
Visual Representations of Newspaper Reportage of *Boko Haram* Terrorism in Nigeria

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Abstract: The *Boko Haram* terrorists have consistently attacked Nigerians in different parts, especially the northern part, of the country. The actions and inactions of this group have been covered, visually and verbally, by different media outlets. Extant studies on *Boko Haram* (BH) terrorism in Nigeria have gained attention from scholars from other non-linguistic fields. Hence, sufficient attention has not been paid to BH terrorism by linguists. Some of the linguistic studies that have examined the coverage of the BH actions and inactions have emphasised the verbal representations, neglecting the visual representations of the reports. This study, therefore, examines the pictorial representations in selected newspapers in representing BH terrorism. In gathering data, BH-related pictures and images are purposively selected from four newspapers which were published from 2011 to 2014. The four purposively selected newspapers, that is, *Daily Trust*, *Leadership Nigeria*, *The Punch* and *The Nation* are representative of the northern and southern parts of Nigeria. The newspapers allocate space to the pictorial representation of the BH activities. The analysis is mainly guided by van Leeuwen's (visual) representation of social actors; and complemented with other relevant multimodal models. The newspapers' visual representations cognitively and imaginatively influence readers' experiences in relation to the activities of *Boko Haram* terrorists.

Keywords: *Boko Haram* Terrorism, Visual Representation, Pictures and Images, Nigerian Newspapers

1. Introduction

Media reports in recent years have widely covered (terrorist) attacks across the world. Media outlets across the world have played a major role in reporting terrorism and the fight against terrorism locally and internationally. Such reports, which have not sufficiently provided a complete view of global terrorism, have succeeded in covering attacks from New York to Moscow, Paris to Istanbul, Buenos Aires to Mumbai, Syria to the Philippines, the Middle East and other countries in West Africa like northern Nigeria and Cameroon, and so forth. The local media outlets based in the countries or regions that are regularly hit by terrorists, together with other national and international media outlets which are miles away from the regions, have incessantly taken an occupation on the reportage of terrorism and the fight against it. The media have equally reported attempts, including those by the state, to combat terrorists and their actions. The governments of the different states and territories have tried almost endlessly to end the attacks. Despite the states' trials and the media reports, the violence and attacks

have not seized. There has been the proliferation of hijack of territories, hostage-taking, kidnap of the innocent among others.

One central question that research on media has grappled with is the question of the connection between the media and terrorism [1-6]. Spencer [5] (, in particular, who made his submission on the controversial connection between the media and terrorism avers that "it has become widely accepted that there is an almost symbiotic relationship between terrorism and the media as terrorism provides for exciting and violent stories which help sell the news product and the media provides terrorist groups with a means of spreading their message and creating fear among the general public." In like manner, UNESCO [6] submitted that "terrorist attacks are often carefully choreographed to attract the attention of the electronic media and the international press. Terrorism is aimed at the people watching, not at the actual victims." One cannot but attempt to agree that the media reportage of terrorist attacks popularises the actions and the inactions of the terrorists, and in turn, affects the audience. Meanwhile, "the degree of freedom of the press in

each country, the economic resources available to the media, cultural factors and singular conceptions of ethics and the social role of the media” [7] cannot be separated from the extent of coverage that the media gives to news items.

As an arm of media organisations in the world, the Nigeria media, including printed and online newspapers, have equally taken the centre stage in reporting the activities of *Boko Haram*, an acclaimed terrorist organisation which domiciles in northern Nigeria. The violence has had some effects on Nigerians and, in response, the Nigerian government has condemned the endless terror, and declared total war against the group. Meanwhile, newspaper outlets in Nigeria have widely reported both the *BH* activities and the war on the activities of the group.

2. Terrorism and *Boko Haram*

Terrorism, though principally a popular word, is ‘hard to concisely define’ [8], especially since there are different written definitions of *terrorism* and *terrorist*. Considered from the viewpoint of Hoffman [8], terrorism can be defined as “deliberate creation and exploitation of fear through violence or the threat of violence in the pursuit of political change.” Five attributes of terrorism exist, according to Hoffman: political goals and intentions, association with violence or threat, attempt to evoke wide psychological effect on people other than the real target(s), a group with an identifiable command arrangement, and fifth, subnational group and non-state entity. Similarly, to Pillar [9] government’s description of terrorism includes four fundamental characteristics: premeditation; political motivation; non-combatants as targets – they attack defenceless people; the perpetrators are either sub-national groups or clandestine agents.

