



# Muslims' Quest for Identity in Nigeria in the Midst of Boko Haram Insurgency, Religious Conflicts and Media (Mis) Representation

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## Abstract

*The task of this paper is to critically and empirically examine the multidisciplinary and multidimensional issues that confront the identity of Islam within the Nigerian society as a resultant effect of the Boko Haram insurgency since 2002. Nigerian political elites have devised various constitutional and administrative arrangements to cope with the country's complex ethnic and religious pluralism. Yet, peace and stability have been elusive, as the country continues to experience severe religious and communal conflicts. In view of this ugly state of affairs, this paper strives to investigate the role of the media in constructing the identity of Islam in the midst of all these dramas. Secondary data mainly from literatures and newspapers were highly relied on. Additionally, a critical discourse analysis was conducted on selected media reports on Islam and insurgencies to highlight the nature of the coverage and their influence in projecting the image of Islam within the Nigerian multi-religious context. This article went further to empirically prove that there is a significant connection between media representation and audience perception. The paper concluded with the submission that it's essential and pressing for the Muslim community to engage the traditional and mainstream media to correct misconceptions and equally disseminate their desired image. Recommendations were put forward on strategic ways the media can be utilized to the advantage of the Islamic faith.*

**Keywords:** Islam and Christianity, Boko Haram, Nigeria, Media and representation, Religious Identity.

## Introduction

Nigeria is a country of over 180 million people. It is reckoned with in the developing world because of its population which has won it the title of the most populous black nation on earth. It is often referred to as the "Giant of Africa" owing to her large population size. One in four Africans is a Nigerian. Nigeria is a multinational state made up of over 500 ethnic groups with the Yorubas, Igbos and Hausas been the three largest. Due to this multi-ethnicity, over 500 different languages are spoken across the country<sup>1</sup>.

Since the modern state was born when the British colonial masters amalgamated the Northern Nigeria Protectorate and Southern Nigeria Protectorate in 1914, the nation has been divided roughly between Christians and Muslims in the southern and northern regions of the country respectively<sup>1</sup>.

Despite the existence of other minority religions, these two major religions have played foremost parts in the socio-political and economic making of the country and in modelling the global image of the nation. The relationship between Christians and Muslims has been bitter-sweet since independence in 1960 but the sectarian religious violence by Boko Haram, an Islamist extremist group that seeks to annihilate the secular system of government and establish Sharia law has greatly abetted in further dividing the nation along religious lines. By the same

token, the local and international media have contributed in amplifying the tension since 2002 when the Boko Haram group was created.

Boko Haram founder was Mohammed Yusuf and was succeeded by Abubakar Shakau till August 2016 when ISIL announced its appointment of one of Abubakar Shakau's main commanders, Abu Musab al-Barnawi as the new recognised leader. This extremist sect is based in Maiduguri, the capital of Borno state in Northern Nigeria. Beyond the shores of Nigeria, Boko Haram maintains also active presence in some border countries like Chad, Niger and northern Cameroon. In March 2015, in a video broadcast, it declared its loyalty to the global terrorism group, Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) with operations in dozens of countries. Global Terrorism Index in 2015 ranked the Boko Haram terrorist sect as the world's deadliest terror group. British Broadcast Corporation in the same 2015 reported that the group has killed 20,000 people and displaced 2.3 million from their homes since their emergence in 2009<sup>2,3</sup>.

The group has carried out many atrocities and inhuman acts especially within the northern states of Borno, Yobe and Adamawa including the internationally publicized kidnapping of 276 schoolgirls from Chibok in April 2014. Boko Haram ideologies are similar to those of Sunni Islamic fundamentalist sect as the founders of the sect were highly influenced by the Wahhabi movement.

