

Addressing The Boko Haram Sect's Nihilism: An Exploration of The Role of Writers

Dr. A.O. Faniran

*Department of Mass Communication and
Media Technology,
Lead City University, Ibadan*

Abstract

Terrorist attacks in Nigeria were formerly almost exclusively carried out by two separate and distinct militant groups: the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) and the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB). Another militant group, Boko Haram, an Islamist sect, has now emerged and is at the moment carrying out deadly attacks on Nigerians, on foreign nationals and on public agencies and institutions like the police, the army, and public and private schools. While the Federal Government has to a large extent successfully used force to curtail the violent activities of MEND and MASSOB, its employment of that strategy in dealing with the Boko Haram sect has largely failed. This position paper briefly discusses the history of terrorism in Nigeria, the advent of Boko Haram, its meaning and origins, its terrorist attacks and their impacts, and the various ways and strategies being suggested to bring the Islamist sect's insurgency to an end. Finally, the paper contends that, in addition to the various suggested strategies, writers too have a role in ending this dreaded sect's murderous activities.

keywords: *attacks, terrorism, militant, movement, emancipation.*

Introduction

Hitherto, only two militant groups in Nigeria-MEND and MASSOB-were making certain demands from the Federal Government, and seeking to achieve their objectives by violent means. While the Government was grappling with the challenges posed by MEND and MASSOB, another and a far more militant group, Boko Haram, emerged on the Nigerian religious and political scene. Whereas the government had almost succeeded in using force to checkmate the menace of MEND and MASSOB, its employment of that approach to deal with the more radically militant Boko Haram has largely failed, as the rising tide of violence of the group has not been curtailed. For the

past two years, the Nigerian state has been constantly witnessing the terrorist attacks of the group against churches, schools, markets, police stations, army barracks, hotels, private homes and so on.

The murderous activities of the members of this Islamist sect now terrorize North-Eastern Nigeria. Urban dwellers and even people living in small villages in those volatile areas now live in fear, as no one really knows when he or she will be blown up or bombed, stabbed or slaughtered, kidnapped or killed, abducted or viciously attacked (Faniran, 2012). The Boko Haram Islamist sect members are now on the prowl in parts of Borno, Bauchi, Yobe, Adamawa and Kaduna states, spilling the blood of Nigerians and non-Nigerians alike, bombing and burning their homes as well as their places of work and worship. The sect members have threatened to extend their violent activities in Northern Nigeria to other parts of the country. It is obvious that a number of steps have to be taken, and very quickly too, to end the violence and destruction which Boko Haram has unleashed on the country. Different people have suggested different strategies to end the Boko Haram insurgency. This paper contends that in addition to the strategies being canvassed, writers also have a role in addressing the nihilistic phenomenon of Boko Haram. It is this role that the paper examines. To back our claims and assertions in the paper, we intend to cite not only books and journal articles but also newspaper reports.

A Short History of Terrorism in Nigeria

Oyeniya (2010) and Falola (2012) trace the history of terrorism in Nigeria from as far back as the violent activities of the Sokoto Caliphate at the turn of the nineteenth century. Our own investigation, however, would be restricted to the more recent past, the post-independence and post civil-war Nigeria. Accordingly, we would take the parcel bomb which killed Dele-Giwa, the Editor-in-Chief of *Newswatch*, on Sunday, 6th October 1986, as the first instance of terrorism in Nigeria in recent times.

The fact that this brutal terrorist attack took place during the military era in Nigeria has fuelled the suspicion that the Nigerian military spawned terrorism and violence on the country's national life. No one or group

claimed responsibility for Dele Giwa's gruesome assassination, and up till today, no one knows the person or persons who delivered the deadly letter bomb to the home of the Editor – in – Chief of the news magazine, or the motivation for their action. As Omotoso (2011) has rightly remarked, Dele Giwa's murder remains one of the many unresolved assassination cases in Nigeria.

Terrorism in Nigeria took a new dimension with the advent of MEND and MASSOB. These two militant groups, in addition to bombing and burning oil facilities, also kidnapped important and wealthy persons as well as oil workers, most especially foreigners, for ransom, and claimed responsibility for all their acts of terror.

