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‘We Are after Ideals’: A Critical Analysis of Ideology in the Tweets by *Boko Haram*

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**Abstract**

*This study critically examines the influence and power of ideology in the activities of Boko Haram – an Islamic radical group that claims responsibility for several bombing attacks in northern Nigeria. Data comprise tweets and retweets presumably produced by members of this group in their effort to promote their ideological stance and mobilize followers. Discursive content of the tweets show that the Islamic radicals adopt some existing African socio-cultural norms to champion Islamic religious ideologies that are intolerant to opposing views. The Boko Haram tweets generally reflect the positive construction of the ‘we’ in-group and negative representation of the ‘others’ who are referred to as ‘infidels’, and are worthy of death. This study also shows that twitter/tweeting has been used in recent times to popularize religious and political ideologies.*

**Keywords:** *twitter, tweets, ideology, terrorist, Boko Haram, Al-Qaeda, government, Nigeria*

**I. Introduction**

‘Tweet’ is viewed in this study as a type of computer-mediated discourse (CMD), which is communication produced when individuals or groups interact with one another by transmitting messages via networked computers (Herring, 2001). This has recently attracted global scholarly studies within the wider interdisciplinary study of computer-mediated communication (CMC). With the innovative additions to the Internet such as instant messaging, Internet forums, and social networking, online communication has enabled and enhanced new forms of human interactions. Users now network and form virtual communities as a platform for information exchange and coordinated group actions. Most interesting in recent times is the adaptability of online social networks for social activism and civil protests (Chilwa, 2012b). The Egyptian revolution that ousted Hosni Mubarak, for example, has been referred to in media as a ‘twitter revolution’ due to its primary use of Twitter as alternative press, where ‘tweeters’ saw themselves as citizen journalists, and professional journalists also

used Twitter to transmit news and photographs (Idle & Nunns, 2011). In the so-called Arab Spring, generally, planning discussions were carried out on Twitter and Facebook where activists talked to each other, mobilized protesters and advanced new strategies (Chiluwa, 2012b). As a matter of fact, ‘the North African revolutionary experience, with its huge implications for the rise of new paradigms for political change and government, demonstrates the potential for similar uprisings, not only in the Muslim world but also in other parts of Africa’ (Chiluwa, 2012b, p. 217).

When the bomb attacks in Nigeria – attributed to the *Boko Haram* radical group in the north – began, the Islamic sect was described in the Nigerian media as ‘faceless.’ Some politicians until recently even denied the existence of any organized terrorist group known as ‘Boko Haram.’ They consider it rather a mere distraction to destabilize the Jonathan administration. The current study critically examines the formation and activities of this group, their demands, what they stand for or their ideologies. Thus, we adopt a critical discourse analytical approach to examine the ideological stance of these Islamic extremists as enunciated on their twitter profile. Until the time of this research, *Boko Haram* maintained two separate twitter profile sites namely: *Boko Haram@BokoHaram* (Chadian Border) and *BokoHaram@BokoHaram* (Republic of Arewa). The former, which was short-lived, was presumably hosted by group members in Chad and Niger and attracted more followers. Since our study is based on the sect’s activities in Nigeria, we focus on the latter, which is presumably the main site, emanating from Nigeria. The ‘Republic of Arewa’ accounts may be accessed by googling ‘Boko Haram on Twitter.’

## **II. Background**

*Boko Haram* is a nickname for an Islamist terrorist group known as *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad*, meaning ‘People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad.’ Like the Taliban, their targets have been churches, the Nigerian police

and state officials. The recent bombing of the Kano central mosque (on November 29, 2014) in which over 100 worshippers were killed added yet another alarming dimension to the terrorists' attacks (Nossiter, 2014). When two separate offices of *ThisDay* newspaper (a popular Nigerian daily) were bombed two years ago, the sect attributed the attack to the newspaper's 'negative representation' of their ideological position and activities (Madunagu, 2012). They are also claimed to fight against the political elite of the country and Muslim governors in northern Nigeria who were accused of compromising Islamic teachings.

Founded in 2002 by a Muslim cleric in Maiduguri, Northeastern Nigeria, *Boko Haram*, which in Hausa stands for 'western education is sacrilegious' has carried out a series of attacks in northern Nigeria. In June 2009 when the group first embarked on an armed uprising, they claimed to be fighting corruption as well as Islamizing the entire northern states. The uprising was confronted by the Nigerian military, resulting in the death of over 700 people, mostly the sect members. During the unrest, the group's leader, Mohammed Yusuf, and several other members were killed. Yusuf died in police custody. Subsequently, the sect splintered into several groups, and began a series of bombings in Nigeria (IRIN Africa, 2011; Adesoji, 2010; Chiluwa & Adetunji, 2013). *Boko Haram* have since declared their allegiance to Al-Qaeda with a strong link with Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) which operates in other African regions, such as Somalia and Mali. The group is also said to have split into three factions operating in Cameroon, Chad and Niger (Onuah and Eboh, 2011).

