

# **Horrible Movies: A Content Analysis of Propaganda Videos of Boko Haram Terrorist Sect in Nigeria**

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## **Abstract**

In 2009, what was hitherto an obscure Islamic sect began its metamorphosis into a terrorist organization that became one of the four deadliest terrorist groups in the world. In 2009, leader of Boko Haram sect in the northeastern region of Nigeria, Muhammed Yusuf, was murdered extra-judicially while in the custody of the Nigerian Police. In revenge, Yusuf's followers, prominently including his deputy, Sheikh Abubakar Shekau, went underground to plot a jihad, which has left thousands dead and millions homeless in its wake for a full decade. The aim of this article is to underscore the fact that the horror videos released by Boko Haram periodically is indeed a powerful instrument of its campaign of terror. In this regard, the article analyses the contents of the periodic videos that are released by Boko Haram and identifies their objectives, ranging from luring young people into its fighting force to sending across the world message of its strength and omnipresence. It concludes that the videos are, indeed, propaganda tools aimed at set objectives in furtherance of the ultimate goal of establishing an Islamic Caliphate.

## **Introduction**

Nigeria, a country in West Africa with an estimated 200 million population, is made up of over three hundred ethnic groups welded together as one country through the instrumentality of British colonization. Since it became an independent country in 1960 from British rule, it has undergone series of internal conflicts most of which have their roots in ethnic antagonism among its multiplicity of ethnic groups. In terms of religion, the country is dominated by two major religions: Christianity and Islam. Both are almost of equal strength in terms of adherents. And aside occasional bickering by leaders of the two religions, there has never been a major conflict between the two. However, Nigeria has experienced serious religious conflicts. In the 1980s there was an Islamic sect known as Maitatsine that propagated an ideology opposed to Nigeria's secular order and without recognition of lawful authorities and allegiance to the Nigerian state. Worse still, it

embraced violence as a tool of actualizing its vision of what a society should be. Inevitably, the Nigerian authorities at the time had to deploy force to crush its advancement. Outside this case, there was no other religious upheaval in Nigeria until 2009 when a sect known as Boko Haram surfaced. Boko Haram literally means “Western education is sin”. Its modus operandi is to establish an Islamic Caliphate where the Qu’ran – the Islamic holy book – will replace Nigeria’s secular constitution. The sect first took root in the north eastern region of Nigeria in one of the country’s 36 states known as Borno, from where it gradually spread to nearby states of Yobe and Adamawa. Till date, it has not made any significant presence in any other state.

Boko Haram embarked on a jihad or campaign of violence against the Nigerian state in the year 2010. Initially, its attacks were construed as revenge for the extra-judicial killing of some of its leaders, prominently featuring its founder, Mohammed Yusuf, who died while in the custody of the Nigerian police in 2009. Later, it became clear that the goal was to capture enough Nigerian territories to establish its Islamic caliphate. In this regard, it has deployed diverse forms of violent acts ranging from suicide bombing to kidnapping, assassination to armed invasion of various communities. On the whole, its main mode of fighting oscillates between terrorism and insurgency.

A decade has passed since Boko Haram began its terrorist campaigns. While there have been claims by the Nigerian government that the sect has been “technically defeated” (BBC, 2015), the evidence suggests otherwise. Admittedly, the sect have, lately, been confined to the north eastern states where it had held sway ab initio. It no longer makes inroads into other areas such as when it bombed the United Nation’s building in the country’s capital, Abuja in 2014; when it detonated bombs and killed many innocent souls through suicide bombs at a motor park in Mararaba, Nasarawa state; and when its fighters invaded the Deeper Life Church in Okene, Kogi state, in the middle of a worship and gunned down a good number of those in attendance. But the sect has been recording successful attacks that leaves in their wake high casualties among the Nigerian armed forces in its regular sphere of engagement: the north eastern region. Examples include an attack personally witnessed by the theatre commander of Operation Lafiya Dole created specifically to combat the sect. Major General Adeniyi is seen in a video that went viral saying that the intelligence estimate that informed a particular operation was misleading and rather than facing an enemy that could be put out in a light operation, himself and his troops were confronted by a well-armed enemy carrying out bombardments on all flanks with the use of over a hundred rapid propelled guns (RPGs), mortars etc.

