

## Media Narrative Construction of Ethno-religious Conflicts in Nigeria

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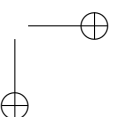
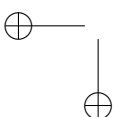
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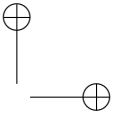
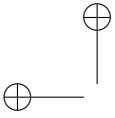
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**T**HE urban is evident in the cities and towns with all the elements of modernity. It is characterised by bigger land areas, big and tall buildings. It has a high population, as well as active business and social lives. Compared to the rural setting, the population consists of a higher number of western educated people. Cities as urban communities are places where all classes and types of humanity mingle; creating a heterogeneity that is one of the most celebrated features of urban life (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2005: 202). An urban community comprises peoples of different ethnic groups, different religious persuasions, and different social orientations. The diversities found in the urban settings constitute the heart beats of such societies. These diversities, based on the inherent differences, however, bring along with them misunderstanding resulting into conflicts which are sometimes violent. The large army of the unemployed which is a characteristic of the urban (Adebagbo, 1988: 261) comes as the energizing factor in the conflagration of the ethno-communal conflicts in the urban centres.

Specifically, in Nigeria, there is a growing phenomenon of differentiation based on ethnicity. There is also the religious dimension to this phenomenon. The conflict here is usually between the two major religions in the country: Christianity and Islam. Because of the nation's configuration, however, the strand of religion is usually intertwined with that of ethnicity. Odiase-Alegimenlen (2001: 48) explains that the two-pronged nature of the problem is compounded by the fact that while the majority of Northerners are Muslims, a large number of Southerners are Christians. This ensures that practically all conflicts between any of these groups of people could easily degenerate into religious or sectarian conflict.

The media as a social institution are also involved in conflicts in the society either as a harbinger, channel of information and analysis of the conflicts, or as part of the escalation or resolution of the conflicts. Thus, this





paper would consider how the media have served as the catalysts of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria, using the Miss World Beauty Pageant- and Danish cartoons-induced crises as case studies.

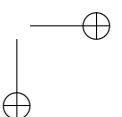
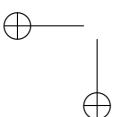
## Media, Conflict and Politics of Identity

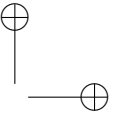
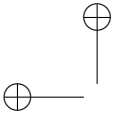
Psycho-Cultural Conflict Theory posits that identity, especially the one that is based on people's ethnic origin and the culture that is learned on the basis of that ethnic origin is one of the most important ways of explaining violent conflict. Social conflicts that are perennial become a possibility when some groups are discriminated against or deprived of satisfaction of their basic material and psychological needs on the basis of their identity (Faleti, 2005: 50). A history of humiliation, oppression, victimization, feelings of inferiority and other forms of experiences which wear away a person's dignity and self-esteem and lead people to resort to vengeance constitute part of what has been referred to as the 'pathological dimensions of ethnicity'. Violent conflicts resulting in situations where passions overwhelm reason are attributed to threatened or actual attacks. Conflicts that are caused by a crisis of identity are usually the most dangerous and most violent because identity is an unshakable sense of self-worth, which makes life meaningful and includes the feeling that one is physically, socially, psychologically, and spiritually safe (Faleti, 2005).

Tichenor *et al* (1980:17) note that social conflict is a principal ingredient of much newspaper content since conflict is a central component in community life and social change. Tehranian (1996:3) explains this further by saying that the media are naturally attracted to conflict. *Media Development* (1996:2) elaborates: "conflict is the bread and butter of journalism. Conflict sells". Arno *et al.* (1984:2) assert:

I would go so far to assert that news is defined by its conflict focus and that there is nothing deplorable about the fact.

The media is justified in reporting conflicts because it has the responsibility of recording events as they unfold, part of which conflict is. In other words, conflict is a part of reality and the media has the task of portraying reality. In fact, the provision of information about conflict in the media is a step towards resolution. Tichenor *et al.* (1980:2) provides an insight:





There is the traditional viewpoint that resolution of social problems is related to inputs of information. Accordingly, if a system is sufficiently saturated with information, a general understanding of the topic will develop within the system. Once understanding is at hand, resolution is assumed to be at hand.