A series of politically motivated violence and assassinations followed on the heels of MEND and MASSOB insurgency. Omotoso (2011) gives a frighteningly long list of eminent Nigerians, mostly politicians, who have been assassinated in what the researcher has characterized as political terrorism. As in Dele Giwa's case, none of the perpetrators of these wicked acts has been apprehended, and this singular failure of the security agencies has emboldened the harbingers of death to operate with impunity.

The Meaning, Origins and Motives of Boko Haram

"Boko" is an expression in the Hausa Language and means "Western Education". As Abolurin (2011:171) has noted, the term "boko" is derived from the Hausa word "boka" meaning a sorcerer, a person who performs magic by using the power of evil spirits; and "haram" is an Arabic word meaning sin or sacrilege or abomination. Taken together, the Hausa and the Arabic words "boko haram" thus mean "Western education is evil" or "Western education is sacrilege" or "Western education is sin". This explains why the militant sect declares all forms of Western education as evil and, therefore, forbidden.

Tracking the origins of Boko Haram, Cook (2011) avers that the roots of the sect lie in the Islamic history of Northern Nigeria, a predominantly Muslim region which traditionally always promotes and defends the cause

of Islam while suppressing other religions, particularly Christianity. In his own account of the origins of the Boko Haram sect, Abolurin (2011) observes that the group started in 1995 under the leadership of one Abubakar Lawan who later went to the University of Medina to study. Mallam Yusuf Muhammad, a fiery Islamic cleric, became the group's next leader and transformed it into a radical organization, vowing that he would fight the Federal Government and the authorities of the Northern states until he succeeded or died in the process (Abolurin, 2011). Muhammed began to agitate for the adoption of Sharia law in the Northern states as a strategy for reducing the influence of Western education and culture. Eventually, Muhammed was arrested and extra judicially killed by Nigerian security operatives on July 30, 2011.

The motives of Boko Haram would seem to declare Nigeria as an Islamic State, to impose Sharia as the country's legal system, to wipe out all traces of Western education and to ensure that Muslims and the North rule Nigeria most of the time. The radical sect also intends to curtail the influence of Christianity in the entire North and to cause the exodus of Christians, most especially the southern Christians, from the region by ceaselessly attacking them, their churches and other Christian places of worship. In the last one year, hardly any Sunday, the Christian day of religious worship, passed without at least one church being bombed or attacked, resulting in many deaths on each occasion. Any Nigerian daily from July 2012 to July 2013 is replete with reports of these weekly and daily deadly attacks by Boko Haram.

Another motive of some of the more radical members of the sect would seem to cause a religious war between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria. Such a war, if allowed to break out, is bound to be very bloody and protracted, and certain to bring about the disintegration of the country. This is the prospect that the Federal Government and all well-meaning Nigerians fear most; and this is why the Federal Government considers Boko Haram a more dangerous group than either MEND or MASSOB. Moreover, such a war is capable of bringing about a massacre and ethnic cleansing.

Explaining the Rise of Boko Haram in Nigeria

Some prominent Nigerians have tried to identify the reasons for the existence of Boko Haram. Among such prominent Nigerians were the late General Owoye Azazi, the former National Security Adviser (NSA) to President Goodluck Jonathan, Alhaji Bamanga Tukur, the current National Chairman of the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), and General Muhamadu Buhari, former Nigerian military ruler and now a co-founder of the new opposition party, All Progressives Congress (APC). According to General Azazi, Boko Haram was the result of undemocratic tendencies in the PDP (Tell May 21, 2011 P. 11). Although General Azazi did not explain what he meant by “undemocratic tendencies” in the PDP, anyone who is conversant with Nigeria’s political scene knows that political parties’ undemocratic tendencies include imposition of candidates on the electorate by political parties, election rigging and other activities that are capable of undermining democratic development in Nigeria.