### **III. Jihadism, Sharia and Boko Haram**

Jihadism, which represents the Sunni Islamist armed struggle (Abbas, 2007), is directly associated with Islamic revivalist ideology, which has been enforced through armed conflicts and terrorism at both local and international levels. Since the 2000s, jihadist terrorism, mostly propagated by the activities of al-Qaeda has been on the increase. According to Kramer

(2003), jihadism is used to refer to the most violent persons and movements in contemporary Islam. Boko Haram, who has since formally confirmed its link with Al-Qaeda and the Somalia-based Al Shabaab (Olagunju, 2012; Blair, 2012; Didymus, 2012; Murdock 2012), represents another manifestation of this movement. Like other jihadist movements, they claim to defend the Islamic law expressed in the Sharia. Sharia for Muslims is the infallible law of God as embodied in the Quran and the teachings and examples of the Prophet Muhammad, which is supposed to govern the lives of all Muslims (Hamann, 2009). Sharia addresses secular laws as well as personal matters such as marriage, sex, diet, and prayer among others (Tibi, 2008). The implementation of the Sharia Law penal code in northern Nigeria had resulted in a major political and religious disagreement between Muslims and Christians, and it led to an outbreak of violence between Christians and Muslims in 2000 (Paden, 2008). Before this time, Muslims applied Sharia law only in civil domains, but the twelve northern states that adopted the law extended its application to the criminal and corporate arenas. Christians and human right groups viewed the implementation of the Sharia as a major challenge to the sovereignty of the Nigerian state (Torty, 2009).

With the growing impact of globalization, there has been a widespread exchange of ideas and cultures among different people. Muslims around the world, who are part of this globalization process, are also connected to the Internet and modern information technology. Islamic fundamentalists believe that the Sharia law is being eroded by western values obtained from this global cultural exchange (Horrie & Chinppindale, 2007). Their efforts to curtail this development have also resulted in the violation of fundamental human rights. Some jihadist extremists have even used the Quran and some versions of Sharia law to justify terror against people with western ideas, including Muslims who are believed to have imbibed western cultures (Brachman, 2008).

Boko Haram insists on a strict adoption of Sharia in all parts of Nigeria, particularly the north where their activities have been most profound. They claim to reject everything Western, including education and social lifestyle, and they have carried out attacks on beer halls and schools. A series of bombings in the north before and after the general elections of April 2011 left many people dead and several others wounded. Of note was the bombing of the United Nations headquarters at Abuja on August 26, 2011 which left at least twenty-three people dead and about 116 others wounded. Earlier attacks on Christian churches had attracted widespread condemnation from the international community. In particular, the St. Theresa Catholic Church in Madalla (a town in the Niger state) was bombed on Christmas day (2011) killing about thirty-nine worshippers after the Christmas morning mass. As highlighted above, more recent suicide bombings and gun attacks have targeted Christians and Muslims alike at market places, bus stations and mosques. For instance, two bomb attacks at a bus station at Nyanya (Abuja) on the 14<sup>th</sup> of April 2014 claimed the lives of 75 people and injured over 200 others (Chiluwa & Ifukor, 2015).

#### **IV. Boko Haram and Conflicts in the Sub-Sahara**

Until recently, there were no clear indications that events and conflict situations in Sub-Sahara Africa (e.g. Mali) had any direct link with the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria. Boko Haram's effort to Islamize northern Nigeria began earlier than the declaration of independence of Northern Mali by the Tuaregs in 2012, though there is no ruling out of intelligence exchanges between the two Muslim enclaves as they share similar religious ideologies. Up till now, some analysts still do not agree that Boko Haram command the same global jihadist scope as Algeria's Al-Qaeda or the Somalia's Al Shabaab. Rather, they are viewed as "a kind of personality cult, and Islamic millenarianist sect, inspired by a heretical but charismatic preacher" (Walker, 2012, p. 9). This implies that to describe Boko Haram as an international terrorist group with the same anti-West aims as Al-Qaeda will be an over

statement. After all, since the bombing of the UN building in 2011, there had not been any further attacks on international interests (Walker, 2012). However, after the declaration of the so-called independence of the Northern Mali in April 2012, Boko Haram were said to join forces with the Tuaregs. Some reports in the media (e.g. *antiwar news.com*) confirmed that the ‘Nigerian Mujahedeen’ joined forces with their Malian counterparts in the Tuaregs’ control of the city of Gao (Ditz, 2012). Boko Haram was also said to constitute the majority of a militant group that attacked the Algerian Consulate in Gao in which seven Algerian diplomats were kidnapped (*The Punch*, April 10, 2012). According to Tanchum (2012), Boko Haram have successfully expanded their operation and influence beyond their initial ethnic and geographical base because some Nigerian militants have already been engaged by *Ancar Dine* (an armed Islamist group in northeast Mali referred to as ‘defenders of the faith’) to instruct segments of Timbuktu’s population in the *Salafi* practice of Islam. Before then, Boko Haram assisted the Fulani herdsmen in Nigeria, a segment of Mali’s Fulani population who may prove more amenable to the Boko Haram-allied *Ancar Dine* (Tanchum, 2012 p. 1). This cooperation between the Nigerian Boko Haram and the Tuareg secessionist group is beginning to throw some more light on the capabilities of these groups. This also has some very huge security implications for Nigeria. Interestingly, the United States Department of State on the 13th of November 2013 announced the designation of Boko Haram and Ansaru as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) (U.S. Department of State, November 2013). It earlier announced a \$7 million reward for information that would lead to the arrest of Abubakar Shekau, the Boko Haram’s current leader (cf. [www.newswatch24.com](http://www.newswatch24.com)).