List of some other atrocities of the group include: i. In 2011, Boko Haram freed 105 of its members out of prison in Bauchi through prison break. Along with this, over 600 other prisoners were freed on the same occasion. ii. In June 11, 2011 killed 6 at the Abuja police headquarters using Vehicle-borne IED. iii. In August 2011, the UN headquarters in Abuja was bombed, in which 11 UN staff members. Many others sustained injuries. iv. They have not spared religious leaders, civilian targets, politicians, religious leaders and security forces in their attacks. v. Attacked and killed members of a branch of the Deeper Life Bible Church in Lokojo, Kogi state. vi. While Goodluck Jonathan's presidential inauguration was on in May 2011, the sect carried out a series of bombings in Abuja, Zaria and Bauchi, killing scores of people. vii. They killed Abba Anas Ibn Umar Garbi, the younger brother of the Shehu of Borno, who was a prominent Muslim figure in the North. viii. Their most deadly action yet was their attack on police buildings, killing 190 in Kano, on 20 January 2012. ix. Over 5,000 Nigerian Catholics had been killed by Boko Haram as at May 2015. x. Issued several death threats on Christian communities in the North, have killed thousands and destroyed their worship centers and properties worth millions of naira.

The above list though not conclusive paints the picture of the situation of Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria and the challenge that Muslims have to face in promoting their identity within the Nigerian media space.

Data from recorded history states that Islam arrived the shores of Nigeria in the 9th century though some scholars like Sheikh Dr. Abu-Abdullah Abdul-Fattah Adelabu claim its presence in the country was much earlier. Usman dan Fodio introduced Islam in the modern era to Nigeria at the beginning of the 19th century through Jihad leading to the founding of the Fulani Empire. The empire was functional till 1903 when it was broken-up into various European colonies.

Fast-forward to the 21st century, over 48% of Nigerians adheres to Islam while 50% of the nation's citizens are officially Christians. In Sub-Saharan Africa, Nigeria has the largest Muslim population. In terms of geographical spread, Islam dominates the northern part of Nigeria. Muslims belonging to Maliki School of jurisprudence are of the majority. Meanwhile, Shia adherents are primarily in Kaduna, Sokoto, Kano and Katsina states.

Ostien<sup>4</sup> did estimate that over 50% of Muslim population in West Africa are from Nigeria. There are fragments of various Islamic sects including the Quaranists, Sufi and Tyaniyah in Nigeria. Sadly, Nigerian Islam is not highly organized as aristocracy characterizes the traditional ruling groups. Presently, the spiritual leader of Nigeria's Muslims is Saad Abubakar, who is the 20th sultan of Sokoto<sup>5,4</sup>.

As to the extent of Islam's presence in the nation, Sheikh Adelabu claimed that Islam has permeated agencies in the

Nigerian nation and has also contributed to Nigerian diversity of ideologies and practices. He further noted that Islam's influence is greater than publicly acknowledged. He went on to cite that Arabic words have long found their way into Nigerian languages, especially Yoruba and Hausa<sup>6,7</sup>.

## Statement of Problem

Religion has not always dominated Nigeria's political and socio-economic discourses but has always influenced them. During the colonial era, the northern region was not well receptive of the British leading to the British adopting a policy of non-intervention toward the Muslims in the North. On the other hand, the Southern people were highly welcoming paving way for the establishment of schools in their region. This policy thereafter led to the creation of imbalance as many Southerners became educated while the Northerners remained illiterates. The effects of this policy are still felt till date in Nigeria. This resulted in a lasting destabilizing dichotomy. This age-long scenario coupled with the present Boko Haram insurgency in the country have aided in further creating a tensed relations between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria. Against this background, this paper seeks to investigate the role of the media in the construction or misconstruction of the identity of Islam and further proffer solutions on how the Muslim community can strategically engage the media to her benefit.

## Objectives of the Study

The study was conducted to undertake the analysis of the construction of Islam by the Nigerian media including the study of the influence on non-Muslims and the implications. For the purpose of this paper, the following objectives have been considered: i. To investigate how the media construct reality, ii. To examine how the media's construction of Islam is influencing the non-Muslims, iii. To ascertain the ideal media management strategies to properly represent Islam in the media.

## Research Questions

To facilitate the study, the following research questions were formulated: i. Do the Nigerian media construct the image of Islam favourably? ii. What are the implications of the prevailing media construction of Islam in Nigeria?

## Theoretical Framework

Two media theories were utilized in the course of this study.