In his own view, Bamanga Tukur attributed the advent of Boko Haram to rampant forms of injustice perpetrated by the PDP (see Femi Fani-Kayode’s article in *Sunday Tribune*, June 24, 2012, p.5); and General Buhari too believed that injustice perpetrated by the ruling PDP was the root cause of the Boko Haram problem (*The Nation*, September 12, 2012 p. 1).

The injustice which Tukur and Buhari and other Northerners seem to be talking about arose from the PDP’s failure to follow the party’s unwritten agreement and disallow President Goodluck Jonathan from contesting the 2011 presidential election. The unwritten agreement among PDP leaders was that the presidency should be rotated between the North and the South. President Yar’adua, a Northerner, died before completing his term, the Northern term, and the North felt that another Northerner and not Vice-President Goodluck Jonathan should succeed him to complete the Northern term. However, the PDP did not only refuse to stop former Vice President Jonathan from contesting the 2011 presidential election, but actually supported his candidature and voted for him to win the election. The North felt it had been denied the

presidency and viewed the PDP's action as a great injustice to it. Expectedly, the opposition political parties in Nigeria are now blaming the PDP-controlled Federal Government for Nigeria's security challenges and its economic, religious and socio-political woes.

It is not only Nigerians that have given reasons for the Boko Haram insurgency. President Barack Obama of the United States has also attributed the insurgency to what he termed "bad governance" (*Sunday Tribune*, 20 June, 2013 P.4) The problem, he said, would disappear the very moment that Nigeria embraced democracy and the rule of law, eliminated official corruption and reduced the level of poverty among Nigerians.

A major reason for the existence of Boko Haram, as far as this researcher is concerned, is illiteracy in Northern Nigeria. The Northern masses, particularly the youths, are denied Western educational opportunities freely available to their counterparts in the South. Unlike in the South, education, whether Western or Quranic, is not made compulsory in the North, and parents in the region are free to send their children to school or to keep them at home or leave them in the streets. It is estimated that there are over ten million such youths in the North. They are called "Almajiris" and roam the streets begging for food or alms or both. Adoo (2010) has stressed the need for quality education in Ghana; we would stress this need even more strongly in Nigeria because members of the Boko Haram Sect recruit uneducated youths, the "almajiris" and send them on suicide bombing missions (Abolurin, 2011).

We are also tempted to see the existence of Boko Haram as a clear indication of the failure of religion and religious leaders in this country. Every Friday and every Sunday, millions of Nigerians, dressed piously, head for mosques and churches to pray. They also pray almost ceaselessly every day. Moreover, every year, the three tiers of government in Nigeria spend millions of naira to sponsor holy pilgrimages to Mecca and Jerusalem. For these reasons, Nigeria ought to be the most peaceful country on the face of the earth. But what we are witnessing in this country today is the exact opposite of what is expected.

Terrorist Attacks by Boko Haram

The February 26 issue of *TELL*, (p44), gives a list of 44 terrorist attacks by members of Boko Haram between July 27, 2009 and January 26, 2012. The number must have more than doubled by now because since February 2012, terrorist attacks by the Islamist sect have escalated. Between January, 2012 and May of the same year, over 254 people have been killed in 20 gunfights and 45 bombings (*Sunday Punch* September 16, 2012 p.2). The number of people already killed by the sect is now over 2000 (*Nigerian Tribune* 24 June 2013 p.12).

A new dimension in the operations of the sect is their attacks on mosques and renewed assaults on Christian churches and schools. The attacks on Christian churches have lent credence to suggestions in Christian circles that religion is the real cause of Boko Haram's insurgency. Nigerian Christians do not seem to be deceived by Boko Haram's occasional attacks on mosques since these attacks are not as devastating and frequent as those carried out on Christian churches. Moreover, it is only the mosques in which Muslim clerics preached against the sect that have been attacked, whereas nobody has denigrated or said anything against Islam in the churches that have been attacked by the members of the sect.

The Effects of the Nihilistic Activities by Boko Haram

The attacks by Boko Haram have taken toll on several aspects of life in Nigeria. First, the attacks have endangered the security of lives and property in the country, as many people have died and property worth millions of naira has been destroyed in the bombings, shootings and kidnappings orchestrated by the Boko Haram sect. Second, many people now live in fear. Important and wealthy people in the North are now afraid to travel to their home towns because of the fear of being attacked by members of the Boko Haram sect. Northern Emirs and the Sultan of Sokoto, the spiritual head of Islam in Nigeria, have been targeted by Boko Haram.