## **V. Social Media Use in Nigeria**

According to *World Internet Stats* (2011), Nigeria ranks first in Internet use in Africa with about 44 million users, who are mostly young people. Facebook and Twitter are the most popular with the youth. About 71% of people within the age bracket of 18-34 are said to

engage in social media communication (*Socialbakers.com*). To these people, the Internet is gradually replacing the traditional media as the main source of entertainment, communication and education. As interest in social media has increased, especially with divergent views and interests on social matters, virtual communities are being formed, though mostly along ethnic lines (Ifukor, 2011). Socio-political and economic interests, as well as events in Nigeria, have further helped in the formation of more virtual communities and discussion forums. The ‘Nigerian Village Square’ established in 2003, for example, is used by members of the civil society to evaluate the socio-political and economic developments in the country. Weblog and Twitter were used as social mobilization media in the 2007 general elections in Nigeria (Ifukor, 2010). Political associations as well as social and civil rights groups have also utilized the Internet and networking sites as active media for political participation (Chiluwa 2011b, 2012a.)

There is no doubt that Boko Haram tweeters, who are strong advocates of the Sharia and jihad, derive inspirations from numerous online sites that promote and support militaristic jihad. Al-Qaeda has frequently used the Internet for messaging among its members, and according to Bunt (2003), the jihadists’ use of the Internet is linked with jihad and fatwas because these two are viewed as the most significant integration of online activity with religion. E-jihad, for example, is often expressed in the issuing of online fatwas and the militaristic aspects in hacking and cracking other websites.

## **VI. Twitter and Tweeting**

Twitter is a type of microblogging that has been popular since 2006 and became the most rapidly growing Internet brand in 2010 with about fifty million tweets a day being posted during the first half of the year (Crystal, 2011). Members may send and receive posts or tweets of up to 140 characters. Often referred to as the SMS of the Internet, tweets are displayed on the author’s profile page and delivered to the author’s followers and may be read

by anyone else. An '@' symbol followed by a user name identifies the history of a semantic thread, signaling a reaction to a tweet on the user's page. The '@user' syntax is used to direct conversations to other tweeters and address messages to them (Honeycutt & Herring, 2009). Prefixing an item with a *hashtag* (i.e. #) indicates that some posts have been grouped under a semantic topic such as #government or #bokophilosophy. This is to enable others to follow conversations that centre on a particular topic. A trendy or recent topic may bear the hashtag. There is also a 're-tweeting' practice which occurs when a tweet is forwarded to another user or to all one's followers (often with the abbreviation RT). Structurally, retweeting is the Twitter equivalence of email forwarding where users post messages originally posted to others (Boyd, Golder & Lotan, 2010). As an Internet-based microblogging tool, Twitter enables users to make comments and share brief messages about social situations, report and respond to ongoing events, contribute to discussions or share their interest and activities to a network of friends and followers. Since its emergence, Twitter (or tweeting) has been used for conversational exchanges, collaboration among users with common interests and goals, coordination of events, and for dissemination of news and information (Ifukor, 2010).

Scholarly studies have further established the uses, linguistic contents, style and technology of Twitter as one of the fastest growing members of the new social media. Honeycutt and Herring (2009), for instance, emphasize the conversationality of Twitter as it supports user-to-user exchanges and as a tool for collaboration. Subasic and Berendt (2011) conclude that social media or citizen journalism do not create news, rather extend news through comments. Hermida (2010), however, argues that Twitter makes data available to para-journalists and can be situated within the trend in citizen journalism and as a system of communication with its own media logic, shapes and structures. Thus, Twitter is viewed as an awareness system like other forms of computer-mediated communications, which enable people form 'ambient affiliations' (Zappavigna, 2011) to construct and maintain awareness of



each other's activities, even when the participants are not at the same location (Hermida, 2010). Leinweber (2009) further argues that Twitter is suitable for real-time information such as news, pre-news, rumours, and the formation of social media and subject-based networks (Chiluwa & Adetunji, 2013).

## **VII. Ideology in the Media and Discourse**

The traditional theory of ideology identifies it as beliefs, ideas and values that are maintained and propagated by social classes, groups and institutions, and inherently associated with class struggle and group interest. According to De Beaugrande (1999), it is a concept that claims exclusive possession of truth and rejects all opposition, thereby claiming to direct the affairs of society and culture in the image of its ideals and upholding the pure 'we' and the evil 'they.' In other words, it maintains the status quo that says, 'he who is not with us is against us.' By its nature, ideologies have the power to manipulate what people think, form their opinions, and direct their attitudes (either positively or negatively). This, often (unfortunately) results in controlling people minds to the extent that they accept social conditions that equal subjugation, denial of rights and suffering.

Marx and Engels viewed ideology generally as a false idea or 'misguided beliefs' by which the ruling class brainwash the working class and blindfold them from seeing the true nature of their exploitation (van Dijk, 1998). Since the dominant ideas are the ruling ideas (belonging to the ruling class), which ultimately serve the interest of the rulers, the dominant idea (or ideology) simply creates false consciousness. However, modern approaches to ideology have sought to identify some positive kinds of ideologies. An example is those ideologies that are opposed to or resist domination and social inequality such as anti-racism or feminism ideologies (van Dijk, 1998).

In relation to ideology, Fowler (1991) argues that language use in the media (e.g. the press) is not value free. Formal choices (in the news or social media) constitute choices of meaning,

which reveals how media language works ideologically (Fairclough, 1995a). For example, Taiwo (2007) identified ‘emotive vocabulary’ and certain ‘rhetorical graphological devices’ (p. 19) in the news headlines of some Nigerian newspapers as conveying ideological views about people and situations in Nigeria. The choice of certain sets of vocabulary or patterns of framing rather than other available options reveals something about their intentions, knowingly or unknowingly (Baker, 2006). This choice is always significant especially because of its power to shape peoples’ perceptions of social realities. Hall (1985) argues that ideology is embedded in the news media, though often unnoticed by journalists themselves who though may be inscribed by an ideology to which they do not commit themselves; instead, they express these ideologies in their writings (as cited in Grayantes & Murphy, 2010).