Media Ecology Theory - also known as Marshall McLuhan's theory of communication as he was responsible for popularizing the perspective. The theoretical concepts were proposed by Marshall McLuhan in 1964 though Neil Postman in 1968 coined the term media ecology<sup>8</sup>.

Marshall also produced the first synthesis of the media ecological thoughts. The theory is understood as the study of

communication environment, the idea that the tools, content, context and actors of communication play a leading role in human affairs<sup>9</sup>.

Media ecology as an emerging metadiscipline was broadly defined by Nystrom<sup>10</sup> as the investigation of “complex communication systems as environments.”

The theory is a preparadigmatic science and a deterministic theory though Strate<sup>9</sup> labeled McLuhan’s view as “soft determinism” opposed to “hard determinism.” Hard determinism holds that humans have no input or control over change in society while soft determinism argues that there is an interplay or interdependence between the human agent of the society and technology in affecting changes.

Similarly, Postman<sup>11</sup> added that media ecology or media environment “looks into the matter of how media communication affects human perception, understanding, feeling and value, and how our interaction with media facilitates or impedes our chances of survival.”

### **Framing Theory of Mass Communication**

Framing theory as a concept depicts different things to different scholars. McCombs<sup>12</sup> defines framing as “the selection of, and emphasis upon, particular attributes for the news media agenda when talking about an object (the fact of cutting and trimming news stories in order to filter it and shape it as the sender wishes)”.

Framing theory was developed by Erving Goffman in 1974 to give a coherent detail of how people use expectations to make meaning of daily human experiences and the characters or the objects of events.

This theory implies that we discover social cues through everyday relations and observing how they are used in media content<sup>13</sup>.

This assumption notes that the media outlets have the capacity to use this tool in presenting certain meaning to audience apart from just stating facts.

In their own works, Chong and Drunkman<sup>14</sup> did point out that framing has to do with in the way in which news outlets construct and present news to their audience. News media in reporting newsworthy events, take the social realities and construct them into frames which influence their audiences’ perception and understanding of reported issues<sup>15,16</sup>.

McQuail<sup>16</sup> went further to propound that “ framing is the manner in which news content is typically shaped and contextualized by a journalist within some familiar reference and according to some extent structure of meaning” p.559.

Media organizations have been restructuring to become more efficient in this era of technological advancement. They are now

embracing media convergence thereby acquiring more power to transmit their constructed frames to their audiences<sup>17</sup>.

In 2004, Microsoft cofounder, Bill Gates<sup>18</sup> noted this development when he said: Convergence does not happen until you have everything in a digital form that consumer can easily use on all the different devices. So, if we look at the three types of media of greatest importance-we look at photos, we look at music and we look at video-we move toward giving people digital flexibility and then it’s pretty incredible on every one of them. It’s been discussed for long, long time. And now it’s really happening.

Therefore, utilizing the weapon of media convergence, the media is able to better engage its audience and bring awareness to social issues. Sacco, Terkildsne and Schnell in Exner<sup>19</sup> supported the notion that through this process of framing, the media can exercise influence over the issues citizens are interested in and their responses to the issues.

### **Construction of Reality by the Media**

It could be argued that humans have always occupied a pseudo-reality that is shaped by the media of a given society. The Plato’s allegory of the cave touches on this, and there still lacks a convincing answer to what is the difference between something and the appearance of that same thing. Channels of control take advantage of this similar lack of awareness of many people of this inevitable dichotomy. It’s more of indoctrination than an educational experience. That is the new reality the media is trying to create. The thing to keep in mind is that these things represented in the pseudo-reality maintain no bearing on the actual things they appear to be. The altered perception thereof leads to disparity of realities.

We have witnessed a troubling shift the media paradigm engendered by: i. a modern scale(everyone is connected) which amplifies the width and breadth of this effect and virulence or particular memes, and ii. a pretty clear effort from multiple entities to use this phenomenon to effect an outcome.