On the name ‘*Boko Haram*’, ‘*boko*’ means book and the Arabic word ‘*haram*’ means unlawful. Combined, *Boko Haram* refers to ‘Western education is unlawful.’ Meanwhile, the group has even rejected the designation, ‘Western education is unlawful’, but prefers the slogan, ‘Western culture is forbidden,’

because culture is broader than education. Existing studies seem to have a consensus view on the emergence of *Boko Haram*. According to them, the group is an outgrowth of the Maitatsine uprising of the 1980s and the religious and ethnic tensions that followed in the late 1990s [10].

As reported by Agbiboa [11], the *Boko Haram* group worked as a recruiting ground for future jihadists to fight the state. It initially called itself the ‘Nigerian Taliban’, adopted a ‘live-off-the-land’ lifestyle and set up a camp in a remote area of northeast Nigeria, which the group dubbed ‘Afghanistan’ (see [12, 13, 14] for more on the history of the *BH* group).

Since the re-emergence of the *BH* team in 2010, the group has engaged in unending attacks on the Nigerian State; and has consistently taken responsibility for the endless attacks in the northern part of Nigeria: bombing institutions, shooting innocent and defenceless civilians, and kidnapping the unarmed [13]. Hence, the fundamentalists’ atrocities have not only created anxiety in Nigerians; but have also rendered many people homeless; and forced over 650,000 people to escape from the conflict precinct to a comfort precinct. In particular, the *Boko Haram* sect has bombed the United Nations office in Abuja, churches, mosques, army barracks, police headquarters, motor parks and other public places; it has also kidnapped over two hundred secondary school girls in Chibok, Borno State, and has killed (see Figures 1 and 2) more than 5,000 civilians between July 2009 and June 2014 [13]. In fact, the kidnapping of innocent schoolgirls, numbering over 100 at two different times touched the world. First, on the night of April 14, 2014, 276 schoolgirls were kidnapped from their school hostel in Secondary School, Chibok, Borno State. Second, as recently as February 2018, the group still abducted 110 schoolgirls who are aged between 11 and 19 years from the Government Girls’ Science and Technical College, Dapchi, Bulabulin, Yunusari, Yobe State. The consistent attack on and kidnap of innocent girls who are already at puberty may not be unconnected with the need to satisfy their sexual needs and promote the strengths of the group through procreation.

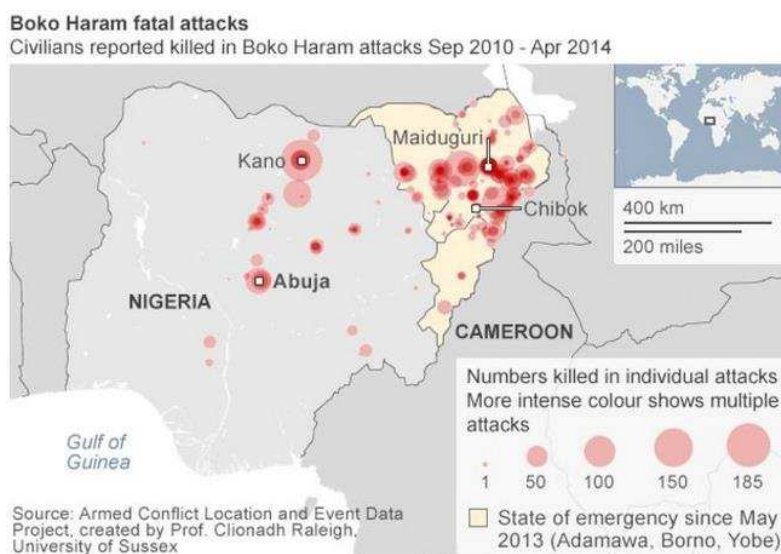


Figure 1. *Boko Haram* fatal attacks (2010-2014).

