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Media construction of socio-political crises in Nigeria

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This paper attempts to show how social and political crises are constructed, represented/mediated in the Nigerian print media news headlines. Nigeria's leading newsmagazines and newspapers namely *The News*, *Newswatch*, *Tell*, *The Guardian* and *The Punch* are selected for the study. From a corpus of thirty-two news headlines being the publications of the above news media between 2000 and 2006, fifteen headlines and their overlines covering the years that marked the end of military rule and the consolidation of democratic government in Nigeria are purposively selected and analyzed within the framework of the systemic model and critical linguistics. The study shows that socio-political crises have been frequent in Nigeria and that the much anticipated recovery associated with democracy has so far eluded the country. In fact the country has witnessed more social crises, national disasters and ethnic violence in the eleven years of civil government than at other times. The study also shows that news headlines — an integral part of media discourse, is an instrument for molding social actions, attitudes and perceptions and are also used as an ideological tool for social criticism. Some of the headlines however, exaggerated the crises and indeed misinformed the general public about the identities and activities of certain people as well as the state of security in Nigeria.

Keywords: news headlines, crises, violence, media, socio-political, Nigeria

1. Introduction

In constructing the Nigerian crisis situations, news headlines and their overlines in the corpus mediate the Nigerian socio-political structure, events and attitudes and show how as social communication is constrained by social events and practices (Chilua, 2005). According to Fairclough (1989: 19, 23) “social conditions determine properties of discourse...” and “the language activity which goes on in social contexts is not merely a reflection or expression of social processes and

practices; it is part of those processes and practices.” In this vein, the investigation of media construction of Nigerian socio-political crises shows how Nigerian social and political situations are reflected in media language use. The view that language performs representational functions is largely based on the systemic-functional linguistics proposed by Michael Halliday about language as being a “social semi-otic” (Halliday, 1978). (Also see Fairclough 1989, 1995a; Birch 1989; Scollon 1998)

“News” is a story/information about social events that is of interest to a sufficiently large group of people (Reah 1998), which may affect their lives and future either for good or bad. It is influenced by the ideological orientation of the individual journalist or the media organization s/he represents. News is therefore a product of journalistic process, an end result of a “systematic sorting and selecting of events and topics according to a socially constructed set of categories” (Fowler, 1991: 12). A news headline which encapsulates the entire story is usually printed in bold letters and occupies more space than the main texts of the news. Words on the headline are usually short and crisp. Wording is determined by ideas to be expressed, technology of printing and the kind of audience associated with the paper or magazine. Other criteria include style, availability of space and accompanying photographs (Freeborn, 1986).

2. An overview of socio-political crises in Nigeria between 1993 and 2007

The word ‘crisis’ (plural: ‘crises’) is from the Greek κρίσις (*krisis*) meaning “decisive moment” (krinein, “decide”).¹ It is defined by most dictionaries as a critical/decisive moment, a period when things are uncertain, difficult or painful; a time when something very important for the future happens or is decided and generally when action must be taken to avoid complete disaster or breakdown. Medically, a crisis moment is when a patient suddenly gets worse or even better

I have used “socio-political crises” in the context of this study to include all forms of social disorder and lawlessness including social uprisings, political assassinations, ethnic/religious violence, and national disasters. It also includes financial scandals and corrupt practices involving political officers especially during the aberration of military dictatorship in Nigeria, between 1993 and 1999. Some major socio-political crises and national tragedies that occurred between 2000 and 2006 are also brought to focus in this paper.

In an attempt to define social crisis, particularly in Nigeria, Nnoruga (2000: 132) concludes that crisis is “poverty, prostitution, occultism, corruption, and unemployment.” It also represents armed robbery, abuse of office, and communal clashes. These social malaises generally culminate in violence, killings and insecurity which are the hallmarks of the kind of crises that are widespread in

Nigeria. In most cases, during a crisis social and economic activities are disrupted and the effects/consequences, shape the future of the parties involved (Vasudev 2002). Social crises are often as a result of fear of ethnic domination, discrimination, or religious persecution and when such fear becomes so overwhelming, it then manifests in conflicts, hostility and violence. In Nigeria, social crises have been as a result of religious intolerance, boundary disputes, resistance to a perceived injustice/exploitation and other political reasons. Ethnic and religious conflicts represent a convergence of events that result in a new set of circumstances (Vasudev, 2002). In the political scene, the Nigerian experience has shown that military government is not only an aberration but also a crisis in itself. The Sani Abacha government in Nigeria which overthrew the Interim National Government (ING) led by Ernest Shonekan on the 19th of November 1993 is an example. The ING had been constituted on the 27th of August 1993 after Ibrahim Babangida resigned following a national outcry and uprising over his annulment of the June 12, 1993 general elections, which was believed to have been overwhelmingly won by the late M.K.O. Abiola.

In the succeeding years, the political class, and indeed every aspect of Nigeria's national life came under attack and many Nigerians lost their lives. Some others who were opposed to the Abacha dictatorship were jailed with or without trial and many died in detention. An example is Major General Shehu Yar'Adua (elder brother of Nigeria's late president Umaru Musa Yar'Adua) who was arrested and jailed along with other citizens including Chief Olusegun Obasanjo over an alleged coup of 1995. He died under mysterious circumstances at Abakiliki prison in 1997 (Babatope, 2000; Mabadeje, 2004).

Out of twenty-three political associations that emerged when the government lifted the ban on politics in 1997, the National Electoral Commission eventually registered only five. By April 1998, Abacha had forced all the parties to adopt him as their sole presidential flag bearer (Babatope, 2000). A convention was to be held when all the parties would have concluded the selection process, latest 20th April 1998. The presidential election was scheduled for August 1998 but on the 8th of June, Abacha died mysteriously. General Abdulsalami Abubakar subsequently took over office and immediately abolished all of Abacha's administrative structures especially the transition programme and subsequently released all political detainees. General Abubakar conscientiously embarked on a transition programme that successfully returned power to a democratically elected government on the 29th of May, 1999. Chief Olusegun Obasanjo and Alhaji Abubakar Atiku emerged as President and Vice-president respectively under the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP).