The ideological work done by (new) media language includes the ways in which individuals or groups, identities and relations are represented. Particular representations of social identities specifically define how the actions of those represented are to be judged or evaluated (Chiluwa, 2011a). In other words, meanings repeatedly and consistently associated with certain people can link them with particular patterns of behaviour and attitudes, which may be detrimental to the public opinion about them especially if these patterns are associated with violence or terrorism. The fact that the media provide a medium for the expression, amplification and dissemination of ideology (Grayantes & Murphy, 2010) negates some earlier assumption that ideology is absent or merely expressed implicitly in news stories (Tuchman, 1978). Grayantes & Murphy (2010), however, argue that Tuchman’s argument is now outdated because with the emergence of the Internet and social media information is made available to the public without any restrictions and with different ideological perspectives that are expressed explicitly and implicitly. Many social or political ideologies involve group relations, conflicts, domination and resistance; hence, they involve debates that

are often publicized by the mass media or the Internet. Most group members recognize the main ideological tenets of their group as well as that of other groups, and when their interests are threatened are ready to resist. The main social function of ideologies, therefore, is the coordination of the social practices of group members for the effective realization of their goals and the protection of their interests (van Dijk, 2005). Jihadism is essentially ideological and the Boko Haram group, for example, promotes religious and cultural practices that are reflective of Islamic ideologies. Hence, their activities seek to institutionalize these practices in order to establish their group and institutional identity.

### **VIII. Methodology**

Until the time of this research, there were a total of 144 tweets on the Boko Haram profile page, i.e. *Boko Haram@Boko Haram* (Republic of Arewa) or [https://twitter.com/BOKO\\_HARAM](https://twitter.com/BOKO_HARAM), and it was followed by 490 accounts and was following eight (8) accounts. On their page is a logo with an inscription 'I hate School.' The sect's slogan reads, *'To hate is human; to bomb is divine. We hate western inventions including twitter: however, we feel the necessity to use it to reach out to our fans.'* This website is still quite active.

Analysis will focus on the 144 Boko Haram tweets (including retweets) and the tweets of the 8 accounts Boko Haram was following, totaling 152. Interestingly, it appears this account has been dormant since 2013 as at the last check there were no new conversations. The conversations are often marked by the @ sign and sometimes with # where a topic had become trendy, which showed the writer's answer to questions or an attempt to clarify the Boko Haram's position. The 'followers' represent both their supporters, referred to as 'our fans' and their critics.

The real identity and locations of the tweeters are not certain. While it is safe to conclude that the tweeters were radical Muslim youths in northern Nigeria, with the evidence that some

of the tweets were written in Hausa and some end with Islamic slogans (e.g. Twt150&Twt151below), it is also difficult to conclude that the supporters of Boko Haram who were the presumed tweeters were exclusively Muslim youths. Some Nigerian youths, who do not lay claim to any religion, may have hidden under the Boko Haram voice to express their own feelings. The tweets may also have been written by southern Muslims. It is again difficult to assume that all Boko Haram followers and tweet writers reside in Nigeria. It is even possible that some writers live in North Africa or elsewhere. Hence, the audience of the tweets is not necessarily Muslims or Hausa speaking northerners/Fulanis, rather Nigerian (unemployed) youths who support the Boko Haram radical approach and people from other regions who have access to the Internet. The tweets might have also aimed at reaching outsiders and probably radicalized Muslims from other African countries. This is perhaps the reason why the tweets are mostly written in English. The tweets have the potential to radicalize Muslims from other parts of the continent where they are less likely to speak Hausa.

**Twt150.**@melifew213kafiri, ubankashegedanbanza

**Twt151.** @\_BokoHaram@\_Boko\_Haram@BokoHaram\_

As drops of water we are firing Arewa and infidel Nigeria. Yarodan is cene.

We adopted a qualitative approach to analyze the contents of the tweets, which we viewed as ‘ideological discourse.’ Ideological discourse very often demonstrates evidences of the positive ‘we’ representation (‘we’ representing a radical group, an ethnic group, or a particular political persuasion) and the negatives ‘other’ representation (‘other’ being either the government or a political opposition group etc). This illustrates the ideological square of van Dijk (1998) (i.e. the stressing of the positive actions of the ‘we’ in-group and the negative actions of the ‘they’ out-group). In other words, (i) emphasize ‘our’ good properties/actions, (ii) emphasize ‘their’ bad properties/actions, (iii) mitigate ‘our’ bad properties/actions, (iv) mitigate ‘their’ good properties/actions’ (p. 33). Hence, meanings are structurally manipulated

by the principle of in-group preference and out-group rejection. Discourse meaning influenced by ideologies frequently features information that enunciates (a) self-identity descriptions, (b) activity description, (c) goal descriptions, (d) norm and value descriptions, (d) position and relations descriptions, and (e) resource descriptions (van Dijk, 1995).

In the current study, we identify some categories of ideological discourse analysis (van Dijk, 2005). The categories applied in the analysis include: (i) actor description (involving the neutral or positive ‘we’ in-group description while highlighting the negative attributes of ‘others,’ (ii) argumentation or authority (e.g. the formal presentation of ‘our’ case and ‘we’ having the right to be heard), (iii) comparison (i.e. the in-group versus the out-group, e.g. Boko Haram versus MEND), (iv) exaggerations (e.g. of government corruption and excesses), (v) disclaimers (e.g. dissociating from corrupt politicians or denouncing the government/security agencies).