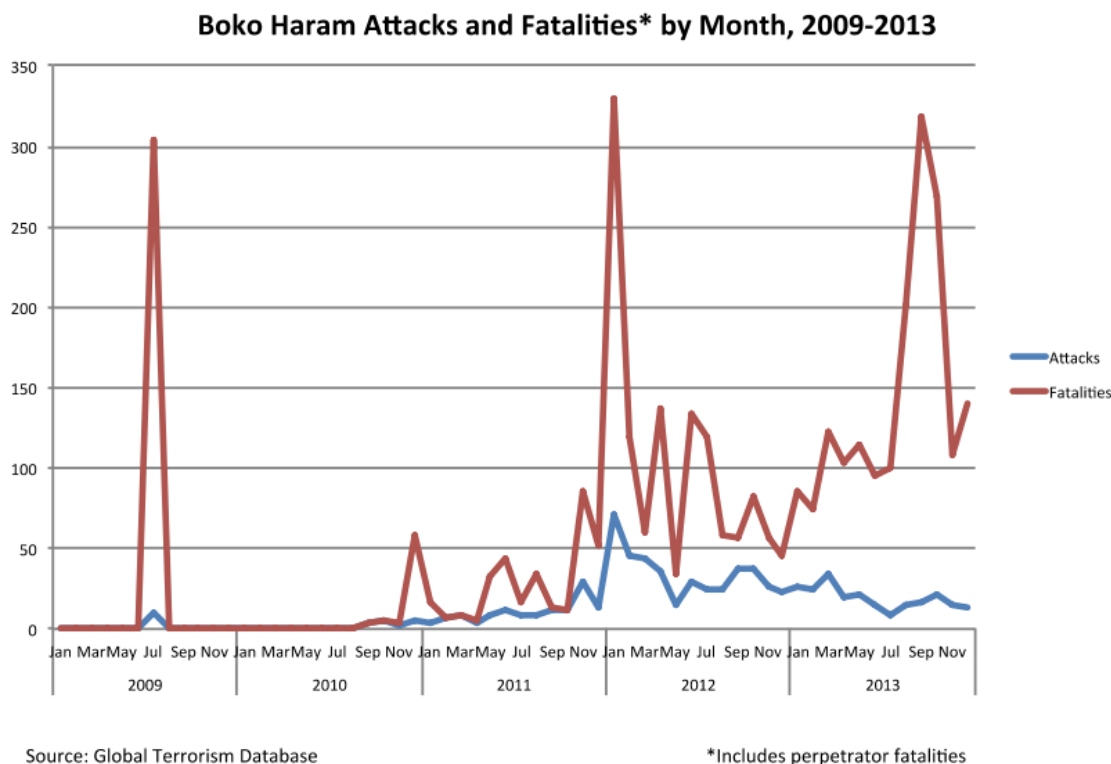


Figure 2. Reported Boko Haram attacks and fatalities (2009-2013).

In addition to the reaction, the traditional media, electronic media and social media in Nigeria have widely reported both the terrorist acts and the war on terrorism, as declared by the President. They have covered, visually and verbally, the actions of the terrorists, and the efforts of the government in combating terrorism. How have the media reported the war on terrorism? How have they framed and constructed visually the issues and news on the escapades of the *Boko Haram* group?

3. Previous Studies on BH Terrorism and Statement of the Problem

Studies on BH terrorism have been examined mainly from nonlinguistic disciplines. The previous linguistics-based studies have examined BH activities in relation to media reports, with emphasis on verbal representations. Such studies on media reportage of BH, have only examined aspects of pragmatics [15], lexis [16], aspects of grammar and discourse [17, 13, 14,], aspects of stance [18-21], and a few others. Meanwhile, the existing studies have neglected the visual representations of the reports. This study, therefore, examines the pictorial representations in selected newspapers in representing BH terrorism.

4. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Different theories have been advanced on visual

representations and analyses, including Kress and Van Leeuwen's [22] image representation, Forceville's [23] pictorial representation and other modal and multimodal theories. In this paper, it is believed that the linguistic tenets in the representation of social actors allow us to think about the way classification is realised both linguistically [24] and visually [25]. Modality is a way of analysing images that have been inspired by linguistic analysis allowing the reader to reveal what is offered as certain as against what is concealed [26]. Modality has to do with the way truth or reality in given information is communicated or represented. It refers to the levels of reality or certainty. While with verbal representation, the use of modal auxiliary verbs such as can, could, may, might, will, would and so forth can reveal the degrees of modality in such statements, with visual representation, other techniques are deployed to determine whether modality is reduced and reality is avoided or changed [27, 22]. The other techniques include the examination of the subjects of the image, the setting of the image, the elements of the image, and the colours in the images.