Boko Haram does not only engage in physical combats. It has also proved adept at psychological operations otherwise known as propagandawarfare. Of particular interest

to us in this article is its use of videos as an instrument of propaganda warfare towards the attainment of its ultimate goal of creating an Islamic caliphate based on its peculiar brand of Islamic doctrine. We refer to the videos as “horrible movies” as this is most apt to describe their contents. In the first place, they are movies because elements of drama is infused into them. As a matter of fact they usually give off the feeling that some sort of rehearsals had preceded their recording and broadcast. For example, in a video apparently done to depict the leader of the Boko Haram jihadist, Abubakar Shekau, as a redoubtable and invincible holy warrior, a video was recorded where he boasted that he was still alive despite the efforts of the Nigerian authorities and their foreign collaborators to get him. The collaborators included the United States that have placed a \$7 million bounty on his head for anyone with information that would lead to his arrest (Sanni, 4 March 2020). He then began a Rambo-like firing of a gun slung across his shoulders into the sky while making a mimicry of the gun shots with his name, shouting, “Shekau, kau, Kau, Kau, Kau”! Then he flung the gun away and made a solemn mutter of his name to end the footage, this time in a muffled voice note to give the effect of a denouement: “Shekau”! It all had the trappings of a movie from Nollywood. On the other hand, the movies are horrible because their sights and sounds are usually gory and fear-inspiring. They send messages that terrify and traumatize the audience.

The methodology of the article is content analysis of select videos of the Boko Haram sect. Content analysis in this context differs from the classical and prevalent approach to the method in social research that is fixated to the use of quantitative techniques facilitated by the coding of texts. Berelson’s (1952,18) definition is typical of the fixation to quantitative approach to content analysis: “A research technique for the objective, systematic and *quantitative* description of the manifest content of communication”. For the purpose of this article, however, the approach to content analysis is qualitative; not quantitative. Qualitative studies usually focus not so much on the content of a communication as rather on its underlying intentions or its presumable effects on the audience (Kracauer, 1953). To break down this remark by Kracauer, he is saying that picking certain words or features in a text (composed of alphabets, images, symbols etc, as the case may be) for coding and establishment of a pattern, as is the practice with quantitative techniques, is not the focus of the qualitative approach. Rather, it entails a critical interrogation of the more nuanced and not so obvious intrinsic element of a text – text in this context being video clips released by Boko Haram. In this regard, the technique of qualitative content analysis is critical thinking aided by the fact that the researcher has been a keen observer of the subject matter and is a Nigerian who lives in Nigeria throughout the period covered by the study (2009 – 2020).

Qualitative approaches to content analysis have their roots in literary theory, the social sciences (symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology), and critical scholar ship (Marxist

approaches, British cultural studies, feminist theory). Sometimes they are given the label interpretive. (Krippendorff, 2004). One of the characteristics of the qualitative approach informing the selection of sample here is that it requires a close reading of relatively small amounts of textual matter (Krippendorff, 2004). This is so because, unlike the quantitative approach that makes the examination of a large amount of sample possible through coding, qualitative approach can only permit the analysis of a few sample, especially when each sample will be subjected to thorough analysis. The sample size is four of the Boko Haram propaganda videos. The sample is purposive in the sense that each of the four videos represents one of the four objectives inferred from about 20 released so far by the sect. This will be further clarified in the main text.

The article is divided into three parts hence. The first clarifies the key concepts (terrorism and propaganda). The second part is the core of the article, while the third concludes it. In a nutshell, the overall aim of the article is to put in graphic details the point that the horror videos released by Boko Haram from time to time is an instrument of psychological warfare and a major component of its arsenal of terrorist campaigns.

### **Propaganda and Terrorism**

Propaganda is normally associated with three things: war, advertising, and politics. It is neither new as a phenomenon nor as a subject of academic inquiry. It loomed large in the prosecution of World War I, and Hitler, in his book, *Mein Kampf*, lamented its efficacious deployment by the British in demoralizing German troops and considered it a contributory factor to German's defeat. Seven years after the end of World War I, a leading political scientist of the era, Lasswell (1928, 260 - 261), defined propaganda as "the expression of opinions or actions carried out deliberately by individuals or groups with a view to influencing the opinions or actions of other individuals or groups for predetermined ends and through psychological manipulations". The key phrase in this definition is "psychological manipulations". This is an apt, short definition of the way propaganda is packaged and deployed as an instrument of war. In fact, an alternative nomenclature for propaganda in military parlance is psychological warfare.

