upholds the doctrines of Allah and that of the Prophet and therefore sees others as non-Muslims or infidels (Christians, Muslims- those contradicting Islam, and the government). They identified themselves with the

religion and stand against opponents who seem to contradict or stand on their way to proclaiming the true worship of Allah. The group name Jamaatu Allus sunna lil daawati wal Jihaed translated as “People committed to the Propagation of the Prophet’s Teaching and Jihad” establishes the basis for the movement and of course the sect strong adherence to the religion in all its entirety.

This identity the sect orients to is revealed through their activities and attacks as characterised by the use of the verbs ‘to obey’, ‘to tread’, ‘to fight’, ‘to kill’, ‘to launch’, ‘to slit’, ‘to slaughter’, and ‘to harvest’. Instances of these will be analysed below using extracts from the data as well as the linguistic features that substantiated them. The sect regards themselves as jihadist and warriors of God.

Excerpt 4:

“You people should *understand* that we only *obey* Allah, we *tread* the path of the Prophet. We *hope* to die on this path and get eternal rest in our graves, rise up in bliss before our Lord and enter Paradise...” (Nov. 2014).

Excerpt 5:

“You infidels, you are finished now. You all want to live and enjoy life; but this time around, we *are well prepared to die*. (Chants of “Allah Akbar”).

“No retreat, no surrender by the grace of God! No retreat, no Surrender by the grace of God! No retreat, no surrender by the grace of God!” (Sept. 2016).

In excerpt 4, the video clip is a response to the claim made by the Nigeria army that Abubakar Shekau, the leader of the group, was killed long ago. The leader of the group first showed their allegiance to Allah, then denied being involved in a ceasefire deal. The identity of the group is brought to the fore through the group’s recognition and loyalty to Allah. With the use of the pronoun ‘we’ and the possessive adjective ‘our’ establishes the conviction they have to service of God (Allah). They do not only want to live (by obeying and threading the path of Prophet) but also desire to die and enter paradise. This is supported with the popular saying that “what is worth living for is worth dying for” and further reinforced by the religious belief that ‘a religion that cannot save (both and now and hereafter) is not practicing’. In addition, the verbal clause reveals the use of the mental verbs of ‘*understand*’ and ‘*hope*’ to cognitively transcends to what the people should be aware of such belief, that is, they are only being faithful and loyal to Allah, and that their strong belief to die and receive eternal rewards for the labour as their end goal.

Also in excerpt 5 above, the video clip reveals the threat made by BH against Buhari, the president of Nigeria, and the counter-claims of defeating them. As part of their strong belief in Islam, the group sees others (Christians, Muslims- contradicting the teaching of Allah, and the government) as infidels and pagans. In the verbal clause of “we *are well prepared to die*”, the material process emphasizes the sect strong belief to die for the religion. Also, the repetition of the phrase “no retreat, no surrender by the grace of God” shows the sect being resolute to fight to finish and not to surrender.

Excerpt 6:

“...But the Giwa Barracks attack is something worth *telling*, because Allah has helped us to *kill* his enemies in Giwa Barracks. We *launched* the Maiduguri attacks and *killed* infidels in Giwa Barracks” (March 2014).

Excerpt 7:

“I promised that we will *kill* all your (Muslim) clerics... I’ll *kill* all of them. I’ll *spare* none but who *follow* Allah and the Prophet. Whoever *follows* Jews and the west is my enemy” (March 2014).

Excerpt 8:

“...Anyone who *turns* to Islam will be saved. For me, anyone that *embraces* Islam is my own. Stupid Jonathan, you will be surprised. Until the land is soaked with blood” (May 2014).

(c) Revolutionist Identity

A revolutionist is someone who fight for a cause or acts to obstruct the operation of a government. This identity type is characterised by radical and fanatic as exemplified in the operations and activities of Boko Haram. The sect sees themselves as a group who fights for their right or that of the people.

Excerpt 9:

“Let me make it crystal clear to you save you from unnecessary distorted newspapers and the radio analysis on issues you don’t understand. We are not fighting the north, we are fighting the world. And you will see us fighting the world. This is our job.” (March 2014).

Excerpt 10:

“My brethren, take up knives and start slaughtering people. Just pick up your knife and break into homes and kill. I heard some people asking Jonathan to relocate to the northeast to take charge of the fight against us, but let me tell you, Jonathan is too small, let even Obama, the President of America relocate to Nigeria and take charge, we will not be deterred” (March 2014).

5. Ideology of Boko Haram in Shekau's Selected Speeches

Ideology is defined as the beliefs, values, and/or principles by which a group identifies its particular aims and goals. The realisation of the categories of the sect identity orientation transforms into the belief system and values upheld by the group. There are matters of ideology – what ‘we’ stand for. These ideological implications enact into social practices or realities.

In the data, four ideological projections are realized, namely, nationalist, Islamic fundamentalism, liberationist, and separatist and they are reinforced by discursive strategies of refutational, exertion of agency/authority, re-affirmativeness, positioning of us against them, and evocation of religious beliefs. These will be discussed in turn.