The tweets are numbered TWT1-TWT152. (‘TWT’ stands for ‘tweet.’) In the analysis, however, only a few relevant tweets and retweets from the various discursive categories are reproduced.

## **IX. Analysis and Discussion**

### *A. Actor Identification and Description*

In the context of this study, the Boko Haram is principally the ‘we’ and ‘us,’ while the government and politicians, Christians, and security operatives are the ‘they’ and ‘them.’ In the tweets, the various positive representations of ‘we,’ ‘us’ and ‘our’ merely reflect how the radical sect and their supporters present their position and ideals. According to the ‘ideological square’ of van Dijk’ (1998), the in-group’s good side is generally maximized and often nominalized/thematized in discourse, while the other’s good side is minimized. Generally, ideology seeks to accept ‘us’ and reject ‘them,’ defend ‘us’ and attack ‘them,’ and protect ‘ours’ and destroy ‘theirs.’ These are expressed in some of the tweets such as ‘the

Nigerian police has 1950 AK47s, **we** have the new M16s,’ ‘if the reason you are not going to church today is because of **us**, **we** love you (Twt107), ‘Mend is after money, **we** are after ideals ...’ (Twt74), etc. Unfortunately in the case of the Boko Haram, it is not certain which faction of the sect the ‘we’ refers to because Boko Haram has broken into several strains and orientations. An example is the *Ansaru*. According to Zenn (2013), the Ansaru now operates as an independent terrorist group with foreign-trained militants, and it has links with al-Qaeda in Algeria and Mauritania. However, in the Boko Haram Twitter profile, there is sufficient textual evidence to conclude that the site was managed by the most radical group, e.g. the tweets that boast of bombings and killings.

In the tweets, there is general *negative lexicalization* of the persons and activities of Christians, the police, and the Nigerian government (the ‘others’). The governments are generally constructed as fraudsters and thieves, while the sect is constructed as the Messiah. The ‘others’ are ‘fools’ (Twt114), ‘mad dogs’ (Twt111), and ‘a gang’ (Twt30). They are also described as killers, either directly by shooting innocent citizens or indirectly through corruption and embezzlement of state funds (Twt32). The writer of tweet111, for example, claims that ‘innocent people’ are killed by the army. To buttress this argument, he/she cited a retweet that reported sporadic shooting in Maiduguri that killed some civilians (cf. Tweet113 below). While it is possible that certain people might have been killed during the armed forces’ confrontations with the extremists, there has not been still established evidence that the army indeed killed innocent people. Rather, some members of the Nigerian military are said to constitute a joint military task force (JTF) to arrest the escalating crisis in the north. The governments are also negatively represented as the real ‘terrorists,’ while the Boko Haram members are ‘freedom fighters’ – the defenders of the Nigerian people (e.g. Twt42). The sect members and their supporters are Jihadists and are also constructed as the defenders

of the teachings of Allah, while all others are referred to as ‘infidels’ that are worthy of death (e.g. Twt110).

**Twt113. @eggheader.** ON MY RADAR: Bomb blast around Bulumkutu area of Maiduguri. Soldiers of the JTF reportedly shooting sporadically all over town. Retweeted by **BOKO HARAM**

For Boko Haram to appear as ‘saviours,’ and ‘lovers of Nigerians,’ the Nigerian economic problems are frequently exaggerated (e.g. unemployment and corruption often constructed as ‘killing’ e.g. Twt115). However, as a matter of fact, Nigeria had shown a considerable growth rate in the last seven years rising from a GDP growth of 6.9% in 2005 to 8.4% in 2010 (see The World Factbook) and an overall growth of 6.61% at the end of 2012 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2013). Nigeria’s GDP for 2013 totalled N80.3 trillion (\$509.9bn) making it the largest economy in Africa, compared with South Africa’s GDP of \$370.3bn at the end of 2013. (BBC, April 4, 2014 quoting the Nigerian Office of Statistics). Boko Haram, however, attempted to blow the problems out of proportion in order to construct the failure of the government. In Twt 24 below, Nigeria is said to be 100 years ‘behind time’ in terms of development and education. This, of course, is an obvious exaggeration although Nigeria’s wealth is hardly reflected in the lives of the people.

**Twt24.** Reason the infidel rulers like Nigeria: it is 100 years behind time; education is no use, citizens too placid to criticize **#bokophilosophy**.

**Twt109. @Boko\_Haram.** As you have seen, we have been causing havoc and bad infidel federal government stil clueless as ever. Long live Boko Haram

**Twt110. @Boko\_Haram** I wonder how many years of bombing the infidels in Aso rock can survive? We plead with Nigerians to join us in our actions

**Twt111. @Boko\_Haram** The truth is it's the army killing innocent people the army is a mad dog. We are for you.

**Twt114. @Boko\_Haram** What matters is the size of the fight in the dog, not the dog size. a big buffoon like the Nigerian govt is a fool anytime.

**Twt115. @Boko\_Haram@daldino.** Do you see the innocent people the infidel government is killing complain? No!

The Boko Haram tweets also apply *negative comparison* to emphasize the bad qualities of the ‘other.’ By so doing, their own bad actions appear excusable and insignificant. For example, the tweets frequently compared Boko Haram’s activities with that of MEND in

order to assert their supposed value-based actions. MEND (Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta) is an ethnic militia group, which was among the several other armed militia groups that sought resource control for the Niger Delta (ND) region of Nigeria (Chiluwa, 2011a). The group, like other radical groups in the southeast (e.g. MASSOB – Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra), has also used the Internet to express their grievances. While MEND is negatively represented as merely materialistic (i.e. they ‘are after money’), ‘we’ (Islamic radicals) are after ‘ideals.’