Viewed differently, newspapers' and other media's reports of conflict are said to be contributory to the legitimating of the conflict (Nnaemeka, 1976). Olorunyomi (2000:5), with background knowledge of the genocide in Rwanda, further, contends that the media can act as an accomplice to genocide not only through its indifference but also through active collaboration. He asserts: "In every communal or ethnic conflict, the positions of the media can significantly impact the outcome".

(Olorunyomi, 2000:7) again notes that the problem associated with media coverage of diversity or conflict is not normative, but rather ontological. He argues:

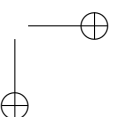
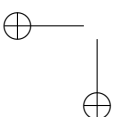
To isolate the problems associated with covering diversity as simple matters of norms is to suggest that only endogenous factors influence the practice of the media. The fact of diversity in concrete editorial terms always assumes a pluralism that also include the exogenous variables of ownership, employees, content and sources (Olorunyomi, 2000:6).

He, thus, counsels that the media's capacity to respond to its own structural weaknesses would strengthen its capacity to better promote tolerance and help manage diversity in the communities they serve and beyond.

Internal diversity in media organisations or not, individual media owners and journalists need to appreciate the tensions between globalisation and primordial feelings and between the notions of totality and heterogeneity (Olorunyomi 2000:5).

## **Mass Media, Propaganda and Agenda Setting**

Even though the first theoretical thinking about the effects of mass communication deriving from various analyses of propaganda has appeared to be out-of-place, yet two important areas of communication theory have their roots in this early thinking about propaganda, and they are: *attitude change* and *general effects* of mass communication (Severin and Tankard, 1992: 90).



Lasswell (1927:521-522), quoted in Severin and Tankard (1992) says “propaganda in the broadest sense is the technique of influencing human action by the manipulation of representations. These representations may take spoken, written, pictorial or musical form”. Similarly, McQuail (2000:50) defines propaganda as the “process and product of deliberate attempts to influence collective behaviour and opinion by the use of multiple means of communication in ways that are systematic and one-sided”.

McQuail (2000:446) however notes that the first association of propaganda is generally with *conflict* (emphasis mine) between states, noting, however, that the term can be applied to religion, politics and other matters of strong belief. He adds that it usually occurs on some *strongly contested issue* (emphasis mine); often coercive and aggressive in manner.

Lasswell (1927:195), referred to in Severin and Tankard (1992:91) highlights four major objectives of propaganda viz: to mobilise hatred against the enemy; to preserve the friendship of allies; to preserve the friendship and, if possible, to procure the cooperation of neutrals; and to demoralise the enemy.

The United States Institute for Propaganda Analysis identified seven propaganda devices viz: name calling, glittering generality, transfer, testimonial, plain folks, card stacking, and bandwagon (Severin and Tankard, 1992:93-104). From scientific evidence, the propaganda devices can be effective, *but only on some people* (Severin and Tankard, 1992:105). As an explanation, factors for effectiveness of propaganda including characteristics of the person getting the message, such as education level and initial attitude toward the topic, and the characteristics of the setting, such as whether the group holding a view different from a person’s is unanimous or not. Brown (1958:06) remarks that propaganda devices are “contingently rather than invariably effective”.

Similarly, McQuail (2000:47) posits that for propaganda to work, it has to reach people and be accepted (if not believed). According to him, acceptance depends, amongst other *things, on the inherent plausibility of the content in the light of information available and on the emotional and ideological climate of the time* (emphasis mine).

In the light of the contingent effectiveness of mass media and propaganda, Klapper (1960) suggests that the general effect of mass communication is reinforcement of attitudes. Though, the effectiveness of mass media as the sole agent of opinion formation, attitude change and mass mobilisation can be

quite suspect, what is, however, certain is that the media can set agenda in the sense of determining the issues the public thinks and talks about i.e. raising people's consciousness.