Apart from adults, even a child is been influence by the media indirectly. They listen to the radio on the way to and from places, see snippets of news and stories on the news, and watch political commercials. A child’s primary source for political and social influence is the adults in its life. We speak more on these matters, use them as reference, or make them points of conjecture in more everyday conversations that we have. Our prejudices, preferences and points of view colour the same of the child’s who has to try and translate the information they get from us and the media into something their limited experience and processing abilities can make them understand. All these are covered by the theories of gate-keeping, cultivation and social reinforcement.

Except for the concept that there is a true reality which can be perceived is slipping. Media definitely stokes the zeitgeist of an era and region.

## Human Make-up and the Media

Three factors have been identified as been responsible for what make us who we are intellectually: i. Genetics – which govern the physical/biochemical aspect of our being, ii. Astrophysics – which govern the metaphysical aspect of our being, iii. Experience – which governs the learning aspect of our being.

The first two are effective before birth and have a declining effect throughout life, but establishes how everything else is perceived. The third has very limited effort prior to birth, but considerable effect throughout life. The influence of life's experience is largely governed by statistical interactions. With conscious influence, like what culture, media, and politics provide, there is the possibility of very significant influence on the individual, because the statistical interactions are human controlled. There is the need for more applied and experimental research to draw a conclusive conclusion whether experience outweigh genetics and metaphysical influence in long term behaviour.

Epstein<sup>20</sup> who is a renowned psychologist and currently works at the American Institute for Behavioral Research and Technology in California wrote that:

As we navigate through the world, we are changed by a variety of experiences. Of special note are experiences of three types: i. we observe what is happening around us (other people behaving, sounds of music, instructions directed at us, words on pages, images on screen); ii. we are exposed to the pairing of unimportant stimuli (such as sirens), with important stimuli (such as the appearance of police cars); iii. we are punished or rewarded for behaving in certain ways.

## Islam and the Media

The media industry has been an essential and powerful tool in the life of modern man though the degree of its influence has been debated for decades. It is the mirror or the lens from which most of us see the world around us, as it has made possible the assertion that the world is a global village<sup>21</sup>.

Baran and Davis<sup>13</sup> stated that “mass media can be viewed as a public arena in which cultural battles are fought and a dominant, or hegemonic, cultural is forged and promoted” Pg. 41.

In the context of Islam and Nigeria, Akintola<sup>22</sup> believes that the media both local and international has been biased as expressed in his statement when he said: Most Muslims believe that unjustified attacks on Islam are not restricted to the Nigerian press alone. The ignoble role of the international press ably controlled by western imperialists, who are all out to silence Islam, cannot be ignored.

In support of this assertion, Rosalind Hackett<sup>22</sup> in one of her writings clearly attested that: Education institutions have long been one of the principal sites for defending religious identity

and contesting religious rights in black Africa's most populous state. There has been a history of clashes between students, parents, teachers, and government officials from missionary and colonial times up till the present day. Now the media constitute one of the principal locations for the propagation and (self-) representation of religious groups. The growth of Nigeria's media institutions and industries has paralleled the expression and diversification of the religious landscape. There has been an attendant increase in competition between religious groups. pp. 1

Nigeria possesses a virulent and diverse media scene despite been one of the most advanced on the African continent. Unfortunately, most existing media studies on Africa give little or no attention to the connection between media, religion and public perception<sup>22</sup>.

Muslims are not alone in blaming the media of partiality; Christians are equally accusing the media of favouring the Muslims. A blunt Christian opinion leader from the northern part of the country, Jolly Tanku Yusuf<sup>22</sup>, recounted the suspicion of the Christian community when he commented that: Christians have been denied access to electronic media in 16 Northern states, while Islam monopolizes 24 hours for its broadcast in the same area. Agents of the devil compound the misery by using the media to heap insults on Christians. Every hour the Muslims broadcast provocative statements about Christianity. It means nothing, they proclaim, that people attend church on Sunday only to dance and to listen to songs! Authorities merely wink.

In further implicating the media in the heightening of religious tensions, Father Hassan Kakah<sup>23</sup> also added that the media has helped in hyping and supporting the flames of bigotry.

Despite the voiced suspicion of the two religious groups, a uniform echo among them as expressed by the various clergies is that the media have not been fair to them. The big question then is who do we believe? It is therefore, imperative to consider also the potency of the modern media in constructing new geographies<sup>22</sup>.