Ironically, the civilian government has witnessed far more social crises, scandals and corruption than its predecessors. The Nigerian National Assembly for

instance was engulfed in various forms of conflicts and scandals from 1999 to 2007. On July 22, 1999, the first speaker of the House of Representatives was removed from office having confessed to certificate forgery and false declaration of age. On the 19th of November, 1999, Chief Evan Enwerem, the then Senate President, was impeached and replaced by the late Dr. Chuba Okadigbo on the ground of incompetence. The latter was soon enmeshed in yet another political crisis, which led to his removal in less than six months. Significantly in less than three years of democracy, the senate had three different presidents. Similar conflicts and threats were recurrent in the House of Representatives, where members constantly accused each other of financial impropriety and corruption. In 2007, for instance Nigeria's first female Speaker of the House of Representatives was replaced following a 'house renovation' scandal that engulfed the House for many weeks. In the 36 states of the federation, the situation was not different. Brawls involving members of the State Houses of Assembly were frequent. State Governors also did not fare well with their deputies accusing each another of financial fraud and betrayal. Since 29th May 1999 when Nigeria returned to civil rule, socio-political and ethnic/religious violence, resulting in loss of lives and property has taken an unprecedented dimension. In most of the states, it has been a "harvest of conflicts".² The situation has remained unchanged especially with the recurrent Niger Delta crises.

Still worrisome had also been the spate of social insecurity in Nigeria, occasioned by armed robbery, planned assassinations and police inefficiency. On the 31st of July 1999, for instance a former Youth and Sports Minister was assassinated in Lagos. His killers were never arrested. On the 23rd of December 2001, the then Attorney General of the Federation and the Minister of Justice was murdered in his bedroom by unknown assassins and up till date, the police are yet to unearth his killers. In 2007, two governorship aspirants of the PDP were also assassinated in Lagos and Ekiti states by unknown assassins. Many more political killings occurred between 2002 and 2007 in all six geo-political zones of Nigeria.

National disasters were also prevalent during this period. In Lagos and the Niger Delta, thousands of people lost their lives following incidents of oil pipeline explosions. There were also incidents of air disasters that became too frequent during this period. On October 22, 2005 for instance, a Belleview plane, crashed in Lisa, Ogun state killing all 117 people on board. Two months later a Sosoliso Airlines DC-9 aircraft crashed in Port Harcourt, 103 passengers died and on Sunday 29th October, 2006 an ADC Airlines plane again crashed killing 98 passengers including the Sultan of Sokoto and a son of a former civilian president. A Senator also died in the accident. This is the picture of the Nigerian crisis situations in the period on which this study focuses.

3. Theoretical framework

This study applies the System Functional model and Critical Linguistics (Fowler, 1979; Fairclough 1989)) in the analysis of data. Halliday (1978) characterizes the functional components of grammar, and identifies three “meta-functions” namely: the experiential component — which is the part of grammar concerned with the expression of experience (*ideational function*); the grammar of personal participation i.e. establishing and sustaining relationships and social roles (*interpersonal function*) and the creation of text (*textual function*). In the clause the experiential component is represented by the participants, process (verbal elements) and the circumstances of transitivity (circumstances). The grammar of transitivity shows events, states, processes and their related entities. The interpersonal function is represented by mood and modality. These components cover utterances or linguistic constructs that express the speakers’ attitude towards one another, their social and economic relationships, their social roles, their attitude towards their interlocutors and their social actions. The textual function is the construction of texts — verbal, written or attitudinal. Texts are seen as sets of options — a set of options from a system of option from among language forms — lexical, grammatical, phonological etc. Both the Systemic Functional Grammar and Critical Linguistics (Fowler, 1979; Trew, 1979), view language as social constructs showing how society influences language use and also how discursive events influence the context in which they occur and vice versa. Both approaches emphasize the cultural and historical dimension of meaning (Graham 2004).

In the analysis of news headlines, the ideational function of language is examined as it gives some insights to the character of verbs (or process) in the clause and how they mediate actions and experience. Thus the Hallidayan grammar of transitivity is applied in the analysis of the selected news headlines. Grammar of transitivity reveals how the clause is used to represent actions, events and entities. Other analytical tools in systemic linguistics that are relevant to the analysis are the grammar of modality (the interpersonal relations of speaker and hearer); the manipulation of linguistic materials; linguistic ordering; order and unity of discourse (Fowler, 1979). In the analysis of some of the headlines however, some parts of the lead story have been referred to in order to clarify certain events.

4. Data

Data selection is essentially purposive, i.e. what I consider as typical cases of specific crises as reported by the selected newspapers and newsmagazines, which in my view provide sufficient data reflecting the Nigerian crisis situation between

2000 and 2006. This period marks the end of military rule and the consolidation of democratic government in Nigeria. The corpus comprises thirty-two (32) news headlines and their overlines (see *appendix B*) — the publications of *The News*, *Newswatch*, *Tell*, *The Punch* and *The Guardian*. All news headlines in the corpus capture news reports on various scandals involving the political class and those in government; national tragedies (e.g. plane crashes), violent protests and other forms of ethnic hostilities. For the purpose of this study however fifteen out of the thirty-two headlines in the corpus that deal mainly on violent protests and communal clashes have been purposively selected for analysis. News headlines on air disasters and other forms of natural calamity are not inclusive. A full-blown analysis of all 32 headlines in the corpus will be too much for the restricted space of this paper. For purpose of clarity however the data are divided into two categories i.e. *A* and *B*. Headlines that construct events (i.e. crises) in a way that tend to overstate the situations and create unnecessary anxiety and tension in the society are examined under *category A*. Also in this category are those headlines that tend to misrepresent certain people in society, thereby stand the risk of misinforming the public and the world about the identities, roles and activities of these people e.g. the Niger Delta “militants.” *Category B* comprises news headlines, which though appear exaggerated are viewed in the analysis as critical strategy against the many unnecessary crises that have claimed many lives due to political violence, corruption, inefficiency and poor leadership.