In order to formally maximize their ‘good’ side, Boko Haram presents an interesting re-definition of terrorism and emphasize their achievements. Islam is generally portrayed as a religion of peace. This is briefly discussed below.

#### *B. Ideology: Terrorism Redefined*

Boko Haram espouses traditional beliefs and norms that are rooted in religion ideologies that are both anti-government and anti-Christian or, better still, may be described as ‘anti-Western.’ The entire data comprise tweets that pledge support for the Boko Haram uprising. More than 90% of the tweets and retweets (both from the ‘following’ and ‘followers’) celebrate the activities of the terrorist group and attempt to defend the Islamic religion as a peaceful religion, whose positive contributions have been undermined by ‘terrorists’ who are not real Muslims.

Ideology is expressed not only in propagating knowledge or belief but also in (subjectively) constructing the context (by a group) and reconstructing existing ideologies to suit their perspective. This is clearly reflected in Boko Haram’s redefinition of the term ‘terrorism’ or ‘terrorist.’ Rather than view a terrorist as someone who commits a criminal act intended to provoke state terror in the general public or who for political, religious, ethnic or ideological purpose (in unjustifiable circumstance) cause harm or destroy people’s lives (see Chiluwa, 2011a), Boko Haram defines terrorism from an interesting moral and religious



perspective. Thus, ‘terrorists are those who drink all day and don’t take care of their families.’ ‘Terrorists are women who sell their bodies’ (Twt62). ‘Terrorists are those who go to western schools to learn how to thief money; they learn to bribe from there’ (Twt63). ‘Terrorists (who) steal government funds in Aso Rock ...; terrorists (who) refuse to maintain roads’ (Twt65). The Nigerian government is, therefore, described as ‘infidels’ who kill people by fraud and corruption (Twt66). Nigeria is referred to as ‘a joke’ and the government, the police and the army are ‘jokers’ because ‘they kill more innocent people everyday than Boko has done in a year’ (Twt67). Thus, Boko Haram claims they are in pursuit of social and religious ideals rather than money, unlike some rebel groups in Nigeria (Twt8). This tends to provide both the ideological and logical argument for their armed resistance. However, the question remains: must the realization of these ideals, no matter how logical they sound, justify the reckless destruction of lives and property like those characteristic of the bombings of Christian churches and public property?

### *C. Augmentation and Position*

The ideological position of the sect is revealed or clearly implied in many of the tweets that attempt to define their mission (e.g. Twt5) and showcase some ‘positive’ results of the attacks that have occurred so far in the north and Abuja (e.g. Twt80etc). While the tweets appear to be self-identifying (of the Islamic sect), they demonstrate defiant and unrepentant voices of anger, justifying their actions and urging youths who are passionate about Nigeria’s future to join in their struggle.

**Twt5.** @Boko\_Haram. We love Nigerians; it’s only the Nigerian polis, Nigerian army, drunkards, prostitutes, politicians, usurers, teachers, touts we can’t stand.

**Twt6.** @Boko\_Haram. Armypeople you are hungry, polis you are tired. Go home. We are your friends. Our enemies are the infidels at Aso Rock **#gaskiya**.

**Twt7.** @Boko\_Haram. Jonathan, abati, omokri are a threat to Nigeria not Boko Haram. We fight for your liberation even though you are not grateful **#longterm**.

**Twt8.** @Boko\_Haram. MEND is after money, we are after ideals. Ideas that come at the right time flourishes. **#deadideals**

Tweets 6-8 above are among the tweets that make the points of view of Boko Haram much clearer. Firstly, they are enemies of the government and friends of the Nigerian people. Secondly, they are fighting to liberate the people, and thirdly, they are defending socio-cultural and moral ideals. These all reflect positive representations of the in-group (i.e. Boko Haram). Some of these ideals (or 'ideas' as embodied in the Islamic religious ideology) are presented in Tweets 10-14 below in the form of their 'achievements,' for example, the restoration of social morality in the north, quietness in the cities (e.g. rejection of modern 'rap' music), marriage and family reunions, reduction of alcohol consumption and general well-being of the people. In other words, the Boko Haram's religious ideology upholds some legitimate social and cultural ideals of the African people. For example, they demand integrity and social morality; hence, they reject clubbing, infidelity, stealing, noisy music, etc. Interestingly, these 'ideals' or ideologies are not unique to Islamic religion alone. They are also common among Christians as well as traditional worshippers. These form the basis of their position as expressed in the Sharia, for example, about women not wearing trousers, not drinking alcohol, not committing adultery, etc. These are reflected in the following tweets:

**Twt10.** @Boko\_Haram. Pls come to Maiduguri to see the good job we have done. quiet. no siren. No thieves only us, polis and army. **#tourism**[http](http://).

