



Discourses of Shekau's Illusiveness and Boko Haram Leadership as a Semiosis

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Abstract

The Boko Haram sect has constituted a serious menace not only to the Nigerian society, but to the entire West African sub-region. The leadership of the organization ranging from the late Mohammed Yusuf to the "late" Abubakar Shekau has proved to be highly illusive to the Nigerian security network. While it has been proved beyond reasonable doubt that the founder of the Boko Haram sect, Mohammed Yusuf had been captured and killed by the Nigerian security agencies, the second in command who later took over the mantle of leadership from Yusuf has been presented by the media as an immortal being. Even though there is available evidence to prove that Shekau was arrested in the past and killed, the media both foreign and local have continuously presented Shekau as still living. In this paper, the study demonstrates through semiotic construct the available evidence that point to the demise of Abubakar Shekau. The persistent use of the name "Shekau" has become a metaphor for illusiveness and immortality. Through the process of semiosis the paper juxtaposes the living-dead bodies of Shekau and questions the continuous use of the name to prove the immortality of the character of the Boko Haram leadership. Data for the analysis were elicited from print media reports on the activities of the Boko Haram sect. The analysis reveals that the name Shekau remains a source of strength to the members of the sect. It also points to the fact that there seems to be information which the media is hiding from the masses with the continuous use of the name "Shekau" in their reportage. The study opines that if the war against the Boko Haram sect must be won, then

there is the need for effective collaboration between media practitioners, security agencies and the populace.

Key Words: Discourse, Shekau, Illusiveness, Boko Hara, Semiosis

There can be no words without images - Aristotle.

Introduction

In this paper, we present insurgency in Nigeria as semiotic constructs to critically describe and interpret the various pictorials that have been churned out of the acts of terrorism, vandalism, kidnappings and the likes in the wake of the violence from a socio semiotic viewpoint. Using this approach, we identify the discourse patterns in the various pictorial representations of the crises by using significations in relation to Critical Discourse Analysis to explicate the issues in relation to the crises. This is because visual semiotics emphasizes the way visuals communicate and the system dominating their usage. Semiotics predominantly enquires into the ways meaning is created rather than simply investigating what it is. Human beings have always tried to understand and interpret the world they live in. they desire to get to know, and *read*, the nature, the universe, human being and his culture, which is why he needs to think about and analyze their meanings. Meaning doesn't necessarily come out obviously, it often exists latently and waits to be disclosed, analyzed and read (Parsa & Parsa, 2002: 79). In this paper, socio-semiotics is used to hint at the way in which an analysis might be done. Our aim here is to clarify the meaning construction process and its interpretation by the reader at the perceptive level and the course of shallow meaning units into the deeper levels of meaning in the selected pictorials generated from insurgency in Nigeria.

SEMIOTICS AND PICTORIAL ANALYSIS

Here we focus on studies in visual and material culture, which according to Peirce's classification of signs in terms of icon, index and symbol are useful. An icon, simply put, is a sign that is linked to a signifier through similarity in appearance. Examples here include portraits or abstract paintings where colour is, for example, black; the

painting is black, refers to the colour black and can then be interpreted differently. The point is that we can gain information (or think we can!) about the signified by looking at the sign. Take, for example, of computer icons. An indexical sign ties, as such, the signifier to the signified; the index has been described as visible sign which points to the invisible, though this may be too general. I would describe the indexical sign as the registration of the real; the sight of smoke, for example, can indicate fire, a bullet hole would refer to a specific act, or the sight of tears suggests sadness or happiness. Further, think of words such as 'this' or 'big' and 'small'. More so, a symbol links the signifier and the signified in a purely arbitrary or conventional way; unlike the icon or index, the link is not physical or logical. We are taught by our society to make the link between the symbolic sign and its signified. For example, flags, dollar signs or the most obvious example, verbal language itself. Pierce's ideas can be useful but should not be understood uncritically. Like objects and images, these classifications are best understood as dynamic when applied to images and objects. Roland Barthes (1915-1980) was the first to apply ideas of semiotics, as it developed from linguistics, to visual images, for example, food advertisements, photography and motion pictures. Barthes' work offers a useful summary of the important aspects of semiotics discussed above.

Essentially, he sought to analyze how the meanings we attribute to images are not a "natural" result of what we see; that is, images are not self-evident and universal in how we understand what we see. For example, it is very difficult to attribute meaning to a photograph without a caption or accompanying text. Further, the meanings that we do give to images are linked to culturally specific associations, though it is very necessary to note that culture cannot entirely determine our response (Potts 1996, 31). Barthes called the immediate visual impact denoted meaning (or first order or basic meaning) and the cultural meaning we attach to it connoted meaning (or second-order meaning). In other words, denoted meaning refers to the recognition of what is registered by the image or photograph (e.g. a photograph of a monk) and connoted meaning refers to the possible invitation of the image to interpret, give meaning to, the

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forms even against or beyond the authors' intention. This provides a useful backdrop to look at the application of semiotics to visual and material culture and, furthermore, in terms of considering cultural meanings, we may also usefully note Barthes' influence on poststructuralist thinking. Post-structuralism does not view language as a structure but rather a structuring process in terms of the relationship of the reader, or viewer, or consumer (Ribere 2002, 60). In this respect, there is a greater emphasis on the impact of language and the role the individual plays in creating meaning.