Propaganda can take diverse forms, but not every piece of communication qualifies as propaganda. There are four characteristics by which propaganda can be recognized: Persuasive function, sizeable target audience, representation of a specific group's agenda, and use of faulty reasoning and/or emotional appeals Shabo (2008, 5). These four are present in the Boko Haram videos under interrogation.

Next is establishing the nexus between propaganda and terrorism. First, what is terrorism? Opinion differs regarding what this rather contentious concept is. This is the thrust of the saying that one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter. In apartheid South Africa, Nelson Mandela was jailed by the apartheid regime for committing terrorist acts. But before the black South Africans, he was a freedom fighter. The implication of this is that there can be no universally accepted definition of terrorism. In her case, the British government has furnished a definition of the concept in line with the imperative of its circumstance. Section 20 of the British Prevention of Terrorism Act (1974), first in a series of British terrorism acts, defines terrorism as "the use of violence for political ends, including any use of violence for the purpose of putting the public or any section of the public in fear". This definition is a bit restrictive in the sense that it narrows terrorism to political use alone. It does not encompass other strands of terrorism such as the one in focus here: religious terrorism. But the definition is understandable because at the time of the promulgation of this Act, the British were contending with a civil strife in Northern Ireland characterized by violent attacks with separatist intent unleashed by the Irish Republican Army (IRA).

For the purpose of this article, we will rather explain what terrorism is than furnish any definition that may be constraining. Terrorism, a type of asymmetric or irregular warfare, is a fighting technique of a weak group confronted by a national army. Terrorism thrives on surprise attacks on usually soft targets such as individuals and a meeting point of large number of people: market, church, aircraft, train, stadium etc. It can be described as a low intensity warfare in contradistinction to conventional warfare where regular armies in military fatigues and in diverse specializations, ranging from armor to intelligence, artillery to infantry etc., engage each other. Terrorist fighters also make use of propaganda. On the heels of the horrendous September 11 attack in the United States, Al-Qaeda terrorist Islamic sect, was quick to post a message via diverse media that it was responsible.

### **Analysis of Four Videos**

Each of the four videos here share the four characteristics of propaganda outlined by Shabo (2008, 5). First is "persuasive function" - meaning there is an inherent attempt to persuade the audience to the message the author of the propaganda is trying to pass across. Second is a "sizeable target audience", which, of course, implies that every propaganda material must have an audience for which it is specifically designed. Third is "representation of a specific group's agenda", which underscores the fact that for a material to qualify as propaganda it must have a source and that source must have a mission it seeks to promote. Finally, the use of "faulty reasoning and/or emotional appeals". This last characteristic is core to any propaganda material in aid of terrorism. It does not have to make sense to a normal person. It can be laced with half-truths or

outright falsehood. The intent is to manipulate the audience to believe the implausible by working on emotions and sentiments.

The first public video released by Boko Haram was titled “Harvest of Spies” (Zaimov, 2015). In this video, two men alleged to be spying for the Nigerian security agencies were executed. This particular video was meant to send a message of fear down the spine of the Nigerian civil populace among which the terror sect’s operatives and foot soldiers mingled to plot and execute horrific attacks, particularly, suicide bombing. In the video, one of the two purported spies was in a kneeling position while the second one with his right leg amputated was seated on a chair. Standing behind them were their executors in military fatigues and hooded. Of these, the main executioner held a sword while the rest carried a rifle each. The exact moment of the beheading was not shown. The footage simply jumped to the scene where each of the executed men lay lifeless with his severed head placed on his chest. The whole essence of the video is to warn existing informants of Nigeria’s security agencies and would-be ones of the dire consequences that awaited them should they be caught. It made the price to be paid by electing to be an informant against Boko Haram. This was a strategic propaganda because at this time Boko Haram had not morphed into an insurgent group marked by conquest and control of territories. They were only a terrorist group whose survival depended largely on how best they could hide themselves within the populace in their theatre of operation.