My choice of the period 2000–2006 — the period of civilian administration is to show that social crises, scandals, corruption and national calamities have been frequent during this period. The study shows that despite the so-called “dividends of democracy” Nigeria has been engulfed in socio-political crises and ethnic violence right from the inception of democratic governance on May 29, 1999. Again my choice of these magazines and newspapers is due to their prominence in and contributions to Nigeria’s socio-political development. They are considered as the mass urban press, being the most popular and widely read weekly and daily news in Nigeria. All the five mass media organizations are privately owned, with little or no government control. Most Nigerian magazines and newspapers except *Daily Times* are owned by private organizations and are read by the average Nigerian especially in the cities. *Tell magazine* for example is also known as “the people’s parliament” because of its anti-military government position during the 1993 controversial general elections in Nigeria. In terms of quality of language and standard of reporting, they are usually considered the best in the Nigerian media industry (Mabadeje, 2004). These news media are therefore considered in this study as having both the profile, and the coverage to represent other print media outlets in Nigeria in this study.

The data are as follows:

Category A

- i. *Kaduna Massacre: Sharia will Split Nigeria (The News, March 6, 2000)*
- ii. *Bloodbath in Kano, Taraba (Tell, October 29, 2001)*
- iii. *Diary of a Killing Force (The News, February 26, 2001)*
- iv. *Foreign oil worker, two militants, Soldier dies in gun duel. Soldiers free six expatriate hostages (The Guardian, Nov. 23, 2006)*
- v. *Tension heightens between Ijaw Militants, JTF (The Punch, August 7, 2006)*
- vi. *Anambra Governor's Lodge Burnt, three killed in Rivers Cult Violence (The Punch, October 30, 2006)*

Category B

- vi. *N30 Billion Abacha Loot Missing: Recovery Effort Crashes (The News, April 19, 2001)*
- vii. *Day of Evil: from Neglect to Disaster (Tell, February 11, 2002)*
- viii. *Crisis in the Land. (Tell, November 11, 2001)*
- ix. *Warri Boils Again (The Punch, August 17, 2003)*
- x. *13 feared killed, Oba Missing (The Punch, March 28, 2004)*
- xi. *Five die in fresh plateau violence (The Guardian, May 27, 2004)*
- xii. *Endless Tales of woe as Onitsha bleeds. The Police, MASSOB, NARTO, Politicians trade accusations in Onitsha Lingering troubles (The Guardian, July 3, 2006)*
- xiii. *Six feared killed in Fresh Rivers Communal Clashes (The Guardian, July 4, 2006)*
- xiv. *The war in Peoples Democratic Party (The Guardian, April 4, 2004)*
- xv. *Black Wednesday at Unilag (Tell, January 31, 2005)*

5. Analyses/discussion

In the analysis of the grammar of transitivity in the news headlines, the interaction of the agent (noun), process (verb) and the affected participant (object) with the circumstance/situation (adverbial elements) will be examined. As already noted, the grammar of transitivity reveals how the verb in the clause is used to represent actions, events and entities. 'Entities' in this context refers to personalities whose identities and attitudes are reflected in their actions and reactions. In this analysis however, some particular attention will be paid to the circumstances of the events, noting how style and rhetoric, figurative references, intertextual references, implications and other stylistic choices in the headlines capture the events. Implication refers to those aspects of the news and information that are implicitly expressed (van Dijk, 1991).

5.1 Category A: Overstatement of conflicts and misrepresentation of identities

With incessant crises in many parts of the country, a state of fear, anxiety and uncertainty was generally created among the populace. This tension was heightened by the way the media constructed the events rather than mitigate them. Note that “news” in this context is a combination of the event and the ideological perception of the newspaper/magazine that the news reporter represents. An example is the report about the Kaduna riot of March, 2000 by *the News* magazine. The headline reads: “*Kaduna Massacre: Sharia will Split Nigeria.*” “*The faithful slaughter one another in the planned introduction of sharia law in Kaduna state*” (overline).³ Massacre implies the killing of a lot of people, especially those who can hardly defend themselves. However, what happened in Kaduna was a riot involving Muslims and Christians over Sharia compliance in which both sides conceded some casualties. There were neither victors nor vanquished. So the killing couldn’t have been a “massacred” or “slaughter” as *The News Magazine* would have the reader believe. “Kaduna massacre” (the situation), functioning as the theme of the report is to be perceived as an unusually painful and violent mode of killing. This discourse strategy captures how the news reporter perceives the event and the tendency of the report to heighten tension. Hence, the second part of the headline says, “sharia will split Nigeria.” The auxiliary verb “will” which appears to express obligation or certainty is used to show how close Nigeria was at the verge of breaking up, hence it is constructed as wood capable of being split. *The News* magazine perceives the Sharia crisis as a serious threat to the continual existence of Nigeria as one independent nation. Sharia is the controversial Islamic code of conduct presently being implemented in all Islamic northern states in Nigeria. The Federal government’s handling of the implementation of the Sharia law has been criticized as presupposing a weak central government and powerful regional administrations. The kind of report that anticipates the breaking of Nigeria no doubt subjected the reading public to unnecessary tension and anxiety. A similar report is the *Newswatch* magazine’s report about “the Osama bin Laden riot” in Kano, which the headline calls “bloodbath.” It says: “Bloodbath in Kano, Taraba.” *Hundred of Nigerians perish in Osama bin Laden riots in Kano city. But in a different circumstance, ethnic clashes between Tiv and Jukun deepen and lead to the death of 16 soldiers in Benue state* (overline).⁴ Kano and Taraba are the two northern Nigerian states where the crises occurred. “Bloodbath” — the key word and the most significant in the headline implies death by a massacre, another exaggerated version of the event. It is perceived in this story as any form of mass destruction of lives, especially where such incident is considered as uncommon. On the 12th of October 2001, some Islamic extremists violently protested against the United States’ reprisal attacks on