Pictures and images have also been related to metaphorisation. Metaphor can be monomodal or multimodal. Monomodal metaphor occurs in a single mode of representation, like verbal metaphor, pictorial metaphor or auditory metaphor. Multimodal metaphor occurs in diverse modes, for instance verbo-pictorial metaphor. The cognitivist paradigm suggests that thought can give rise to non-verbal or multimodal metaphor, and insists that verbal metaphors are manifestations of thought. Therefore, the study of non-verbal

metaphor provides tools for the analysis and production of pictorial representations. Pictorial metaphors are mostly left in the hands of the viewers to make sense out of the pictures. Hence, Forceville [23] points out that when a picture contains a metaphor, what the picture editor does is to invite the viewer to construe the metaphor. The metaphor producer, therefore, may put some hints or salient clues for the viewer to easily perceive and construe the metaphor. Forceville [23] proposes four types of pictorial metaphors to include *Hybrid type of pictorial metaphor*, which is a case where a unified object that consists of two different parts that belong to different domains can only be properly interpreted by an understanding of one of the parts in terms of the other; *Contextual type of pictorial metaphor*, which is a situation where a unified object is understood to be something else as a result of the visual context of representation; *Pictorial Simile*, which is a situation where a unified object is compared with another which belongs to a different category in order to interpret the second by the understanding of the first; *Integrated metaphor*, which is a situation where a unified object, regardless of the contextual cues, is represented in such a way that it resembles another one.

The pictures in our data represent BH terrorism and the war on BH terrorism from different angles. For most civilians who could not move near the ‘battlefield’, the representations and presentations in the newspapers give some of the actual effects of BH terrorism in Nigeria. Beyond the effects, it also gives ideas on the trials and the escapades of the government in combating BH terrorists. The pictorial representations also show Nigerians some of the actual effects of bullets and explosives on humans and society. These photographs can be used to represent instances of ‘terror’, ‘war’, ‘suffering’, ‘combat’, ‘enemies’, ‘solidarity’ and ‘civilians’ in general. A good pictorial representation of events, on the front-page of a newspaper may mean more patronage. Although the pictures are of different types, the aim is to reveal what kinds of participants are depicted as being involved in BH terrorism as an accomplice or anti-terrorist.

How are participants pictorially represented? The participants represented can generally be categorised as good or evil, that is the in-group and out-group. The out-group – the bad group – is made up of the terrorists, while the in-group is made up of different types of people and things, believed to be good because they are anti-terrorists. The anti-terrorists can be further subdivided into Nigerian Government, Nigerian army, Nigerians/civilians, victims, sympathisers, protest groups, world leaders, media and so forth. The pictorial representations have both the visual and verbal dimensions. Using the linguistic tenets in the representation of social actors allows us to think about the way that classification is realised both linguistically and visually [24, 25]. Therefore, how are enemies (terrorists), soldiers, and civilians positioned for the viewer in the photographs?

For data, the online editions of four newspapers from the northern and southern parts of Nigeria were purposively selected: *Daily Trust* and *Leadership Nigeria*, and *The Punch*

and *The Nation* respectively. Besides allocating sufficient space for the reportage of BH activities, the printed versions of the newspapers are widely circulated across Nigeria, while their electronic versions are available online. Headline and overline stories are purposively retrieved from the newspapers between 2011 and 2014. Van Leeuwen’s [20] (visual) representation of social actors complemented with other relevant multimodal models guide the analysis.

5. Analysis and Findings

The mediated pictorial representations on *Boko Haram* escapades implicate the government as not sufficiently capable to confront the problem alone. Two tools – individualisation and collectivisation have been identified in the visual representations. In addition, the other techniques such as setting, colour and arrangement show that the newspapers generally give a negative perception of *Boko Haram* terrorism.

5.1. Individualisation of Social Actors

Participants are pictorially individualised. This has to do with the singularity of pictorial representation, that is the individual representation of social actors. In Figures 3-9, many actors are visually individualised by shots that show only one person.



Figure 3. Mohammed Yusuf as a defeated and captured leader.



Figure 4. Abubakar Shekau is presented as a leader in command



Figure 5. Dr Goodluck Jonathan as worried by the killings 1.