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

Here, we present pictures of the two leaders of the Boko Haram sect. this is to demonstrate through semiotic analysis the available information on the key players of the sect. It is a fact that Mohammed Yusuf founded the sect and was the first leader of the group. At his demise, Abubakar Shekau took over the mantle of leadership. These two individuals therefore are of interest to the masses. How the first leader ended, why the media has refused to accept the demise of Shekau and the implications of the believe in Shekau's immortality.

ANALYSIS A: THE B/H FOUNDER ARRESTED AND PARADED



S/N	Triadic	Semiotic Resources	Semiotic Significance
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	Model of the Sign	in the Image	
1	Icon	The “harmless” Boko Haram leader under the weight of the law	This picture is iconic of a temporary defeat of a monster that has terrorised a whole nation over a period of time.
2	Index	The picture of the Boko Haram founder Mohammed Yusuf being paraded naked with his hands tied to the back. There are other members of his gang who have been arrested being paraded. There are spectators at the background.	This is indexical of a conscious security outfit which had arrested the founder of the Boko Haram sect.
3	Symbol	No one is illusive or above the law.	This symbolises a temporary defeat of a sect that had proven to be illusive and untouchable.

DISCUSSION

On the 31st of July 2009 the founder and grand commander of the Boko Haram sect Alhaji Mohammad Yusuf was captured alive as seen in this picture at the city of Maiduguri, the capital of Borno state north eastern nigeria. Shortly after his capture he was said to have been handed over to the country’s police force by the Army that captured him. However after a short while the news began filtering out that the dreaded Boko Haram leader had died from gun shot wounds that were sustained in a cross fire between the police and the insurgent group. There were also indications that the order to kill Yusuf in order to hide the real motive behind the formation of the sect came from

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above as there was no seriousness on the part of government towards unravelling the mystery surrounding the death of Mohammad Yusuf on that fateful day of July 31st 2009. In that picture we see a Mohammad Yusuf who is well fed; not looking like a starving fighter or even a freedom fighter but a man who is well taken care of. His heavily built body testifies to this. His hands are tied to the back demonstrating victory for the Nigerian Army and a point of Waterloo for the sect group. The white cloth used in tying his hands should be a symbol of purity and sanctity but the irony is that the same cloth is tied to a wound he sustained in a cross fire between himself and the members of the Nigerian security outfit. Will that cloth heal his wound? That would have led to the healing of the wounds of all Nigerians who were also victims of the insurrection but those who hastily killed Yusuf succeeded in murdering sleep as the insurrection continues till date. The picture of Yusuf is a sharp contrast to that of his followers who are paraded along side himself at the background. His followers are wearing different colours of dresses and different sizes; the age range is not restricted. This shows that the sect members come from different backgrounds, age strata and will always continue to join and solidarise with the group even after the death of its leader. While his followers look malnourished, unkempt, dirty and emaciated Yusuf looks a complete man even at the point of danger. This situation reaffirms Ebim (2021) opinion that:

Minority groups are systematically, although often indirectly and subtly, denied equal rights, that is, equal access to material or cultural resources and equal opportunities. The practices that result in these forms of discrimination are not incidental or individualistic. They are systematic, group-based, often institutionalized, and surprisingly similar. There seems to exist a body of generally shared beliefs on which such discriminatory actions are based and that provides the tacit legitimization of this kind of power exercised by the dominant in-group

The soldier who is standing very close to Yusuf is a testimony to the everconscious attitudes of the security outfit to ensure that he does

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escape. Mohammad is neither smiling nor weeping symbolising the fact that he has no regrets over his actions. He looks determined to carry on with his actions. At the background other security operatives are seen carrying guns while watching keenly to ensure that the Boko Haram leader does not escape. This picture presents a clear evidence of the capture and hand over of the leader of the sect before his execution. It is also an emotional appeal to human sensibilities that those who pretend to be invincible are not as powerful as they prevent themselves because Mohammed here is pictured without all those weapons that had empowered him before now he is helpless without his lieutenants to assist him but a case of betrayal at the point of need.