(a) Nationalist Ideology

This belief is strongly connected to national liberation. It is the ideological position that seek to fight for national goals and national liberation against democracies such as education, marriage, freedom of worship, system of government, etc. Here, democracies seem to be the target. They fight to achieve a specific secular and strategic goal, that is, to compel democracies to withdraw military forces from their national homeland – Northern states of Nigeria. The main reason for burning the military base in Borno State.

Also, nationalist ideology reflects a fight against Nigeria as a nation state with democratic political systems for democracies are often thought to be especially vulnerable to coercive punishment. The excerpt below establish the sect's nationalist ideology:

Excerpt 11:

“Let me make it crystal clear to you save you from unnecessary distorted newspapers and the radio analysis on issues you don't understand. We are not fighting the north, we are fighting the world. And you will see us fighting the world. This is our job.” (March 2014)

(b) Islamic fundamentalism ideology

An Islamist is someone who believes strongly in Islamic ideas and laws. An Islamist is a believer or follower of Islam. Their actions and motivations are controlled by Islamism, that is, the faith, doctrine, or cause of Islam. It is a popular reform movement advocating the reordering of government and society in accordance with laws prescribed by Islam. This is revealed through BH original name: people committed to the propagation of the prophets'

teachings and jihad. This is enacted through the following:

to institute and impose Islam

total Islamisation of the Nigeria (Islamic social movement)

western education is sin *boko haram*

They are against anything called civilisation or any system of government promoting such.

The aforementioned can be seen in the following excerpts:

Excerpt 1:

“Our goal is to see only Koran being followed on earth. This is our focus.” (Nov. 2014)

(c) Liberationist ideology

A liberationist seeks the equal status or just treatment for or on behalf of any group believed to be discriminated against. This is the case of the Boko Haram sect as they seek to demand for equal distribution of the nation's wealth on one hand and to set at liberty members of the group under the hostage of the government. To achieve this goal, the sect makes use of all possible means, be it lethal, criminal, and such like to liberate their fellow ones in prison.

Two prominent methods characterised Boko Haram activities as liberationist ideology. The first is referred to as prison break while the other is rescue mission. These two features are exemplified through the verbal processes of break into and rescued over in the excerpts ??? given below:

Excerpt 12:

“Allah gave us the courage to break into Giwa Barracks (where) we killed and we burnt. We rescued over 2,000 of our brethren, and most of them Commanders!...They all got away. (March, 2014)

Excerpt 1:

“We rescued all our brethren, we gave them clothing, shelter, vehicles, food and all they needed... Our brethren are in good state, we thank God.

(d) Separatist ideology

A separatist is someone or a group who advocates or practices secession from an organisation or group or country. The bid of Boko Haram group as a separatist movement stems from their demands to be a nation state, the Islamic state, outside the federation of Nigeria. Despite all attempts to quell this movement, the reasons for such demands outweigh the government interventions. For such movement, the principles and ideologies drive their desire for a separate nation. This connect with the sect's quest for the creation of caliphate as well as the fight to be

alone as a nation state. The excerpts below clearly justify the sect's orientation to separatist ideology.

Excerpt 13:

"I am a leader, I don't have any president; I am my president. Late Aminu Kano, Late Tafawa Balewa are not Muslims, they are all pagans. I am going to kill all the Imams and other Islamic clerics in Nigeria because they are not Muslims since they follow democracy and constitution." (May 2014).

Excerpt 14:

"My brethren, take up knives and start slaughtering people. Just pick up your knife and break into homes and kill. I heard some people asking Jonathan to relocate to the northeast to take charge of the fight against us, but let me tell you, Jonathan is too small, let even Obama, the President of America relocate to Nigeria and take charge, we will not be deterred." (March 2014).

6. Conclusions / Summary

The findings in this paper reveal Boko Haram identity orientation as freedom fighter, Islamic adherent, and revolutionist. These are characterised or indexed by the verbal, mental and material processes. In the same vein, the ideological projections of such identity orientation reflect Boko Haram as upholding the belief of nationalist, Islamic fundamentalism, liberationist, and separatist ideology through the discursive strategies of evocation of religious beliefs, refutational, positioning of us against them and exertion of agency or authority.

There is said to be an interacting relatedness between the identity types and ideology. While freedom fighter identity projects the sect ideology of nationalist and liberationist, Islamic adherent reflects that of Islamic fundamentalism ideology. Also, the sect identity as revolutionist projects the group as promoting nationalist ideology.

In sum, the paper establishes that Abubakar Shekau's speeches reflect freedom fighter identity type as the overriding identity orientation of the sect while the main/overriding ideological implication is that of nationalist ideology. This implies that Boko Haram self-conceptualisation as freedom fighter and nationalist movement determines the group modus operandi as well as its motivations. It then suffices to say that the 'war on terror' as viewed from the terrorist self-conceptualisation anchored on socio-pragmatic approach would provide a lasting solution to terrorism in Nigeria.

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