Figure 6. Dr Goodluck Jonathan as worried by the killings 2.



Figure 7. American President, Barack Obama on Terrorism.



Figure 8. The American first lady, Michelle Obama on Support for the girls.



Figure 9. BH victim or sympathiser.

As depicted in the images, visual individualization is a matter of degree. It can be reduced by increasing distance, making individual traits less easy to observe. The close range shots given in Figures 3 and 4) are those of the BH leaders. Figure 3 is the first leader of the group, Mohammed Yusuf, as surrounded by soldiers at Giwa Barracks in Maiduguri, northeastern Nigeria, on 30 July 2009. Figure 4 is that of the succeeding leader, Abubakar Shekau. Consistently, when the group releases any picture or video, despite their facelessness, as common to terrorists, their leaders' faces are not covered. Figure 3, as depicted here, represents Mohammed Yusuf as a defeated and captured leader. Surrounded by soldiers, the leader is captured. Characteristic of terrorists, despite the capture, his face remains that of a hardened terrorists who is not remorseful despite the atrocities his group had carried out. In Figure 4, Abubakar Shekau is presented as a leader in command. Using a red background, which connotes danger or evil, the leader speaks to show that he is in charge. Figures 5 and 6 represent the president of Nigeria, Dr Goodluck Jonathan as pathobed and overwhelmed by the killings and attacks by the group. Meanwhile, Figure 6 individualised him as a thinking president who is brainstorming on the way out of the situation. Figure 7 is the individualization of the World President, Barack Obama. Speaking on the Boko Haram terrorism in Nigeria, the individualised representation of his face shows support and solidarity for the Nigerian situation. He speaks with hands raised to convince all that America is set to help Nigeria conquer the BH terrorists and arrest the unfortunate situation. Figure 8 shows the individualization of the American first lady, Michelle Obama. She shows solidarity with the abducted Chibok girls and their parents. She joins other women in the world to call for their release. The individualised person in Figure 9 is a victim, bereaved or sympathiser, who must have just lost a loved one or property to the terrorists' violence or one who is affected directly or indirectly by the atrocious activities.

5.2. Collectivization of Social Actors

Visual collectivization is realised by plurality or representation of images of groups of people, shown to be pursuing a similar goal. Such a group of people, as found in Figures 10-14 can have a collective name, such as terrorists, terrorist-combatants, protesters, sympathizers, and so forth. In essence, the individuals in the images represent different teams. Figure 10 is a representation of the team of terrorists. Again, while their faces are veiled in order to remain in perpetual darkness from easy identification by non-terrorists, only their leader, Abubakar Shekau has his face uncovered. The terrorists are 'homogenized' with their same clothing which suggests they belong to the same terror group, while they carry their guns and other weapons in an unruly manner, which show that they do not belong to regular army, but are a collection of unruly and motley individuals. They are represented as being badly dressed and armed, without a particular order and they show some level of indiscipline. The BH terrorists in Figure 10 also hold iconic weapons (like

the AK-47) that are now non-official forces in a style that symbolises resistance movements.

Figure 11 also represents the group of people who take the centre stage in combating the terrorists, that is, the Nigerian soldier. Their clean military uniforms (clothing), arms and ammunitions and the other technology that they wear also suggest that they belong to the military arm of the country. Figure 11 shows massive military forces, convoy with ammunition in order to give Nigerians their idea that they are powerful enough to combat the terrorists. In the context of peacekeeping discourse, this is important to the masses and suggestive to the terrorists that they (the military) are equal to the task of subduing them. Figures 12 and 13 represent social organisations who are differently united in calling for an end to BH menace in Nigeria. Team members in both groups put on the same clothing to campaign their demands for all to see. Figure 12 is made of selected concerned Nigerians whose organisational name is #BringBackOurGirls (#BBOG). The group is specifically meant to call for the rescue of the Chibok girls. The members of the group, #BBOG, are 'homogenized' with their red clothing, which symbolises danger or evil. Figure 13 is made up of Nigerians in Diaspora. The group's name is Nigerians in Diaspora Organisation (NIDO), and rallies support for the Federal Government of Nigeria to end BH terrorism in Nigeria. The members of the NIDO group are also 'homogenized' with their green clothing, which symbolises life. Figure 14 is a representation of thirty presidents and heads of government from Africa, Europe and other continents who resolved after their conference to put an end to the growing spate of terrorism in Africa. The collectivised persons in Figure 15 are victims and sympathisers, who would have just lost their loved ones or property to the terrorists' violence. Their attire depicts that they are from the same social cultural environment.