**Twt11.** @Boko\_Haram. Wives and children now see their husbands in the night in Abuja and Maiduguri. Countless marriages have been saved **#collateraleffect**

**Twt12.** @Boko\_Haram. Rate of alcoholism has reduced in Abuja and Maiduguri because of our good work **#collateraleffect**

**Twt13.** @Boko\_Haram. Maiduguri looks better with our fireworks. Roads look more even and streets quieter **#collateraleffect**

**Twt14.** Also, none of those horrible music again from dbanj, terryyg, wbanky, wande coal and Duncan might...danmarayajos rules **#goodmusicisbliss**

**Twt16.** RT@Omohthurlah@Boko\_Haram.youpple are the bomb. Ride on guyz Retweeted by BOKO HARAM

Notice that the concern about quietness, integrity and security is systematically grouped under tourism (i.e. **#tourism**). One of the fundamental ways of establishing a difference

between ‘us’ and ‘them’ is to portray the ‘other’ as the violators of the norms and values that Nigerians cherish as a people. Islamic ideologies as reflected in some of the tweets include complete banning of cigarette smoking and replacing it with ‘sheesha,’ (smoke piping) which the Jihadists claim is healthier to the body (e.g. Twt18). Secondly, there would be a complete ban on wearing of Jeans and T-shirts and replacing them with ‘Jelabia,’ which they also claim is more suitable for the Maiduguri weather (Twt19) (Chiluwa & Adetunji, 2013). Most of the tweets denounce the police and the Nigerian government and promise further attacks. Some appeal to the police and security agents to deflect to the terrorist group since the government is viewed as the real terrorists. In order to justify their activities, western lifestyle is constructed as evil and a cultural aberration to the African people. This is discussed in detail below:

**Twt18.** @Boko\_Haram. Boko Haram thinking of replacing cigarettes with sheesha...healthier and with more vitamins #Progress

**Twt19.** @Boko\_Haram. We are thinking of banning Jeans, Tshirt and Tmlewin shirts...Jelabia is more suitable to the Maiduguri sun and for banks #1STEPHEAD

#### *D. Rejection of Western Education and Social Lifestyle*

The hatred for Western education and social lifestyle must have prompted the bombing of schools, beer pubs and churches. This is clearly explained in the sect’s ideological redefinition of terrorism, as highlighted above. For instance, on April 14, 2014 Boko Haram attacked and kidnapped over 276 girls at a government school in Chibok (Borno state), and burnt down the school. Until the time of doing this research, over 200 girls were still missing prompting a global outcry and twitter campaign *#BringBackOurGirls* (Chiluwa & Ifukor, 2015). This was in addition to several other bomb attacks at schools that have killed hundreds of school children. Modern schools are blamed for producing corrupt people, especially modern ways of stealing (money) through technology. Western education is also viewed as a failure because it merely produces cowards and ‘fools’ who are afraid of criticizing and confronting the

government (e.g. Twt20 and Twt24). Ironically, the sect uses Twitter (a product of western education) to disseminate its messages. They try to explain this contradiction in their profile page where it is boldly written: ‘we hate western inventions including twitter: however, we feel the necessity to use it to reach out to our fans.’ Notice that semantic topics under #banschools #stopNYSC show that these topics have been under debates. The call for the scrapping of the compulsory national service (i.e. NYSC – National Youth Service Corps) has generated heated argument in the media, especially when some corps members were killed in the north during one of Boko Haram’s bombings in 2011.

**Twt20.** You are a proof of why school is wasted. Stop those secular education, breeds jerkies and fools @qafro

**Twt21.** We are happy to announce the closure of 3 universities: unimaid, ui, uniben. slowly but surely we shall overcome #upboko

**Twt22.** Notice people cannot spel, even univarsity graduates. What’s the purpose of western education.#BOKOHARAM#BANSCHOOLS#STOPNYSC

**Twt23.** another reason for our bomblasts is to stop decadence on twitter such #rapeherif#nigeriangovtrapesyouenuf. Bomb off their fucking pricks.

**Twt24.** Reason the infidel rulers like Nigeria: it is 100 years behind time; education is no use, citizens too placid to criticize #bokophilosophy.

Christians are blamed for permitting their women to wear mini-skirts and expose their bodies in public. Social vices generally, e.g. prostitution, alcoholism, and fraud among others, are blamed on western education and its influence on the social life of the average Nigerians. Significantly, the seeming negative influence of western values, especially on the social norms and cultures of the African people has also been criticized by individual scholars and social groups who have questioned the impact of globalization on African traditions (Obioha, 2010; Kwame, 2006). Boko Haram, is therefore, not the only group that has expressed concern over the destructive influence of western cultures on Nigerians (e.g. western music overshadowing traditional music, revealing female dresses in place of traditional ones, etc). However, the terrorist sect has adopted a method of cleansing which is also inimical to African culture. Another argument put forward by Boko Haram is the break-up of Nigeria.

#### *E. Demand to Split Nigeria*

One of the main objectives of Boko Haram is to create an independent Islamic state of northern Nigeria, which is an effort to divide the country. Assertive statements such as ‘Nigeria is a joke’ (Twt34), ‘we have left Nigeria; we are in boko republic of Arewa ...’ (Twt58), ‘there is no country called Nigeria’ (Twt 59), for instance, are not only a direct demand to be granted political independence but also an implied dissociation from the present Nigeria. According to Campbell (2012), a recent negotiation between the Nigerian government (represented by the Supreme Council for Sharia) and a Boko Haram spokesman ended in a stalemate, following what the radical sect described as insincerity on the part of the government. While a faction of the sect (i.e. the immediate followers of the late Mohammed Yusuf) was willing to negotiate and present their demands (e.g. punishment of Yusuf’s killers, restoration of seized Boko Haram assets, and the release of Boko Haram members in detention), the other strain (the more radical Islamic anti-government) demanded a radical introduction of the Islamic law in some parts of Nigeria, which the government could not grant. The Jihadists rather views the Nigerian government’s readiness to negotiate with the sect as a form of bribe (Twt62).