ANALYSIS B: ABUBAKAR SHEKAU TAUNTING SECURITY OPERATIVES



S/N	Triadic Model of the Sign	Semiotic Resources in the Image	Semiotic Significance
1	Icon	The sect leader seems to be	The show of deviance is iconic in that the sect leader seems to be

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		saying I am in a world of my own and above the law thereby being iconic of deviance.	in a world of freedom, executing his threats without any form of challenge.
2	Index	A picture of the Boko Haram leader pointing his index finger at his enemies with his lieutenants at the background holding their banner.	This is indexical of insolence, where the abusive finger is being used to point at the populace.
3	Symbol	A transfer of foreign culture--the gangsters' style of abuse.	This could be taken to be a symbol of cultural transfer---from foreign to local.

DISCUSSION

What Shekau has done here is to interweave elements of American lifestyles to paint a picture that is linked together by a common theme. That theme symbolizes the life styles of street urchins, gangsters and the different mafia styles of living that are portrayed in American movies and hip pop songs. Within the American culture especially the blacks, the use of that finger to point at somebody translates to mean an abusive language which is unacceptable. And that style of abuse is un-African especially when it involves people who know the codes and see it as an abuse. It is however used freely among street urchins who are ignorant of the semiotic import of the sign. Intertextuality thus offers a useful theoretical paradigm to explain the close relationship between acts of this nature and the symbols they send out in texts. Intertextuality is a profound component of twentieth-century popular culture, and supports and explains much of the cross-media interaction of culture. It can be a

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conscious, self-referential mode of media consumption, and as a result Umberto Eco describes a “meta-semiotic” culture or aesthetic where this is considered normal consumption behaviour. Its existence in cultures is undeniable, and dates back to the invention of discourse. In the arts, clear evidence of intertextuality can be found in films by *semiotically* saturated directors. Here we focus on the use of gestures because this basic intertextuality has its equivalents in other media: the diegetic use of old (and not so old) film clips in movies, popular music videos, and television shows; and the use of music ‘samples’ in popular music.

ANALYSIS C: A DEFIANT SHEKAU WITH A MACHINE GUN



S/N	Triadic Model of the Sign	Semiotic Resources in the Image	Semiotic Significance
1	Icon	Since he is invincible and his enemies not clearly spelt out, anybody is a victim	This is iconic of insecurity in an insecure society.
2	Index	Abubakar Shekau, the insurgent leader pointing at his next target	This is indexical of callousness where the masses are not secure and are not sure of the next point of attack.

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3	Symbol	All Nigerians irrespective of their backgrounds who do not believe in the Boko Haram ideology are not safe.	The projection of an ideology that is forcefully implemented and imposed on the people.
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DISCUSSION

Abubakar Shekau in the above picture is wearing a military camouflage indicating that he is a “military” man though not trained in the professional word. The gun AK47 though more sophisticated than the occasional military type of gun is an indication of the use of superior fire power within the insurgent ranks. The cap he is covering is not that of the military but a deviation from the military code of dressing thus portraying him as a ganster. The wool cap epitomises a rasterferian cap that is used to cover their dreglogs. The major semiotic import of that picture is the finger that is pointing at no specific individual. Whoever looks at that picture sees the finger pointing at him/her hence denoting that everybody is either a victim or will soon be a victim of the insurgent menace. The background makes him invincible because it leaves no trace for guess work where the picture was taken, just ordinary colour.

ANALYSIS D: ALIVE AND DEAD PICTURES OF B/H LEADER



S/N	Triadic Model of the Sign	Semiotic Resources in the Image	Semiotic Significance
1	Icon	All powers surrender unto superior ones	This is iconic of surrender to a superior power. This “monster” had been uncovered and revealed to the masses.
2	Index	Defeat and reality	This is the juxtaposition of the live and dead body of the Boko Haram sect leader. The sect leader had proven to be illusive, indestructible and untouchable but the picture is indexical of a defeated “champion”.
3	Symbol	The end of an era?	This symbolises the end of an era. This dead was meant to put an end to a rampaging militancy but the reality is that the insurgent activities were on the increase after this acclaimed murder.

DISCUSSION

On the 17th of september 2014 the leader of the Boko Haram whom the media had described as an impostor was finally unmasked and brought to the level of mortality at the cool city of Konduga in Adamawa state. After an encounter with the sect members that lasted for several hours, the captured members of the sect were told to send a text message to their leader that they (insurgents) had routed the Nigerian army. On hearing this information the much illusive Shekau came out to celebrate victory with his courageous foot soldiers. Unknown to him, the Nigerian soldiers were said to have laid an ambush for him. With the clear message of victory over his