The Boko Haram terrorist attacks have also affected food production in the North and the supply of foodstuffs to the South, threatening to

cause famine and hunger in the country. The effects of these attacks on agriculture and food production will definitely be felt in the near future. Newspaper reports (e.g. *Sunday Punch*, 27 May, 2012 p. 14) have claimed that some farmers in the North have abandoned their farms and others have fled to neighbouring countries like Chad, Cameroun and Benin Republic to escape death from Boko Haram attacks.

Moreover, the terrorist activities of the Islamist group have scared away many foreign investors. This is the most harmful effect of the Boko Haram terrorist attacks. The current Federal Government in Nigeria is determined to transform the economy by creating jobs for the army of unemployed educated Nigerian youths. The Government can do this only by attracting foreign investment. But no foreigners will invest their resources in a socially, politically and economically insecure environment. Even the nationals of such an environment will be reluctant to do business in their own country.

Boko Haram terrorist attacks have also dented Nigeria's image and reduced the country's influence in the international community. This has been confirmed by a statement credited to Chief Emeka Anyaoku, the former Secretary – General of the Commonwealth (*Nigerian Tribune*, July 11, 2012 P4). Given its large population and its vast natural and mineral resources, Nigeria should be the undisputed leader of Africa, commanding respect even among countries outside Africa. However, this is presently not the case.

Addressing the Insurgency of the Boko Haram Sect

Dialogue with members of the Boko Haram sect has been suggested as one of the ways to address their insurgency and attacks. One of those advocating this is retired General Yakubu Gowon, Nigeria's former military ruler and founder of a popular prayer group, "Nigeria Prays". In an interview by a correspondent of *Sunday Express* of June 5, 2012, Gowon said, "I believe in dialogue (with Boko Haram) as a key to conflict resolution" (p.10).

Although we are not against the use of dialogue being canvassed by

General Gowon, we very much doubt if it can bring any tangible results simply because many of the demands being made by Boko Haram cannot be met. One such impossible demand is that Nigeria should become an Islamic country. We do not think that Nigerians can be persuaded to delete the clause in their country's constitution which declares it as a secular state and guarantees religious freedom of all Nigerians. In fact, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) the umbrella body for all Christians in Nigeria and in the diaspora, will resist any attempt by any person or group of persons to turn Nigeria into an Islamic state. And former President Olusegun Obasanjo has told members of Boko Haram that they are "living in a fool's paradise" if they think they can win their current battle against the Nigerian state. (*Saturday Tribune*, September 15, 2012 p. 6).

Another difficult demand being made by the Boko Haram sect is that Western education should be abandoned in favour of Islamic or Quranic education. As has been noted, "Boko Haram", the very name of the sect, means "Western education is forbidden". It is most unlikely that the Islamic sect can be persuaded to give up this demand just as it is impossible to persuade other Nigerians to abandon Western education. Third, the sect is demanding that President Goodluck Jonathan should convert to Islam for peace to return to Nigeria. This is also impossible. In addition to dialogue and discussion with members of Boko Haram, Gowon also suggested prayer as another way to end attacks by Boko Haram (*Sunday Express*, June 3, 2012 p. 9). It is very difficult to see how the prayer option can stop a group that continues to attack and kill innocent people in their churches and places of prayer and worship. Many Nigerians have also suggested the use of force as an effective way to end the Boko Haram insurgency. Prominent among these is former Minister of Aviation, Chief Femi Fani-Kayode (*Sunday Tribune* July 1, 2012 p.22). But, as has already been pointed out, the police and the other armed personnel deployed to fight the Boko Haram insurgents have not succeeded in curtailing their violent activities.