Figure 10. BH terrorists.



Figure 11. Nigerian army combating BH terrorists.



Figure 12. Peaceful protesters 1.



Figure 13. Peaceful protesters 2.



Figure 14. World leaders.



Figure 15. Sobbing victims.

5.3. Settings

In the images selected from our data, there are lots of detailed settings: burning villages (Figures 16-18), burning vehicles (Figure 16), burnt humans (Figure 19), dead civilians (Figure 18), injured civilians, sobbing victims and government officials (Figure 22), among others.



Figure 16. Property set ablaze 2.



Figure 17. Property set ablaze 3.



Figure 18. Property set ablaze 1.



Figure 19. Corpses BH victims 1.



Figure 20. Corpses BH victims 2.



Figure 21. Kidnapped girls 1.



Figure 22. Sobbing victims and the president.



Figure 23. Kidnapped girls 2.

The represented images are recorded in high modality. The light, shadow and color, where the images are in color, are as we might expect in the real world. The fire flames reveal the authenticity of the mayhem and the detonation of 'bombs' in different locations in the northern part of the country. The northeastern part of the country is populated by Muslims and the representation of victims (women dressed in Islamic way) in Figure 21 relates to reality. The girls in Figure 23 are the kidnapped school girls from the Chibok community, a Christian dominated school. The presentation of the picture is to show that they are real, alive and have all been islamised, at least, by attire.

Although the picture shows that they are somewhere in a forest, possibly the Sambisa Forest (the territory of the BH terrorists), but the revelation is reduced on purpose by the BH terrorists to obscure their identity from counter-terrorists and to perpetually keep the girls for as long as they wish. So we have a low modality representation of settings in Sambisa Forest. The photograph deliberately focus attention on the girls, to prove to all that the girls are in their custody. Therefore, viewers are orientated to think about the participants rather than the place itself.

The represented participants in Figure 25 are the Nigerian soldiers. They are arranged as neatly as regularly done in real life. In Figures 26 and 27, the BH terrorist are arranged and represented as tatty and weathered as it is the case with terrorists. Finally in Figure 28, the civilians are also arranged in a fearful position, running for their lives from the troubles of terror.

6. Conclusion

The mediated pictorial representations on *Boko Haram* escapades implicate the government as not sufficiently capable to confront the problem alone. Meanwhile, two tools – individualization and collectivization have been identified. Some of the social actors were individualized using different expressions that portray their identity, while others were collectivized, using postures that portray the similarity in their goals. On the other hand, the images were examined for other techniques such as setting, colour and arrangement. The temporal and spatial settings in the pictorial representations underscore the authenticity and reality in the atrocious acts. The displayed details including burnt villages, burnt vehicles, burnt humans, dead civilians, injured civilians, sobbing victims, among others, at the respective spatial settings are sufficiently evidential. The displayed colours – red, green, blue – are used to create a link or coherence in a text, as they do in multimodal discourse, in order to represent our daily experience. Hence, they are used to draw the attention of others to what is presented, and to have specific effects on others. Reality is portrayed via the depiction of the arrangement of individuals and groups. The arranged groups or individuals include the Nigerian soldiers, the BH terrorists, the government and civilians. The arrangement of the civilians connotes absolute fear with the represented participants running for their lives from the troubles of terror.

This study, therefore, submits that the reporters and the newspapers generally give a negative perception of the *Boko Haram* terrorism. The negative portrayal of the members of the group as terrorists, alongside other identity constructions, as identified in the visual images, implicate the group as a deadly group, bringing to the fore the need for immediate solution to the menace of the group in Nigeria. The identity construction also underscores the capability and strength of the *Boko Haram* terrorists to the readers and Nigerians at large. The pictorial representation of other world leaders and individuals who are involved in the campaign for rescue brings respite to the hearts of the victims or their families that they are not alone. The newspapers' visual representations cognitively and imaginatively influence readers' experiences in relation to BH terrorism, and largely orientate readers on the lack of trust for the Nigerian government in self-combating the *Boko Haram* insurgency.

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