### **The Miss World Beauty Pageant-induced crisis**

At the wake of the Miss World Beauty Pageant which was being planned to hold in Nigeria in 2002, *This Day*, a Nigerian newspaper published a story written by one of its Style writers. The story, published in the November 16, 2002 issue of the newspaper was said to have been cynical of the Prophet Mohammed for it insinuated that if the Prophet had seen the beauty queens who converged in Nigeria for the pageant, he would have admired them and taken some of them as wives. This story did not go down well with Muslims in some Northern cities of Nigeria; hence they resorted to violent attacks on Christians and churches, killing, maiming and burning. As already mentioned in this paper, most Christians in Nigeria are Southerners. So, the attacks were on Southerners, especially the Igbo stock residing and doing business in the Northern cities.

Depending on their locations and the ethnic origin of their owners, newspaper establishments had different views of the mayhem. While newspapers based in the South and owned by Southerners were critical of the reactions of the Northern Muslims to the publication, their Northern counterparts did not see much wrong in the action as the only issue they were critical of in the whole imbroglio was the "irresponsible and insensitive journalism" of *This Day*. For instance, the *New Tribune*, a Southern-based newspaper, in its editorials of December 12 and 18, 2002 (respectively entitled 'Zamfara's *fatwa*: Matters Arising' and 'Still on the Miss World Pageant Riots'), though critical of the contents of the offensive article for being insensitive, however, condemned the resultant riots and the *fatwa* (death sentence) issued on Isioma Daniel by the Zamfara State Government.

*Alaroye* magazine (a magazine published in Yoruba, a Southern Nigerian language) of November 2002 played up the politics of identity with this issue. In the story headlined, 'Rogbodiyan ilu Kaduna' ('Mayhem in Kaduna'), published on page 5 of the issue, the following statements were made in part:

What the crisis brought to the fore is the difference between the Hausa and other tribes in Nigeria. The Hausa are greatly different from us; their conduct is not the same as ours.

Referring to the offensive statement in the *This Day* story, the newspaper writes:

If such a statement angers the Yoruba, what they would do is to write a strong rejoinder, and explain issues to the writer . . . But the Hausa do not do this, in particular their leaders . . . The religion of this Hausa is different from that of the Yoruba (p. 5).

Similarly, in its editorial published on page 4 of its December 10 issue, *Alaroye* writes:

We are opposed to the Hausa 's crazy fight, we are opposed to their stupid conduct. We are equally opposed to the idea of perpetrating evil under the guise of Islam. . . If a Hausa person were to be in power, we know the Hausa would not start the Sharia system . . . there are many people in Hausaland who can slaughter their mothers because of politics. . . there are many Satanic children among them.

The same issue of the newspaper carried a very blunt cover title: 'Ija Kaduna: Yoruba ni Hausa fee ba jagun', meaning 'Kaduna mayhem: The Hausa want to engage the Yoruba in war'. We shall refer to a portion of the cover story which appears on page 5:

In actual fact, churches and the non-Hausa are the target of (the evil of) The rioters, but the fight was different from those of the past because They say among themselves that the Yoruba were the actual target.

There are outright calls for dismemberment of the nation. This is evident in a letter published in *Alaroye* of November 19, 2002. Yet, a similar letter appeared in *Alaroye* magazine of November. The letter, published on page 3 of the issue has the headline: 'Imoran mi fun gbogbo omo Nigeria' ('My advice to all Nigerians'). A portion of it says:

My first advice to Nigeria is that we should break so that each ethnic group will go its own way because if we say a Hausa, or Ibo or Yoruba will do it well, we are only deceiving ourselves. As Yoruba is doing it now and peace is not allowed to reign, when it is Hausa or Igbo turn, they will do the same. Instead, let everybody answer to his father's name, that is the only way peace can reign.

Newspapers published in the North of the country had a different view about the crisis. They were very critical of *This Day* and the writer of the offensive article, and therefore based their justification of the killings and arson on the insensitivity of the newspaper and its writer. Northern columnists who did not toe this hard line were heavily indicted by their fellow columnists of extreme view. An article written by a 'guest' writer and published in 'Baitil Hikma' (Wisdom Column) of *New Nigerian*, December 9, 2002, lambasted Northern Muslim columnists "seized by the devil delusion" of defending professional madness or irresponsible journalism by blaming it on the government or alleged distortion of historical facts or misrepresentation of issues or even insulting the readers' senses. The writer cited the "kidding" editor of *Weekly Trust*, Mohammed Haruna (*New Nigerian* columnist), and Garba Deen Mohammed as being culpable of the 'offence'.