The Role of Writers in Addressing the Nihilism of the Boko Haram Sect

Writers too have a role in putting an end to terrorist attacks by Boko Haram. By writers in this paper is meant poets, novelists, short story writers, essayists, playwrights, newspaper columnists and feature article writers, as well as writers of non-fictions, such as religious tracts, pamphlets, etc. Individual writers of each of the three literary genres should write stories that teach and encourage moral behaviour. For example, a character in a novel or short story or play or poem can be shown to get killed while attempting to plant a bomb in a busy and densely populated area, to illustrate the moral that evil doers will not go unpunished, and will be destroyed in their evil deeds.

Such story books should be published in attractive colours and widely distributed in primary and secondary schools across the country. Copies of such books should also be in public libraries, mosques and churches. Muslim and Christian preachers should tell worshippers stories in the books and emphasize their moral lessons. Writers of children's literature can also write a short story like the following:

Once upon a time, there was a man. He spent all his life persecuting and killing people who did not follow his faith. He was very happy that he had persecuted and killed many "unbelievers", and he had no doubt in his mind that he would go to "alujana" or heaven if and when he departed this earth.

One day, the man died after a protracted illness. Moments after his death, he met God face to face. "In one sentence", said God, "tell me the most important thing that you did on earth." "I performed my religious duties diligently, serving you and killing all those who did not accept the faith, those who followed other religions," the man replied. "I never asked you, or anyone, to persecute or kill those who practise other religions. I am the Creator of all human beings and all those that you have persecuted or killed were my creatures. You will spend all your miserable new life in hell fire," said God. Hardly had God pronounced his verdict when a hefty angel lifted up the man and hurled him into a fire that was burning like sulfur. "Ye! Ye! Pain! Pain!" the man started to cry in hell fire. If children listen to stories like the one told above, they will refuse to be recruited by Boko Haran or any violent group.

The leaders of Boko Haram claim to be fighting against injustice. Writers should make the leaders of this violent group see the injustice in the methods that they employ in their fight against injustice, methods that cause the death of several innocent people and the destruction of public and private property.

Boko Haram leaders and sponsors should be reminded by writers through their writings that thousands of innocent Nigerians who survived the deadly attacks orchestrated by their dreaded group are now in severe pain in many hospitals.

Short poems and plays that teach moral lessons should also be written and published and distributed freely in schools, colleges and universities. The poems, short stories, novels, plays and religious pamphlets and tracts should be translated into Nigerian languages and both English versions and the versions in the Nigerian languages should be made available in schools, churches, mosques, hospitals, and other public places.

Non-fiction writers can also write books preaching tolerance, forgiveness and peaceful coexistence. The Writers should stress the need to avoid another civil war in Nigeria, which the Boko Haram sect's destructive activities can cause. This country went through a civil war between 1967 and 1971; it has not fully recovered from the pain and destruction which it engendered. It is doubtful if any country in the world can survive two civil wars; so, another civil war in Nigeria is certain to bring about the break-up of the country.

Conclusion

The terrorist attacks and mass killings orchestrated by the Boko Haram sect have caught the Federal Government unaware and greatly embarrassed it and the Nigerian public. The attacks have also threatened to scare away foreign and local investors and frustrate Government effort to transform the economy through job creation, youth employment and provision of physical structures like roads, bridges, rail-lines, water ways, electricity, schools, health centers, pipe-borne water and other social amenities. Thus, the current violence and insecurity have adversely

affected the economic and socio-religious life in the North in particular and in the entire nation in general.

For the first time in 700 years, the Sallah Durbar, a colourful and exciting socio-religious event in the North, usually attended by numerous Nigerians and foreigners from all over the world, was put on hold in 2012 by the Emir of Kano for no other reason than the fear of its being disrupted by members of the Boko Haram sect. By this action, the Emir appeared to have nipped in the bud an event that could have provided an opportunity for the messengers of death to commit mass murder of innocent Nigerians and foreigners.

Among the strategies suggested for ending the Boko Haram insurgency and terrorism are negotiation and dialogue with the members of the sect, prayers for and appeals to them to lay down their improvised explosive devices (IEDs) or bombs and their other offensive weapons. Our article also outlines and discusses the role which writers could play in bringing an end to Boko Haram's dangerous, devastating and destabilizing activities.

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