Afghanistan over the terrorist attack on New York City, killing more than 3,000 people. The Kano riot resulted in the death of 200 people and injured many others. Five months earlier,⁵ the Tiv and Jukun tribes of Taraba state were involved in another clash resulting in killings and looting. Peace initiatives failed as sixteen soldiers that were sent on peace mission were abducted and killed by the Tiv in Vaase. To an average Nigerian reader, especially those that witnessed the Nigerian civil war, the idea of “bloodbath” brings back the memory of death in thousand and the trauma that is associated with the war. Even the younger generation of Nigerian, who are familiar with the history of bloodbaths in Nigeria, will agree that it was a harrowing experience which no one ever wants to recall. What happened in Kano and Taraba was therefore not “bloodbaths” but a discursive strategy viewed in this study as a deliberate effort capable of creating unnecessary fear and unrest.

The press’s construction of social and political crises in a way that overstates the situation is also visible in its misrepresentations of social institutions. For many years, the Nigerian Police have come under attack by the Nigerian media. On their own part, however the police have blamed their inefficiency on the lack of modern equipment, poor infrastructure and inadequate social welfare. But the press increasingly worsens the image of the Police before the public. On this headline by *The News*, the Nigeria Police Force is called “a killing force” - a critical epithet derived from a metaphorical renaming strategy. The headline: “*Diary of a Killing Force*” (noun phrase) describes the situation while the overline provides the explanation. “The Nigeria Police Force (NPF) has a knack for killing innocent citizens under the guise of accidental discharge”.⁶ The tone of the headline itself is cynical and indeed accuses the police of deliberate killings. The entire story gives an overview of the “exploits” of the police, accused of leaving many innocent Nigerians dead under the guise of accidental discharge. The report showed that 55 Nigerians were killed by the police in 1999 alone. Between Dec. 1999 and Nov. 2000, six women were killed. And in the first two months of 2001, seven other innocent citizens were accidentally shot by the police in Lagos state. No doubt the pathetic incidents resulted in renaming the Nigerian police as a “killing force” which I think is an outright overstatement that is capable of causing disaffection against the police. Although sensational headlines are discursive means of enlisting some expected public response, some often betray elements of motivated propaganda that favours certain members of the ruling class.

The second part of *Category A* comprises headlines that tend to misrepresent certain persons and the tendency to misinform the world about their identity or activities. At this point this study shows how the construction of some members of the Niger Delta emancipation movements, as “militants” tends to blur their mission and legalizes their killing by the police. In Nigeria, the word “militant” assumes a meaning that generally demeans the Niger Delta struggle against lack of

socio-economic development and many years of neglect by the Nigerian government, especially with the rise of some criminal groups in the region. So the word “militant” is used to confuse legitimate struggle and sponsored criminal activities. The headline below is an example of a regular story in the Nigerian press: “Foreign oil worker, two militants, soldier dies in gun duel: soldiers free six expatriate hostages”.⁷ Three items are of interest here, namely “militants” “dies” and “free.” Due to the recurrence of violence and kidnapping in the Niger Delta the legitimate demands of the youths in the armed struggle are generally ignored and a general negative feeling against them fills the air. Expectedly the media helps to sustain this ill feeling. The negative construction of the activities of the militants therefore justifies their killing. To kill two of them out of four reported in the headline is a welcome development, while the death of an oil worker and a soldier is not. Over-time, the media has portrayed the Niger Delta youth in a negative light, often neglecting the issues of underdevelopment and poverty in the region. The identity of some genuine freedom fighters (for so they call themselves) is generally misrepresented. The media describe them as “miscreants,” “cultists,” or “militants” (Chiluwa 2001). Note that to be called a militant in this context is derogatory — the reason why one of the leaders of the movements has urged the media not to describe him as “militant” because, according to him, he is not. In Nigeria any form of brutality, harassment or victimization against a “militant” is justified. Little wonder the Joint task force (JTF) set up by the government to wipe out militants in the Delta region is described as “operation restore hope.” The verb (or process) in the second part of the Guardian headline is “free” which is acted on the affected participants “six expatriate hostages.” The agent “soldiers” are members of the government joint military actions against the militants. At the time of this report, certain individuals who were described in the media as “cultists” or “hoodlums” attempted to hijack the Niger Delta struggle and invaded some parts of the region, especially during the recent breakdown of law and order there. This led to the deployment of troops by the federal government to restore peace. The JTF then had the mandate to shoot and possibly kill “militants” without really confirming who the real trouble makers are. The headlines by *the Guardian*, of July 4, 2006 and the *Punch* of October 30, 2006, also report loss of lives in the “rivers cult violence.” Significantly the *Guardian* says “six feared killed in Fresh Rivers Communal Clashes”. It is silent about who were killed. Worse still, six lives were lost and the verb “killed” implies the fact that certain people were responsible for their death. The reports were not quite clear about who killed whom — the parties in the clashes killing one another or the police who were invited to restore peace killing the people. Youth movements in the armed struggle were often described by the government and the media as “cultists” and in some cases clashes between them (“militants”) and the JTF were erroneously viewed as “cult violence.” Unfortunately the media often

obscures the levels of atrocities committed by the armed forces in the region, so the above reports obscures the involvement of the police in the whole incident. What I see as unbalanced reporting by the Nigeria media about the Niger Delta crisis is portraying Nigeria as one insecure place in the world. Unfortunately this is being re-echoed in some foreign media that after Iraq, the Niger Delta is the next most volatile region in the world. This kind of conclusion in my view is completely subjective and unfair.