The second video for analysis is about abducted schoolgirls. On 14 April 2014, girls numbering 276 were abducted from a high school in Chibok, a predominantly Christian town in the northeastern region of Nigeria, by Boko Haram jihadists. It was a most shocking development among a series of terrorist acts so far perpetrated by the extremist Islamic sect. The sheer number of the abductees and the fact that they were of the female gender drew global attention to the abduction. A worldwide movement with the slogan “Bring Back Our Girls” began and featured many international figures, including America’s First Lady, Michelle Obama, photographed holding a cardboard on which the slogan was etched. The abduction was a major publicity breakthrough for Boko Haram as it catapulted it from a relatively obscure group to global limelight almost on par with Al-Qaeda. On 13 April 2016, about two years into the abduction, the sect released a video (CNN, 2016) at a time concerns were rife about the safety of the girls. The video was not meant to allay the fears of anyone about the girls’ safety, though. It was rather a carefully-packaged propaganda instrument aimed at achieving a mix of objectives.

The first objective obvious from the video was the portrayal of the sect as a true crusader of Islam. The girls, mostly Christians, were attired in Islamic apparel called hijab – a loose and commodious gown that covers a lady ensconced in it from head almost to the toes, leaving only the face open. All the girls without exception were uniformly attired. The video

passes the message that the sect has successfully converted a group of infidels into the Islamic faith. Of course, not every Muslim will be cajoled by the gimmick but it will have an impact on the illiterate and homeless mass of male youths in northern Nigeria known as *almajiri*, who earn their living by begging while they are supposed to be undergoing training in Islamic theology under a cleric. Boko Haram needs the *almajiri* as recruits for its jihadist warfare. It is thus good public relations to appeal to them that the sect is a rallying point for Islamic proselytisation. Last but not the least, it offers the attraction of prospects of settling with a woman to the boys. The leader of the sect, Abubakar Shekau, announced in one of his videos he was marrying off the girls to his boys.

The third video (AFP, 15 January 2018) showed the abducted Chibok girls dressed exactly the same way they appeared in the first video, except that some of them were hooded in the orthodox Islamic way. At least three of them carried a baby each – meaning they had either been raped or married off under duress. They said “we won’t return”. Apparently, they must have been told to say this by their captors and they, of course, had no choice than to comply. The message of the video was to give a false impression to the watching audience that the girls had found fulfilment and home in the Boko Haram camp and way of life, and, whereas, they were taken by force from their community, now they had willingly embraced the Boko Haram way of life so much that returning home would be unthinkable. This message is, particularly, targeted at the impressionable youths among whom the sect drew most of its recruits. They were meant to think that there was a hidden pleasure and bliss in the Boko Haram camp, wherever it may be, and to aspire to be a part of the idyllic Islamic life.

The fourth video focuses on the Boko Haram leader. On 9 November 2018, Abubakar Shekau, leader of the Boko Haram sect, released a video meant to project his person as an invincible holy warrior. This was against the background of news making the rounds in Nigeria that he had been killed. In this video, he appeared in a military fatigue alongside four bodyguards similarly clad, except that they wore face masks while his own face was bare (SaharaTV, 2018). All of them had a rifle strung across the shoulder such that it rested on the chest. In the video, Shekau showered praise on his troops for their success in capturing some Nigerian towns such as Kumshe and Gulumba in the crisis-torn northeast region of Nigeria. He then, importantly, boasted about his invincibility – that he was alive contrary to the wicked expectation of “those that said I have died”. This video is a morale booster to Boko Haram fighters, especially those faraway from Shekau, operating in diverse secret cells. It reassures them their commander is alive and, not only that, he is victorious as evidenced by his claim of capture of new territories. The visual message passed across by his dressing and the guns is that of a battle-ready, fearless commander who is actively fighting himself just as he expected them to do, risking their

lives to attack the Nigerian military, manufacturing improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and detonating same on selected targets, kidnapping innocent people for forced conversion to Islam and huge monetary ransom, as the case may be, and so on.

### Conclusion

We have established, using four videos as samples, that Boko Haram – a sect whose name means “Western education is a sin” – is heavily reliant on Western technological innovation such as videos for its propaganda warfare. We have also established the fact that each video is not a happenstance but a carefully packaged tool of communication to targeted audiences for specific goals.

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