From the writings of Northern writers, it was evident that *This Day* story only provided an opportunity for them to inveigh into their Southern counterparts. There had been a deep-seated grudge against the Southern journalists on their writings about Shari'a, the Islamic legal code that was introduced in a good number of Northern states at the wake of the rebirth of democracy in the country. The introduction of this legal code had sparked off a bloody riot in Kaduna in 2000, where lives and property were destroyed. The editor of *Weekend Triumph*, another Northern newspaper had written on the Miss World Pageant-induced crisis:

It is very clear that some newspapers and writers (especially from the South) find it difficult to accept and respect the values of other people ... Most commentaries on Shari'a especially have been not only negative but utterly antagonistic ... and others are written with unlimited mischief. (cited in *New Nigerian* of Dec. 9, 2002).

Similarly, the 'guest' writer of 'Baitil Hikma', previously mentioned, referred his indicted Northern columnists to two books. One of the books is entitled, *Shari'ah and the Press in Nigeria: Islam versus Western Christian Civilisation* by Ibrahim Ado-Kurawa. Another writer in *New Nigerian* of the same December 9, 2002, while reacting to the plea of the management of *This Day* and one of its writers that the newspaper was not anti-Islam, punctured the arguments by referring to the contents of the Ado-Kurawa's book. According to the writer of the article in *New Nigerian*, the 461-page book identified and exposed the propaganda, fiction and bigotry, rather than reason that a part

of the Nigerian press, which is the root of today's tension created by the media in the country.

Ado-Kurawa (2001: 353 - 358) analysed the coverage by *This Day* from October to December 1999, of issues pertaining to Shari'a and Muslims. The author discovered that more than 60 per cent of the items in the *This Day* editions studied over the period were not favourable to Islam and Muslims and were in "conformity with the paper's ideological inclination". A further analysis also revealed that 25 percent of the items were on the front pages of issues of the newspaper. Faruk Sarkinfada, the author of the article in the *New Nigerian* commented that this indicated the importance that the paper attached to propaganda against Islam and Muslims.

Similarly, a Nigerian Muslim contributor from Sweden wrote in the *New Nigerian* of November 27, 2002 (p.8):

Over time, Moslem writers have in the main, at least in Nigerian newspapers been very careful in the way they represent Christianity in their writings. It could be attributed to the place that Jesus occupies in the Quran. But writers like Isioma (the writer of the offending article in *This Day*) have through their exuberance, caused untold hardship to innocent citizens by their expressions and jaundiced analogies.

## The Danish Cartoon Crisis

The following is a report of how the Cartoon crises that rocked the Nigerian Northern cities of Maiduguri, Kontagora, Kano and some others; and the reprisal attacks in the South-eastern cities of Onitsha and Enugu started, as provided by Arsenault, Powers and Kirova (2006):

*In early September 2005, Flemming Rose, the Culture editor for a right-of-centre Danish newspaper, commissioned over 30 Danish cartoonists to submit caricatures of the Islamic prophet Mohammed that he could print in his paper, Jyllands-Posten. Rose had recently become concerned that European media organizations were self-censoring themselves with regard to issues sensitive to Islam, and was worried that the principles of freedom of speech were under attack. On September 30, with the intent of "pushing back self-imposed limits on expression that seemed to be closing in tighter," Rose published twelve cartoons depicting the Islamic prophet Mohammed, images that are considered blasphemous by followers of Islam.*



*Two weeks later, 3,500 protestors organized in Copenhagen to non-violently protest the cartoons, calling for a formal apology from the paper. Flemming and Jyllands-Posten refused, and tensions escalated. On October 20, eleven ambassadors from Muslim-majority countries asked to meet Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen to discuss the government's reactions to the publication of the cartoons. Prime Minister Rasmussen declined to meet the ambassadors, stating:*