5.2 Category B: Critical strategies against violence in Nigeria

Category B of the data comprises news headline that function as critical strategies against the spates of violent crises in Nigeria, caused by corruption and bad government. Reporting the controversial “Abacha loot” on the 9th of April, 2001 *The News* magazine’s headline reads: “N30 billion Abacha loot missing; recovery effort crashes. “A huge N30 billion recovered loot is missing. Fingers point at the National Security Adviser as Senate renews probe” (overline). Notice that the verbs “missing” and “crashes” are directly antithetical to “recovered,” viewed in this study as highly critical of the corrupt Nigerian civil service. The juxtaposition of these items in the headline is to create an ironical situation — a discursive strategy that enables the reporter question the sincerity of the so-called “recovery efforts.” “Abacha loot” refers to the billions of US dollars, which the late military despot was accused of stealing during his five-year regime in Nigeria. Ironically the Obasanjo administration which institutionalized the “war against corruption” by setting up the Economic and Financial Crime Commission (EFCC) was also accused of misappropriating the same funds they were meant to recover. The whole recovery process was entrusted to the then National Security Adviser (NSA). Investigations later revealed that the NSA operated secret accounts in his own name with ABC International Bank in Paris and also offered some “discounts” to persons who returned recovered fund.⁸ One of the senators was quoted as saying: “We can prove that N30 billion is missing. With the latest discovery, over N10 billion can now vividly be traced to the NSA. Nigerians have the right to know and we shall inform them”.⁹ Surprisingly this case has never been properly investigated and the accused persons were never prosecuted. The implication of this news report is that the government and its functionaries are not really sincere about the so-called war against corruption despite the efforts of the EFCC whose activities have been widely criticized.

Corruption has been a major moral challenge in Nigeria, which has been responsible for most of the socio-political crises. Another example is the Lagos bomb disaster that claimed more than 1,000 lives. A critical headline by *Tell* magazine refers to it as “Day of Evil: from Neglect to Disaster.” *While sabotage could*

not be ruled out for now, there is a consensus that the Lagos bomb explosions were caused by many years of neglect of the military".¹⁰ On Sunday, January 27, 2002 bombs from the Ammunition Transit Depot (ATD) located at the Ikeja Military Cantonment, in Lagos exploded causing the death of more than one thousand people. Most of the victims, children and women drowned in the marshy swamps of Oke-Afa and Mafoluku areas as they scampered in confusion for safety. The initial official explanation was that fire could have started in the ATD that detonated the bombs. A colonel in the cantonment however, refuted this explanation and said the explosion was "incendiary explosive" caused by many years of neglect of the military. The two parts of the headline — a noun phrase "day of evil" and two prepositional phrases "from neglect to disaster" suggest a chain of cause and effect. Neglect and disaster (abstract nouns) are constructed as place nouns, complementing the prepositions "from" and "to". Thus, when people come from neglect they invariably move on to disaster. This captures the theme of the entire news text. The headline and its overlines present two propositions; first, the Nigerian military are to blame in the Lagos bomb disaster: second, the Nigerian military itself is a victim of "many years of neglect". The overline however tends to shift attention from the military to the government both past and present. The stockpile of ammunition at the Ikeja cantonment was said to be a consequence of the highly lucrative defence contracts. These contracts were awarded for military hardware especially arms and ammunition, which were dumped indiscriminately at the ATD, and each military dictatorship made new orders for fresh supplies. Since every new arms contract meant a new opportunity to make money (i.e. corruption), arms were imported regardless of the risks involved.

Another critical strategy which is of interest to this study is the media construction of the crises in a way that seeks public reaction to condemn the perpetrators of the crises. This we shall see in the next few examples of headlines in *Category B*.

In an attempt to manipulate positions and feelings of people against the 2001 crises in the North, the *Tell* magazine in its headline of November 11, 2001 announces: "Crisis in the Land." This was the same incident which *The News* describes as "bloodbath." In September of the same year, Jos (Plateau state) was also engulfed in a three-day riot as a result of the appointment of a Christian as chairman of a local council. More than 165 lives were lost with almost one thousand people wounded. "Crisis in the land" (a noun phrase) is informative and sounds like an alarm call, which is viewed in this study as a critical strategy to mobilize a mass action against the perpetrators of the crises in the north. In the south, incidents of violence were also prevalent. *The Punch* of August 17, 2003 reports: "Warri Boils Again" (*headline*). *20 killed 40 houses razed* (*overline*). The headline here is a simple clause comprising an agent (Warri) and a process (boils again). The crisis is captured in the process "boil" — a metaphorical extension of meaning

which calls on the reader to perceive and visualize crisis as water at a boiling point. This metaphorical reference involves a process of mapping across two conceptual domains or semantic fields. Usually two domains are activated on the mind of a discourse participant and that leads to “the noticing of incongruity, the resolution of which results in the construction of a meaning for the expression” (Cameron 2003: 12). The parts of a text being used to refer are usually not to their conventional referents, but unconventionally to other objects or concepts (Goatly 1993).

Explaining metaphor as the conceptual process of domain transfers is often attributed to Aristotle, who discusses the particular force of metaphors of analogy in which two terms in the topic domain stand in the same relation to each other. To Aristotle, understanding metaphor is about the process of finding similarities within differences (Cameron 2003). Warri in the headline is to be perceived as liquid under an intense hot condition, while conflict is constructed as heat which is associated with the question of oil exploration and other environmental factors that generate violence in the Niger Delta. The demands for equitable access to oil revenue and resource governance by the people of Niger Delta over the years have been systematically downplayed by the Nigerian government (Chilwa 2001). This access is believed would yield social and economic development for the oil producing territories. These demands were first articulated by an organized oil right group known as the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), led by the late social activist, environmentalist and writer, Ken Saro-Wiwa who was hanged in 1995 by the Abacha administration. Hence, the rise and spread of militancy activities in the Delta region today are fundamentally due to growing resistance against economic hardship, state monopoly of oil ownership rights and environment degradation. The latter appears to be the most devastating effect of oil exploration in the region. The recurrence of oil spills in the area has almost totally destroyed fishing and farming which are the people’s main sources of livelihood. About 3,000 oil spill incidents were reported by oil companies operating in Nigeria; this represents over 2 million barrels of oil spilled into the country’s terrestrial, coastal and offshore marine environment. Oil spillage and gas flaring not only destroy the environment, especially farmland and rivers, causing the high rate of unemployment; they also constitute health hazards (Omotola, 2006).