## The Need for a New Communication Paradigm in Nigeria

In Nigeria the study of communication process is similar to that noted by Bel, Brouwer, Dos et al.<sup>24</sup> when they said it “does not seem to be critically engaged with political developments. Its lack of disciplinary concern and scholarly rigor has made the field sometimes abstruse, other times undimensional. A certain apolitical and ahistorical notion of communication does not allow a creative engagement with the realms that communication affects and is affected by. While the academia lack forum to engage with such developments, many intellectuals and activists raise pressing concerns about communication in everyday life.

The root of myopia in communication seems to lie in the unduly media – centered concerns of the research without a broader social theory to examine the interdependence of media and society. There is the need for a reconceptualization of the media in the Nigerian context to factor in the place of religion in the entire media discourse.

This decade has witnessed a renewed emphasis on an older theme: participation, thus ‘participatory communication’ became the new avatar in which the traditional debates on communication and/or development reemerged. This concept can equally be extended to the realm of religious discourse as it has proven successful in a host of other fields<sup>25</sup>.

### **Investigating Communication**

Remooring the Dynamics of Communication: Available research illustrates the great chasm in the disciplinary trends of communication studies. Much of communication research has been of logical positivism as borrowed from the West. Therefore, there is the need for trained professionals who can view, understand and utilize communication as an applied discipline for communicating development and building bridges across societies and religious divides.

In this training process, three kinds of activities must be born in mind as was distinguished by Das, Parthasarathi and Poltevin<sup>24</sup>, namely: i. Information as the circulation of ideas and knowledge. ii. Relation as a social rapport underlying and acting upon such circulation. iii. Intention as aspirations to exchange, share or control.

Eapen<sup>26</sup> drew general conclusions about Development Support Communication research in developing countries that remain valid today: i. In general, there is inadequate understanding of the exact nature of the communication process in the local cultures of a developing country. ii. Communication must be studied as a social process and the mass media as institutions within the total society. iii. Direct media-audience relationships may not exist because of the mediation of personal source between the media and villagers. iv. There is a tendency to make mass media more influential for change than they really are, so research is vital. v. Available research literature in a field may not always cross-culturally, vi. Research tools may need adaptation before they can be used in developing countries, vii. There appears to be little evidence that the scale for testing attitude are valid cross-culturally, viii. Research in the mass media in developing countries is slow, difficult and costly, and needs trained researchers who know their country. ix. Great care must be taken before generalizing on the basis of research results in any single developing countries; there is no all-embracing formula which can be used in differing countries. x. Intelligent decision-making requires reliable information, which is more likely to come from good research than experience, so research should be into every project from the start. xi. Funding bodies should insist that communication policies should rise out of appropriate preliminary and continuing research.

### **Public Relation as a Vital Stakeholders Engagement Tool**

We turn to the Chartered Institute of Public Relations<sup>27</sup> for a definition of public relations. It defines public relations as all about reputations – the result of what you do, what you say and what others say about you.

Based on the CIPR’s definition, public relations is understood as the field or organizational activity which looks after a firm’s reputation, with the aims of favourably positioning the firm in the mind of its stakeholders.

Another definition was given by the Public Relations Consultants Association<sup>28</sup>: Public relation is all about reputation. It is used to gain trust and understanding between an organization and its various public – whether that’s employees, costumers, investors, local community – or all of those stakeholder groups. In relation to religious use of PR, Averill<sup>29</sup> went further to state that any religion could be defined as a quintessential PR story with it events, persuasion, spokespeople, and publications which are all able to reach out and communicate with different publics.

If the Muslim community chooses to remain silent and not pragmatically engage the tools of public relations and mass media generally in reaching out to the broader community then a spiral of silence might gradually set in as many people are guided by what they think is the public opinion. When the Muslim community remains silence then they will indirectly be facilitating to conceal their views and true identity. They will be isolated from public discourse and the assumed dominant views in the public sphere become even more dominant.