*"I won't meet with them because it is so crystal clear what principles Danish democracy is built upon that there is no reason to do so . . . As prime minister I have no tool whatsoever to take actions against the media, and I don't want that kind of tool."*

*Outraged by the Prime Minister's refusal to meet, Abu Laban, an imam living in Denmark, initiated a campaign to bring international attention to the issue. He contacted the Organization of Islamic Faith and organized a group of Muslims that would tour the Middle East presenting and criticizing the cartoons. The tour presented a 43-page book that included the 12 cartoons as well as 3 more images of Mohammed that had never actually been published. After showing the booklet to religious leaders, politicians, and journalists in Egypt, Lebanon, and Syria, public outcry quickly grew. On January 30, 2006, the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) and the Arab League jointly called for a UN resolution, backed by possible sanctions. The political firestorm escalated when in response to the debate, numerous publications around Europe began republishing the cartoons in addition to several new, and perhaps more offensive, images.*

*As Western diplomats and media industries in the West paused to debate the free-speech implications of the cartoon debate, what began as a public diplomacy crisis for Denmark quickly spread to negatively effect images of countries such as Italy, the United Kingdom, and the United States. At the height of the crisis in February 2006, Muslims around the world took to the streets in sometimes violent protest against the publication and re-publication of Danish political cartoons considered sacrilegious, deeply offensive, and disrespectful to the religion of Islam.*

*These protests targeted Western embassies, fast food chains, and even diplomats themselves. In addition to often violent street demonstrations, protests against the cartoon publication have taken a number of forms - each with important implications for the study and practice of public diplomacy. Iran*

*formally declared an economic boycott of Danish products on February 6. Bakeries across Iran renamed pastries formerly referred to as a “danish” as a “rose of Mohammed.” In Saudi Arabia, the cartoon crisis sparked the birth of a new social movement, campaigning under the banner of “Victory for the Prophet,” and dedicated to promoting better awareness about Islam in the West. The group launched an economic boycott of Danish products, collected signatures to deliver to the Danish Embassy and is now conducting research into strategies for making the public insulting of the prophet illegal. Major Saudi supermarkets posted notices saying “Danish products are not sold” over their cheese displays, while text messages circulated urging consumers to boycott Danish products.*

*The anti-cartoon demonstrations quickly prompted counter-protests in the West, which intensified outrage in the Middle East. Numerous websites featuring the offensive cartoons quickly appeared. In what was perhaps one of the most high-profile counter-protests, Italian Minister Roberto Calderoli began wearing a t-shirt featuring the cartoons.*

Similarly, a chronology of the crisis was compiled by Jorgensen (2006). Specifically, this paper is interested in the chronology of the demonstrations that greeted the publication and re-publication of the cartoons.

Feb 4: A South African court prohibits newspapers from publishing the cartoons. Protesters in Damascus attack the Danish and Norwegian embassies. Mr Momani and Mr Hisham Khalid, editor of al-Mehwar, another Jordanian weekly that published the cartoons, are arrested and charged with insulting religion

Feb 5: Protestors storm the Danish Embassy in Beirut. One person is left dead and several are injured. Iran recalls its ambassador to Denmark. Denmark says it is withdrawing diplomatic staff from Syria and recommending Danes leave the country. Norway confirms it is taking the same action with diplomatic staff in Syria.

Feb 6: Lebanon apologises to Denmark. EU leaders call for calm. Protests erupt in Afghanistan where one person died. Danish and Austrian embassies attacked in Tehran.

Feb 7: Peter Mandelson, EU trade chief, warns Iran against suspension of trade with Denmark. Norwegian NATO peacekeepers attacked in Afghanistan as demonstrations escalate. Austria, holders of the EU presidency, demand

Muslim states improve security measures for European citizens and premises after Norwegian embassy is attacked in Tehran.

Feb 8: The US accused Syria and Iran of inciting violence among Muslims over caricatures. Three more people were killed in fresh protests in Afghanistan and French President Jacques Chirac condemned “overt provocations” as Charlie Hebdo, the satirical weekly, reprinted the images.