“Again” on the headline implies that violence in the region is a recurrent phenomenon and that the loss of life is becoming unbearable. The outcome of the boiling this time is “20 killed, 40 houses faded.” When it says, “Warri boils again”, it is by implication saying, “We are tired of violence. We want no more.”

Like in other forms of communication, news texts often integrate varied semiotic codes as well as literary discourse strategies like metaphor, symbolism and idiom. There is also the news writers’ penchant for abbreviation, coding and other forms of representations for economy of space or for graphological function. In

the headline “13 feared killed, Oba missing”. *10 houses burnt in Ondo, gun battle in C’River... as violence, voter’s apathy mar LG poll* (overline) (*The Punch*, March 28, 2004), “13” — a representational code for thirteen people, captures a stylistic feature of headlines “13” replaces “people” as the agent and “performs” the action “feared killed” (a psychological/material processes). “Feared killed” is an action outside the text — a completely contextual action attributable to the audience. Embedding metaphor in a noun phrase, e.g. “pockets of violence” is another significant feature of media texts. Violence is here characterized as a visible collective entity capable of existing in groups or “pockets”. This discourse strategy again enhances the reader’s visualization of the situation as violence was taking place simultaneously in almost all the states of the federation. This report has a significant ideological implication, that of Nigeria’s easy susceptibility to political violence which was said to mar local government poll. The country is constructed as a society unripe for a sustainable democratic practice while the report indirectly questions the authenticity of the results of the Local government elections in the states. In other words violence mars the elections as well as the results. The report also appears to indict the Nigerian political class as well as ridicules the practice of government in Nigeria.

The Nigerian press has constantly criticized the Nigerian political class especially where political intrigues have resulted in violence that claimed people’s lives. The headline below reports the Plateau/Benue political violence of 2004. “Five die in fresh Plateau violence” *Uproar in Benue Assembly over Motion on Emergency Rule* (overline) (*The Guardian*, May 27, 2004). While the report appears not to pretend about the vulnerability of Nigerian security system, the headline berates the system and the ruling class. “Fresh” in the headline stands for “additional”, “new” or “another”. The reporter uses “fresh” to represent the general hateful crisis situations. “Plateau” is a state in the middle belt of Nigeria. “Plateau violence,” implies that there were other crises in some parts of the country. The headline and its overlines integrate two different events in one brief text. Benue, a neighbouring state of Plateau experiences “uproar” while five die in plateau crisis.

Significantly the ruling party has been a house divided against itself. In all six geo-political zones in the country, the PDP has been enmeshed in intra-party crises. The Guardian of April 4, 2004 reports on its headline: “The War in the PDP.” “War” is a conceptual construction, which in this context mirrors the high profile intrigues and political assassinations in virtually all the geo-political zones in Nigeria. In Kogi state for example, a former local council chairman was assassinated in 2004; a day later, the Independent National Electoral Commission’s (INEC) chairman in the state was also shot dead. A report attributed the killings to recriminations over the automatic victory given to a former committee chairman of the council to contest the ruling party’s elections in the state.¹¹ Again an assassination attempt was made on the Benue state governor but the party’s stalwart

in the convoy of the governor was killed. Party members predicted hard times for the party as many decamped to other parties. In the last ten years it has been reports of rifts, assassinations and threats of assassination. *The Guardian* report about the “war” in PDP by implication raises the question as to whether the PDP indeed merits the kind of legitimacy it claims in Nigeria today. Did the party actually win the elections they claim to win in virtually all the states of the federation as they claim? Didn’t the intrigues and crises within the party itself suggest that it lacked the moral platform to provide credible leadership for the country? It sounds ridiculous that with all the reports of violence, corruption, intrigues and blackmail raging in the party, it still produced about 75% of state governors in the 2007 general elections in Nigeria. Significantly, all five governors whose elections were later nullified by the election petition tribunals were all from PDP, raising further questions about the credibility of the elections which the party was said to “convincingly” win.

The crisis of leadership in Nigeria is also implied in *The Guardian’s* report of the Anambra crises. It says: “Endless Tales of Woe as Onitsha Bleeds” (Headline). *The Police, MASSOB, NARTO, Politicians trade accusations in Onitsha Lingerling troubles*.¹² Deploying literary devices, the headline writer encodes the theme of the news in the active process “bleeds.” This is attributed to the affected participant, Onitsha (a location), which is also the personified item, representing the people of Onitsha and the kind of physical and psychological trauma they suffered. The crisis started as a rumour that a bomb had been planted in some parts of Onitsha and that non-Igbos would be attacked probably by MASSOB members. MASSOB (Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra) and other groups like the Anambra state vigilante service (AVS), National union of road transport owners (NARTO) etc. had been involved in a power tussle to control the state. It was the attempt by the police and soldiers to rid Onitsha of MASSOB that triggered off the crisis. The second part of the headline continues in the same vein describing the Onitsha situation as “lingering troubles” and “endless tales of woe.” “Bleeds” is to be perceived in terms of a wounded man, or a woman in a trauma of hemorrhage being wasted of her life. The Onitsha market was burnt down and shops were looted and indeed the life-blood of one of Africa’s biggest commercial centres was ruined in the crisis that lasted for many weeks. The critical stance of this headlines lies on the fact that the absence of peace in a nation is a mark of failure on the leaders of that nation. This was exactly the situation at the University of Lagos, which the *Tell magazine* describes as “black Wednesday.” In the headline “*Black Wednesday at Unilag*,”¹³ there is no process (or verb), rather a circumstance described by a metaphorical reference. Figurative expressions are functional elements in media discourse, as a means of creating tension, or for enhancing mental images. “Black Wednesday” refers to a reactionary student violent

demonstration on the particular Wednesday at the University of Lagos (Unilag) following the death of a student union leader. The union congress was to protest against constant power outage, lack of water supply and a planned privatization of students' hostel accommodation by the university authorities. The student blamed the sudden death of the union secretary on the university management. The union president was also said to have slumped after receiving a phone call. The angered students went on to burn down the official residence of the Vice-chancellor and that of the dean of students affairs; they also abducted the latter's wife and destroyed their cars. Again one can conclude that the headline is a critical strategy aimed at molding people's response to the Nigerian social situation.