While utilizing PR we ought to be conscious of the fact that propaganda overlaps with persuasion. Our goal should be to persuade and create an arena of ongoing interaction and healthy debate between Islam and other religious communities and the nation at large. Perloff<sup>30</sup> identifies three differences between propaganda and persuasion: i. Propaganda message is homogenous and unidirectional whereas persuasion usually takes place in interpersonal and organizational contexts thereby giving room for more parties to be involved and equally influence the process. ii. Propaganda is a one-way communication open for manipulation from the information source while persuasion allows for interaction between the source and the audience. iii. People have a negative view of propaganda whereas they are more relaxed to persuasion especially when it addresses issue of social concern.

The North – South relationship must be bridged through the establishment of an open systems; an environment where there are interactions among the stakeholders to eliminate misunderstanding, misconceptions and unwarranted tensions. To achieve this, the two-way symmetric model will be useful as it enables the organization to engage in dialogues with one another.

## Engaging the Media Audience with Newsworthy Contents

In 1965, two Norwegian researchers, Galtung and Ruge developed the idea of a list of news values, they described news as events that are reported according to eight criteria. The list was formulated in an era where there was no internet or user generated content. Brighton and Foy<sup>31</sup> factoring in the recent developments in the fields of technology and communication identified seven criteria for news worthiness: i. Relevance – the news ought to be “domesticated” to have local connection. It must be relevant to country or audience of target. ii. Topicality – a key skill of communicators is to be aware of what is going on in the world and make it new, current, and immediately relevant. iii. Composition – the news must be slotted in the right place within the broadcast news schedule. iv. Expectation – the news must be presented in a way that the audiences believe it is something they ought to know. v. Unusualness – the news item should be position as unusual or different. Therefore, we must be careful of how the news headlines and leads are constructed. vi. Worth - the appearance of the item in the news must be justified. vii. External influence –there should be a communication between news items and other past, present and future events.

## Opinion Leaders and Media Influence

In shaping the image of religion in the Nigerian media, two categories of opinion leaders are broadly identified and required. i. Formal Opinion Leaders – they are those who hold official positions either by appointment of the government or by election. Very often media persons interview such formal leaders in official position for their opinions or comments on issues. They are vested with power by the law as long as they hold such positions and influence public opinion with their views<sup>32</sup>. ii. Informal Opinion Leaders – in this category we have leaders who have power with a peer group because of their charisma and referent authority. Reddi<sup>32</sup> in shading more light on this type of opinion leaders added that “informal opinion leaders exert considerate influence on their respective peer groups by being highly informed, articulate and credible on certain issues”.

## Conclusion

This paper has extensively appraised the Nigerian media landscape in relations to its representation of the identity of Islam and equally critically reviewed the negative influence on such misconstructions on the perception and attitude of non-Muslims. The study has empirically shown that both religions – Islam and Christianity accuse the media of propaganda and been instrumental in heating up the already tensed relationships among adherents of the two main religious communities in Nigeria. As a way of remedying the situation, the research explored various necessary media theories and public relations perspectives with the aim of furnishing the Islamic policy-

makers with effective tools they can utilize towards reclaiming Islam’s image in Nigeria and equally becoming their own architect for constructing their desired identity in the present world of media dynamism. Additionally, it is logical to assert with the wealth of data on the subject of this paper that the future of Nigeria highly rest on the ability of these two religions to co-exist and manage their difference ethically, democratically and respectfully in partnership with the media industry.

**Recommendations:** i. An open dialogue between Muslims and other religious groups especially Christians based on genuine respect. ii. Public renunciation by the Muslim Community of Boko Haram and other criminal groups that commit atrocities using Islam as a shield. iii. Encouraging the broadcast of Islamic messages of tolerance and national inclusiveness in English language and other local languages other than Hausa and Arabic. iv. Building more mutual relations with both local and international media. v. Pulling down fences, recognizing differences and building bridges across the Muslim communities and projecting same to the nation and the world. vi. Creating an even platform for the understanding and appreciating the various stakeholders in the quest for peace and development in Nigeria. vii. Training professionals in the field of communication arts within the context of religion, peace, nation-building and diplomacy.

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