Feb 9: The international row spilled over into the creation of a new UN Human Rights Council. Hundreds of thousands of Shia Muslims turned a religious ceremony in Lebanon into an anti-western cartoon protest.

Feb 10: Danish embassies are targeted in both Kenya - where police fire live rounds and teargas at hundreds of protesting Muslims - and in Bangladesh, where Indian police clash with about 10,000 people.

Feb 11 Denmark recalls ambassadors and embassy staff from Syria, Indonesia and Iran over security concerns.

Feb 12: Condoleezza Rice, US secretary of state, said violence sparked by the cartoons could get out of control and urged governments, especially Iran and Syria, to “act responsibly” and refrain from encouraging demonstrations.

Feb 13 Kofi Annan, UN secretary-general, said that Iran, Syria and other governments that failed to protect foreign embassies from mobs should pay for the damage.

Feb 14 Jose Manuel Barroso, EU Commission chief, backed Denmark, saying that freedom of speech cannot be compromised. But in fresh violence, two people were killed in the Pakistani city of Lahore, despite a province-wide ban on demonstrations. German embassy attacked in Tehran.

Feb 15 Three more people died in violence as outlets of the Norwegian phone company Telenor, a US KFC fast food restaurant and banks were ransacked and set alight in Pakistan.

Feb 16 Protests continue in Pakistan, where up to 50,000 rallied in Karachi.

Feb 17 A Pakistani cleric offers rewards of over \$1m for anyone who kills the Danish cartoonists. In India police clash with several thousand Muslim protestors, using tear gas to disperse crowds. In Islamabad violent protests cause Denmark to announce that it is closing its embassy due to security concerns.

Feb 18 Nigerian Muslims attack Christians and burned churches, killing at least 15 people in the deadliest confrontation yet in the whirlwind of Muslim anger.

The above statement about the number of casualties in Nigeria is really an understatement, as the event of February 18 was just the beginning in the series of violent attacks on Christians and Churches in some cities of the North, and the resultant reprisal attacks in some cities of the South-eastern part of the country. The number of casualties overall were in hundreds. *The Guardian* Newspaper editorial of March 2, 2006 notes:

Nigeria has become notorious for “religious wars”, occurring almost on an annual basis, in the Northern part of the country, and, in recent times for reprisal attacks in the South, occasioning the brutal and premature death of countless innocent lives and the destruction of places of worship and other valuable property (p. 6).

Similarly, in an article published in *The Punch* of March 6, 2006, it was also noted that “Nigeria recorded the highest degree of violence over the offensive cartoons. No fewer than 200 persons were killed in different parts of the country. Besides, churches and mosques were burnt in the orgy of violence visited on innocent Nigerians in the name of religion”. Another article in *The Punch* of March 1, 2006 had put it more succinctly:

It is unfathomable that the resultant deaths in the last few days of altercation in Nigeria are counted in three digits, while the total number of casualties in other parts of Arab, Asia and even European countries put together was less (p. 15).

While it is true that religious conflicts have become perennial in Nigeria, the Northern part of the country and the Muslims there have become really notorious for this. An opinion piece in the *Vanguard* newspaper (a Southern-based newspaper) of April 17, 2006, published on page 18, noted that most religions claimed to be preaching peace and tolerance. It, however, noted that in the Northern part of Nigeria, the interpretation of this peace and tolerance was different. According to the piece, this is because people of the North do not enjoy anything like peace that the religion leaders talk about rather they experience mostly religious crises. The same reiterated: “Religious crisis persisted (sic) in Nigeria in just one region – the North. Clashes in the Northern

part of Nigeria have become an issue of global concern” (*Vanguard*, April 17, 2006, p. 18).