6. Conclusion

We can conclude that media discourse mirrors the extent to which the media provides a critical platform for evaluating the state of affairs in a nation. Because the media occupies a prominent position in contemporary social systems, their relevance to the study of political and socio-cultural change is not in doubt (Fairclough, 1995a) and significantly social crises are one of such agents of social transformation. In mediating social crises in the context of this study news headlines, an integral part of media discourse have been used as an instrument for molding social actions, attitudes and perceptions and also as an ideological strategy for social criticism. The power of the media in attitude formation and manipulation of public opinion and perception is one good reason for examining media language use/discourse (as social practice) and its relationship to social crises. As stated above, functional elements and discourse strategies in the news become crucial in providing evaluation and analysis of the events. In the interpretation of crises in Nigeria, it is quite clear that the Nigerian press have not altogether taken an 'unbiased' posture. This of course shows, according to Fowler (1979), that there is generally a response from the media that reflect divergent ways of perceiving things especially when social norms are infringed upon or the legitimacy of the institutions of control is challenged. Hence, each part of a media text is representing an event in a particular way or point of view, setting up identities in a particular way and setting up relations (e.g. between politicians and the rest of us) in a particular way (Fairclough, 1995a). While the Nigerian press presents some exacerbated versions of the events in question, they have succeeded in telling the Nigerian story, revealing the state of Nigeria's nascent democracy and the tension associated with stabilizing young democracies across the world. Democratic experiments are fraught with the initial teething problems and challenges. This is usually made worse in societies like Nigeria that seek to integrate various social

and ethnic interests in their development objectives. The multi-ethnic nature of the Nigerian society no doubt has contributed to the fundamental challenges of development in the country.

Particularly in the news, the study has attempted to show that there is a systematic ideological bias to the media that is traceable to the linguistic choices and choice of vocabulary made by individual journalists and media houses they represent. The choice of one word to the exclusion of another clearly indicates not just a personal view but reflect institutional biases while mediating power structures with socio-political implications, (Matheson, 2005). Hence in mediating crises, media discourse represents the world, the tensions and consciousness of the unequal society in which we live. In the case of Nigeria crisis situations reflected in media discourse show the struggle between different social interest clamoring for supremacy and the need for co-existence. The study shows that socio-political crises have been frequent during the period under study due to poor handling of social crises, lack of adequate conflict resolution mechanisms, weak security institutions, police inefficiency and corruption in government. Ironically, despite the economic reforms of Olusegun Obasanjo, the much anticipated socio-political/economic transformations associated with democracy have not really been the case in Nigeria. As a matter fact the country has witnessed more social crises, national disasters and ethnic violence in the eleven years of civil government than at other times. This is not peculiar to Nigeria however; emerging democracies are usually plagued with conflicts, which in itself is necessary for social development. This we see in many developing economies in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. It is hoped that some of these crises would usher in social revolution. This study also seeks to increase proper awareness and consciousness of the Nigerian crisis situations, correct certain wrong impressions created by the foreign media on the state of security in Nigeria and to increase development efforts towards peace and social development.

Notes

1. Wikipedia, 2009; Encarta, 2009.
2. *Tell*, Feb. 18, 2002 (See Appendix A)
3. *The News*, March 6, 2000
4. *Newswatch*, Oct. 29, 2001, pp. 36.
5. The Tiv and Jukun tribes' conflict was in May, 2001
6. *The News*, Feb. 26, 2001, p3.

7. *The Guardian*, Nov. 23, 2006
8. *The News*, April 9, 2001
9. *The News*, April 9, 2001, p. 16
10. *Tell*, Feb. 11, 2002, p. 25.
11. *The Guardian*, April 4, 2004
12. *The Guardian*, July 3, 2006
13. *Tell*, January 31, 2005

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Appendix A. Ethnic/Religious Crises

Nigerian press responds to the crises listed in the data. The use of “vs.” (versus) stands for “clashed with” or “fought with”. Examples of conflicts in Nigeria include:

Ogun (Imosan)	Nov. 9, '99	Hausa/Fulani Muslims vs. Oro Cult members
Delta	Nov. 11, '99	Itsekiri vs. Urhobo
Lagos	Nov. 27, '99	Hausa/Fulani Muslims vs. Yoruba
Kwara	Dec. 19, '99	Hausa/Fulani Muslims vs. Christians
Oyo	Jan. 5, 2000	Hausa/Fulani Muslims vs. Yoruba
Kaduna	Feb. 21, 2000	Hausa/Fulani Muslims vs. others
Abia	Feb. 28, 2000	Reprisal violence on Hausa/Fulani Muslims
Rivers	March 18, 2000	Eleme vs. Okirika
Borno (Damboa)	March 28, 2000	Hausa/Fulani Muslims vs. others
Oyo (Saki)	April 24, 2000	Hausa/Fulani Muslims vs. Christians
Onitsha	May, 2000	Hausa/Fulani vs. Igbo
Oyo (Saki)	May 6, 2000	Hausa/Fulani vs. Yoruba
Abia (Aba)	May, 2000	Hausa/Fulani Muslims vs. Igbo
Kaduna	May 20, 2000	Hausa/Fulani Muslims vs. others
Kano	July 12, 2000	Hausa/Fulani Muslims vs. Yoruba
Ogun (Shagamu)	July 18, 2000	Hausa/Fulani Muslims vs. Yoruba
Lagos	Oct. 15, 2000	Hausa/Fulani Muslims vs. Yoruba
Oyo (Ibadan)	Oct. 2000	Hausa/Fulani Muslims vs. Yoruba
Lagos (Alaba)	Oct. 16, 2000	Hausa/Fulani Muslims vs. Igbo
Lagos	Oct. 17, 2000	Hausa/Fulani Muslims vs. OPC
Kwara	Oct. 17, 2000	Hausa/Fulani Muslims vs. Yoruba
Niger (Minna)	Oct. 24, 2000	Hausa/Fulani Muslims vs. Yoruba
Lagos	Nov. 25, 2000	Hausa/Fulani Muslims vs. Yoruba
Katsina	April 7, 2001	Hausa/Fulani Muslims vs. Katafs
Kaduna (Zango Kat.)	April 22, 2001	Ikulu vs. Baiju
Bauchi (Tafawa Bal.)	June 18, 2001	Hausa/Fulani Muslims vs. others
Gombe	June 18, 2001	Hausa/Fulani Muslims vs. others
Nasarawa	June 25, 2001	Hausa/Fulani Muslims vs. others

Jigawa	July, 2001	Hausa/Fulani Muslims vs. others
Birnin Gwari	August, 2001	Hausa/Fulani Muslims vs. others
Jos	Sept 7, 2001	Hausa/Fulani Muslims vs. Birom & others
Taraba	Sept 8, 2001	Fulani Jukuns vs. Tiv
Zamfara (Gusau)	Oct. 2001	Hausa Fulani Muslims vs. others
Delta	Oct. 10, 2001	Itsekiri vs. Urhobo
Kano	Oct. 12, 2001	Hausa/Fulani Muslims vs. Christians
Benue	Oct. 12, 2001	Jukuns vs. Tivs
Osun (Oshogbo)	Nov. 29, 2001	Yoruba Fundamentalists vs. Christians
Jos	Dec. 29, 2001	Hausa/Fulani Muslims vs. Birom/Anaguta
Delta	Jan. 2002	Itsekiri vs. Urhobo (Source: <i>Tell</i> , February 18, 2002)

Appendix B

1. *Kaduna Massacre: Sharia will Split Nigeria (The News, March 6, 2000)*
2. *Day of Evil: From Neglect to Disaster (Tell, Feb.11, 2002)*
3. *Crisis in the Land (Tell, Nov. 11, 2001)*
4. *N30 b Abacha Loot Missing (The News, April 9, 2001)*
5. *Kano Tragedy: More Crashes Likely (Tell, May 20, 2002)*
6. *Miss World Riots: Shame of a Nation (Newswatch, December 9, 2002)*
7. *Bloodbath in Kano, Taraba (Tell, Oct. 29, 2001)*
8. *Diary of a Killing Force (The News, Feb. 26, 2001)*
9. *N30 Billion Abacha Loot Missing: Recovery effort crashes (The News, April 9, 2001)*
10. *Warri Boils again, 20 killed, 40 houses razed (The Punch, August 17, 2003)*
11. *Battle of Kingmakes (The Punch, January 5, 2003)*
12. *Five killed, 21 injured in Lagos (The Punch, January 3, 2003)*
13. *Okada Menace (Newswatch, January 13, 2003)*
14. *13 feared killed, Oba Missing, 10 houses burnt in Ondo, gun battle in C'River...as violence, voter's apathy mar LG poll (The Punch, March 28, 2004)*
15. *Five Die in Fresh Plateau Violence, Uproar in Benue Assembly over Motion for Emergency rule...Our Plight in Kano, by returnee (The Guardian, May 27, 2004)*
16. *Two feared killed in protest over death verdict (The Guardian, April 2, 2005)*
17. *Black Wednesday at Unilag (Tell, January 31, 2005)*
18. *YCE wades into OPC crisis (The Guardian, April 4, 2005)*
19. *Land dispute claims 10 lives in Benue (The Guardian, April 1, 2005)*
20. *The war in Peoples Democratic Party (The Guardian, April 4, 2004)*
21. *18 feared dead in Air Force Plane mishap (The Guardian September 18, 2006)*
22. *Tension heightens between Ijaw Militants, JTF (The Punch, August 7, 2006)*
23. *Anambra: Two Policemen: Four others killed. Hoodlums attack PDP Chiefs in Lagos. (The Punch, July 24, 2006)*
24. *Endless Tales of woe as Onitsha bleeds. The Police, MASSOB, NARTO, Politicians trade accusations in Onitsha Lingerling troubles (The Guardian, July 3, 2006)*
25. *Foreign oil worker, two militants, Soldier dies in gun duel. Soldiers free six expatriate hostages (The Guardian, Nov. 23, 2006)*

26. *Sultan, Shagari's son, 96 others Perish in Crash, Family loses 4 children, Senator Gandhi dies with wife* (*The Punch*, October 30, 2006)
27. *Nigeria: History of Air crashes* (*The Punch*, October 30, 2006: 10)
28. *Anambra Governor's Lodge Burnt, three killed in Rivers Cult Violence* (*The Punch*, October 30, 2006)
29. *Fayose's aids hired us to kill Daramola — suspects* (*The Punch*, October 23, 2006)
30. *Six feared killed in Fresh Rivers Communal Clashes* (*The Guardian*, July 4, 2006)
31. *Onitsha rages, rioters free 204 prisoners. Governor orders shoot-on-sight.* (*The Guardian*, June 20, 2006)
32. *Thugs vandalize Ekiti Assembly. Fayose must go, elders insist; Soldiers take over plateau. I'm not perturbed by the burning of my house — Mantu* (*The Punch*, October 15, 2006).

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