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enemies, he proceeded from Sambisa forest to Konduga to claim victory as an exercise that resulted in his being killed and paraded in the above picture. Having encircled him in the battle Shekau was said to have jumped out of his armoured tank and ran away but he was spotted and shot in the legs by the Nigerian army thus putting an end to the era of mimicking the voice of the "Shekau" who had been killed several times. This is because each time the Nigerian security outfit "killed" a Shekau another one resurrected to continue with the job of terrorising the masses. But this time the operation could not be faulted even though another Shekau has been spotted in some videos downloaded into the internet by some experts to prove the immortality of Shekau. There are two pictures merged into one in that image. The first one is the garrulous Shekau with his mouth widely open in his characteristic manner of mocking the nation and her people. In this particular one he is lively in his full regalia as a garrison commander of a fugitive sect that takes delight in sucking the blood of the innocent. There is an AK47 gun across his chest showing that he is a man of courage who cannot be seen but can only be heard. The cloth tied to his head is made of different colours proving his chameleonic disposition at all times. His ability to deceive and transform in order to lay claim to immortality. The second picture betrays all of these acclaimed features. Shekau's hands are tied to the back symbolising helplessness especially in times of need. His chest that is usually covered with clothes and a gun double crossed is left bare revealing his hairy chest.

The moustach and the hair on his chest likened him to an animal that is unkempt. His mouth is open even at dead symbolising a liar and a cheat who could not trick the Nigerian army. The body looks severed symbolising a shattered ideology and the fact that his dead body is lying on a tarred road is a semiotic import of the sect having come to a cross road. This picture clearly epitomises defeat, a shattered ideology and a frustrated mission that leads nowhere. The cap that is removed from his head is a symbol of defeat, powerlessness, deceit and the end of a game. Even at the point of death, Shekau's hands seem to be clinching a trigger this is evident in the muscles in his arm that are accentuated, showing the power that he could exert over his victims.

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His motionless body is a testimony to the game of hide and seek he had played over time. The vest Shekau is wearing could not protect him thus becoming an irony because this is the time he needed the vest bullet proof to protect him but he could get the help.

ANALYSIS E: A CAPTURED ARMoured TANK OF THE B/H INSURGENT



S/N	Triadic Model of the Sign	Semiotic Resources in the Image	Semiotic Significance
1	Icon	A soldier driving the Boko Haram armoured tank used in terrorising the people.	The capture of the armoured tank is iconic of a temporary defeat over a monstrous sect. the process is purely iconic.
2	Index	Boko Haram armoured tank seized by Nigerian	The picture shows a Nigerian soldier driving the Boko Haram armoured tank around town

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		soldiers.	where the villagers are seen in jubilation mood at the capture of the weapon of mass destruction. The armoured tank is painted in the Boko Haram colour with some Arabic inscriptions. This is indexical of a defeat of a monster.
3	Symbol	An end game?	This symbolises the end of an era. The terrorising experiences in the hands of the Boko Haram sect are temporarily put to a halt.

DISCUSSION

After the successful killing of the Boko Haram sect leader Abubakar Shekau, on the 17th of september 2014 the Nigerian soldiers mounted the armoured tank that was always driven by the sect leader as a proof of their outing that resulted in the dead of the dreaded sect leader. Apart from the armoured tank, other rifles were recovered and transported to the headquarters of the Nigerian Army for further investigation. The two people on that tank are soldiers of the Nigerian Army. The armoured tank bears inscriptions of the Boko Haram sect but being driven by two soldiers of the Nigerian Army---an indication that finally the much illusive Shekau has been unmasked and brought to justice. The soldier on the tank is holding a gun and pointing at any object that tries to pose a threat. The crowd on the background jubilating is an indication of acceptance of the superiority of the Nigerian armed forces over the Boko Haram. There is a young man to the right hand side of the armoured tank who is taking photographs of the jubilant masses; the young man is dressed in a long white gown symbolising peace and the end of a tumultuous era. Even the green leaves at the background are paving the way for the superiority of mother nature as the seem to be bending to pave the way for the blue sky that looks cloudy---about to shower rains of peace and acceptance. The crowd is jubilant and following the Nigerian army showing that it is in the direction of the Nigerian armed forces that they people prefer to follow and not in the direction of the primitive

Boko Haram who are of the view that western education is a sin. Does this signal the end of an era? Is this the end of the insurgents' struggle or an avenue to regroup and launch a come back?

Conclusion

This paper is a semiotic depiction of the leadership of the Boko Haram sect. The study uses the different pictorials that have emerged from the discourse over time by first focusing on the founder of the sect, his demise and the emergence of Abubakar Shekau. This process of analysis exposed common filaments of emotional outrage, the portrayal of violence, neglect, betrayal, marginalization, torment, emotional and psychological trauma. The leadership of the sect is portrayed as illusive in the media whereas available evidence points to the fact that Shekau is actually dead and buried. What then are the implications of the persistent use of the name in the media? The major thematic preoccupation that runs through all the photos or images is that of violence, which runs through the semiotic depiction of the Boko Haram leadership insurgency in the Northern part of the country. In all, the semiotic depiction as examined in this paper portrays the intrigues that characterize the activities of the insurgents and the major actors involved in the crises.

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