In a similar vein, a Christian cleric from the North, but based in Uyo, a Southern city, in a report published in *The Punch* of April 7, 2006, page 8, asserted that it was painful that the Moslems were usually the ones who initiated attacks on Christians. Not minding the fact that there had been reprisal attacks in some towns of the South-east, the cleric yet wanted government to begin the immediate trial of those behind the carnage in some States of the North. The cleric maintained that if the Federal Government continued to treat the perpetrators with kid gloves, it was only playing with fire. He, however, opined that Christians ought to have been congratulated for limiting the reprisals to Anambra State. He stressed further: “As far as I am concerned, any Muslim that (sic) thinks he can just wake up to go and burn down churches is a criminal and should be treated as such. He should be made to face the full weight of the law” (*The Punch*, April 7, 2006, p. 13).

A Muslim of Yoruba origin, in his letter to the Editor published in Sunday Comet (Comet is now repackaged and renamed *The Nation*) of March 5, 2006, page 10, called on Northern Muslims to always find a peaceful way of protesting whenever the need arises. He also reasoned that the offensive cartoons did not call for attack on innocent Christians in Nigeria to the extent of burning their churches which Prophet Muhammed and his successors detest. Meanwhile, a notable columnist of Northern extraction and of Islamic faith did not find the Northern Muslims specifically responsible for the carnage occasioned by the cartoons. Rather, he lumped the Muslims and their leadership in the country together. In his column of ‘People and Politics’ published in *The Comet* (a South-based newspaper) of March 2, 2006, Mohammed Haruna wrote:

Unfortunately many Muslims in Nigeria (emphasis mine) and elsewhere fell for the provocation where it should have been obvious that Christians had absolutely nothing to do with the cartoons. This is why the killings of Christians and Igbos in several towns in the North, starting with Maiduguri, the Borno State capital, on February 18, should have been condemned in the strongest language by every right thinking Nigerian, but especially by the Muslim leadership. Sadly such unequivocal condemnation of the cartoon riots was left to the secular leadership of the equally secular Arewa Consultative Forum. As its Chairman, Chief Sunday Awoniyi, said in a statement the ACF issued on February 20, the killings and burning of churches

were “most despicable, thoroughly condemnable and totally unacceptable (p. 12).

Condemnations of the mayhem have come from various sources, yet the towns and cities that had been affected in the initial and reprisal attacks would still have to carry the scars of the disturbances for a long time. The living victims of the disturbances in the affected cities and towns would for long carry the memories of the carnage with trepidation and bitterness. Such are the consequences of violent conflicts. In *The Comet* of Saturday, March 11, 2006, a Hausa goat-dealer in the Onitsha market recounted his ordeal:

It is very sad that the crisis broke out that particular day. I lost my Property and relations, those I have been doing business with for more than 20 years. I have lived in Onitsha for 27 years, but all that I lived and worked for have gone and I don't think anything will make me to go back to that place (p. 6).

Many were displaced as their houses were razed. They fled the town and sought refuge in barracks. Reporting on the situation at the time, *The Comet* revealed:

The casualty rates were incredible. On the conservative side, well over 100 persons were reportedly killed, a good number injured, while a flourishing livestock market was reduced to ashes. Not to talk about the money spinning bureau d'change which dotted the city where several millions both in local and hard currencies were looted by miscreants. The displaced persons aided by security operatives flocked to Asaba (a neighbouring town to Onitsha), where they made their new home. While some are quartered in Police Mobile Base, others are living in Cable Point area usually populated by Hausa-Fulani. The influx has swollen the population of the towns. Although calm has returned to Onitsha, none of them wants to have anything to do with it again. The situation is still fragile and the mass exodus has continued. “No Hausa man will sell something again in Onitsha”, Alhaji Musa Adamu Shua, the Chairman of the Livestock Market in Asaba said. . . . As you are aware, it affected them gravely and many of our people lost their lives and their trade and many have gone back to the North (p. 6).

*The Comet* finally remarked:

The attacks on Christians in the North and the reprisals in the South-East has once again brought to the fore the fact that there is no common ground in the land. For many Nigerians, the inter-ethnic relationship has suffered

another major dent. The surge of violence has obviously unsettled Onitsha and its environs (p. 7).