**Twt58.** @kasaliolalekan@melifew213. We have left Nigeria. We are in Boko Republic of Arewa. The infidel Nig. Govt and Kafiri Army should leave us

**Twt59.** @drcomely1. What part of we are Nigerians. Don’t you get? #FREEYOURSELF. There is no country called Nigeria.

**Twt60.** @xaxxoo Matters of urgent importance, coordinating the routing of infidels from Arewa land. No time.

**Twt61.** @Boko\_Haram @Boko\_Haram. Federal government wants to negotiate with Boko Haram ... more like bribe us #Foolsall

**Twt62.** RT@jemc2: i wonder why it has taken this long for some to realize that Boko Haram doesn’t want negotiations. They aren’t money-hungry MEND. Retweeted by Boko Haram.

Topics of conversations on Twitter bordering on the splitting of Nigeria into several independent states have been discussed extensively. One of the groups under which posts on this subject is discussed is #Freeyourself (Twt59). The call for the breakup of Nigeria has also been made by non-Islamic extremists. For example, online agitations by the Biafra

campaign groups also seek a separate state for the Igbos of the southeast Nigeria (Chiluwa, 2012b). This call is made not only on twitter but also on comments and reactions to online reports of the bombings. Some of the comments show that Boko Haram's demand for the Arewa Islamic state revitalizes the Igbo dream for political independence. The reactions clearly show that both a section of the Muslim north and a section of the Christian south demand political independence, again throwing some doubts on the continual existence of Nigeria as a single geo-political entity. However, the creation of a separate state of the Muslim north in Nigeria will no doubt further strengthen the foothold of Al- Qaeda in the Sub-Sahara. It is possible that a cessation attempt like that of northern Mali is being anticipated in Nigeria by Al-Qaeda, who is likely motivating the Boko Haram agitations.

#### *F. Disclaimers*

One interesting definition of terrorism by Boko Haram is the attribution of suffering and death of the Nigerian people to the government through corruption. Hence, the sect dissociates itself from the Nigerian politics and government. 37.5% of the tweets in the data reflect both explicit and implicit accusations of the Nigerian government as the root cause of the crises in the country. The government, described as 'a gang' (e.g. of thieves or criminals), is said to 'kill people by fraud and corruption' (Twt32, 34). In other words, the failure of political leadership can only breed crimes and insecurity and the Boko Haram insurgency has been viewed by their supporters merely as reactionary to suffering and unemployment. The government is said to 'rape' the country, for example, through misappropriation of public funds, leaving the people 'hungry.' (Twt31, 33).

**Twt30.** @Boko\_Haram. Boko haram would not sit by and allow a gang rape. The infidel government of Nigeria has done enug#ABSU#EVIL5

**Twt31.** Who needs 25 million naira for their family to spend on their behalf?<http://dlvr.it/m39wH> #BLOODMONEY. We know where we are ... do we qualify?

**Twt32.** @Boko\_Haram. Federal govt of Nig has killed more people thru incompetence this year than Boko Haram, armed robbers, kidnapaz and MEND. #GASKIYA

**Twt33.** @Boko\_Haram. People you are hungry, polis you are tired. Go home. We are your friends. Our enemies are the infidels at Aso Rock #Gaskiya

**Twt34.** @daldino. Nigeria is a joke. Polis, army & govt are jokers. They kill more innocent pple everyday than Boko has done in a year.

Generally, Nigeria's underdevelopment has often been attributed to corruption and incompetent political leadership. This has also provided the main argument and the strong point for the apologists of Boko Haram resistance. The bad qualities of the government are assumed to be well known and are to be viewed as sufficient evidence for the revolt. The writers of Twt40 and Twt42, who are probably members of the Islamic sect, see themselves as heroes. Some revolutionary questions that tend to portray the Jihadists as revolutionary fighters (e.g. 'How many jets does the President have? How many jobs would that have created?' (Twt40)) sound quite valid. Thus, the tweets implicitly identify with the Nigerian people. Attacks on public facilities and the police are also implicitly viewed as revolutionary efforts to rescue the people from the oppressive political system. Again, the government is viewed as 'the terrorist,' while Boko Haram have come 'to the rescue' and are viewed as 'freedom fighters.'

**Twt40.** How many jets does the president have? How many jobs would that have created? Boko Haram to the rescue (#wherewedarethread)

**Twt42.** @Boko\_Haram. The government is the terrorist. When last did you have light for 24 hrs? Boko Haram are the freedom fighters.

**Twt43.** Nigerians would rather tolerate their thieving rulers than face them. We are not the problem, the government is #Faceyaproblem

## **X. Conclusion**

We conclude that Boko Haram has the legitimate right to uphold their ideologies, propagate their religion or seek a separate existence if they feel insecure in the Nigerian state. However, they certainly do not have the right to carry out terrorist attacks on people who do not share their beliefs. In spite of efforts by the Nigerian government to dialogue with the sect (Campbell, 2012), they have continued their bombing in several northern cities, recently sacking whole villages and taking over some. This clearly suggests that the sect is rather not

willing to negotiate. With their presence on Twitter, they are all the more mobilizing northern youth through the subtle interpretation of ideology that validates their action and positively portrays their position. Thus, hiding under popular feelings and general political sentiments, they are selling their intolerant ideologies through the Internet. This study, therefore, concludes that ideology can indeed be destructive. Agreed that there are positive sides to ideology, but ultimately it is often one sided: there appears to be always the selfish protection of oneself or 'our group' to the detriment of others.

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