## Conclusion

No doubt, the cities and towns ravaged by sectarian violence occasioned by the *This Day* report of 2002 and *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons of 2005 cannot remain the same. There are definitely charred remains of buildings and vehicles torched. Many of the buildings destroyed would still remain wrecks for a long time. For families whose relations died in the carnage, the bitter memories would linger on for long. Many of the displaced may not find their bearings again until after a long time. Many of the affected would have to relocate to other cities or villages. The non-indigenes would go back to their homesteads in search of succour. In the affected towns and cities, there will be suspicion between the indigenes and the non-indigenes, and between the adherents of different faiths. Palpable fears of possible attacks remain the lot of non-indigenes in their cities of abode. There have been talks about the fears that non-indigenes in certain cities of the Northern Nigeria usually have for Fridays, for the *almajiris* (Koranic School pupils) who are used for religious 'wars' are usually mobilised after Friday prayers in the central mosques.

Really, the affected cities cannot remain the same again. In the two cases that this paper has examined, we can understand the catalytic power of the media in creating an atmosphere for conflict. The media did not create the conflict, but rather provided the climate for the conflict to be triggered. Religious and communal leaders are the actual proponents of the conflict. In the case of the *This Day* story, many of the people who got themselves involved in inflicting the violence on the cities and affected individuals were people not literate enough to have read the offensive article. Likewise, many of the people involved in the violence induced by the Danish cartoons never saw a copy of an issue of *Jyllands-Posten*, talkless of seeing the offensive cartoons. They were actually triggered into action by the elites who themselves were not likely to have seen the offensive cartoons.

The point being made is that the mass media do not have the all-powerful effect of goading people to violence. The multi-step flow in which the opinion leaders are very influential can only explain how the violence came about (See

Severin and Tankard, 1992: 247 – 266 for discussion on Mass Communication Effects). In all cases of religious violence in Nigeria, the religious leaders and other elites have always been the propelling forces.

Religious violence becomes more apocalyptic when it is carried along with ethnicity. In Nigeria, due to its configuration as a nation, the strand of religion is usually intertwined with that of ethnicity (Salawu, 2004:258). The ethnicisation of religion is reflected in the fact that whenever there is a religious uprising, peoples from different parts of the country are always at each other's neck. The Igbo, for the fact that they are mostly Christians, are usually the objects of attack of Northern Muslims. Likewise, when there is a reprisal attack, the Hausa (Northerners) and anyone who looks an inch like them are usually the target. For instance, an Edo man (a Southerner), because of his dark skin that resembles that of a Hausa, only escaped death by the whiskers in Onitsha during the reprisal attacks. *Saturday Punch* of March 4, 2006, p. 2, reported: "Shadrach drove his van into the 'war zone' and was promptly captured by the irate Igbo youths who said he looked every bit a Hausa man!" The man himself recounted his ordeal thus: "They vandalized my vehicle with their weapons; dragged me out of the van despite the plea from my fellow driver who is Igbo that I was not a (n) Hausa person". To paint the horror that he escaped from, Shadrach revealed: "I could count more than 300 corpses hacked down in the most brutal manner I have ever seen".

Obviously, the media themselves get involved in this ethnic drama. The Nigerian newspapers, variously, narrate the stories and comment on the conflicts based on their own ethnic nature. The ethnic identity of a Nigerian newspaper is determined by the location of its headquarters, the ethnic identity of the publisher (Uduak, 2000: 78) and the main market that the paper seeks to cultivate and patronise (Abati, 2000: 91 - 92). For instance, the way *New Nigerian* and *Daily Trust*, both Northern-based newspapers will narrate and comment on the events of the religious riots will be different from the way *New Tribune* and *The Punch*, both Southern-based and owned by Southerners will do the same. The issue is even more apparent with indigenous language newspapers. Obviously, indigenous language newspapers are ethnic based newspapers, which of course, have primordial interests in the ethnic groups whose (indigenous) languages the newspapers use. These newspapers can lead and modify the opinions of their peoples forming stereotypes for them about other ethnic groups, thereby fuelling further the social con-



flicts (Salawu, 2004). In this present paper, we have seen how an indigenous language newspaper plays the politics of identity, even in relation to religion.

While it is true that Objectivity as a hallmark of good journalism is relative, the media should be able to balance the tension between primordial feelings and national cohesion; and between press freedom and social responsibility.

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