Discussing Insurgency in Nigeria: A Study of Tracia Adaobi Nwabani's *Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree*

Abigail Oaikhena

Abstract

Terrorist insurgency in Nigeria and the mayhem left in its trail are quite worrisome, and these affect human lives and property. The consequences are quite enormous on the economy. This state of affairs is troubling. It does seem as if the attention insurgents get in spite of their horrendous acts gingers them. They propagate Islamic agenda across the entire country and enforce it with unparalleled violence, killing and maiming. Some literary texts have articulated the activities of these insurgents and have become sources that make possible the understanding of insurgent activities as well as the consequences of defective governance and poor leadership in Nigeria. In view of this, the paper examined Tracia Adaobi Nwabani's *Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree*, which could be seen as an allegory of the Chibok girls' story.

Keywords: Insurgency, Terrorists, Islamic Agenda, defective governance, poor leadership, killing

Introduction

In the North Eastern part of Nigeria, the Boko Haram insurgent group seeks to establish Islamic government in contrast to the democratic form of government that already exists in the country. According to Adesoji, Abimbola, in *The Boko Haram Uprising and Islamic Revivalism in Nigeria,* "The Boko Haram uprising was not the first forceful attempt to impose a religious ideology on a secular Nigerian society" (173). Hence, the recurrence of religious conflict could be traced back to the Maitatsine sect in 1980, an Islamic group that attempted to undermine the Nigerian state and forcefully introduced a religious ideology. Government's effort to clampdown on the group always resulted in well-known resistance by its members, and this usually led to the death of scores, and damage to properties in several northern parts of the country.

From a retrospective view, the history of northern Nigeria has been characterized by periodic instability, conflict, and sectarian violence. According to Oarhe Osumam, Jihadists sacked Birnin Ngazargamu in 1808 and invaded and occupied Rabih in 1893. In the early 1970s, the Muslim Brotherhood, Shiites, a Zaria-based Islamic Movement in Nigeria, was led by Ibrahim El-Zakzakky, an undergraduate at Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria in Kaduna State. Similarly, in the early 1980s, the Maitatsine sect rejected symbols of Western capitalism and renounced several Muslim practices, including praying five times a day, triggering an intra-religious conflict between it and the dominant Islamic sects of the time. The Maitatsines also harassed members of the public and became a huge source of social disorder and insecurity until its members clashed with state forces in Kano in December 1980. As Toyin Falola puts it;

After the Kano clash, members of the sect traveled to other northern cities and continued the revolt, which erupted in Bullum-kutu in October 1982, in Rigassa, Kaduna State in October 1982, and in Jimeta-Yola between February 27 and March 5, 1984 (3).

Maitatsine which is suspected to be origin of Boko Haram attracted more support from youths and unemployed migrants, who were disenchanted with the unresponsiveness of the government and Islamic hierarchy or the Northern oligarchy to their needs. Despite the ideological and operational similarities between Boko Haram and previous movements, the Executive Governor of Borno State, Hon. Kashim Shettima, in *Sunday Tribune*, July 17, 2011 noted that the earlier movements were not "as destructive as they did not degenerate to killing of innocent souls and targeting of recreational centres, places of worship in a sustained and protracted manner as the case of Boko Haram" (52).

However, in the present day Nigeria, the major insurgent group is Boko Haram which predominately operates in the north eastern parts of the country, and which is originally known as the *Jamaatul Alissunna lid da a wa wal Jihad*, an Arabic phrase meaning, "people committed to the propagation of the prophet's teaching and Jihad."

In 2002, the founder and leader of this group Muhammad Ali, declared Borno State immoral and hopeless, N.I.O and D.L-B (full names withheld) revealed that "Muhammad Ali and co decided to perform the traditional Hijra which is a withdrawal before the jihad. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) withdrew from Mecca to Medina. In his own case, Ali and his followers withdrew from Maiduguri (the Borno State capital) to Kanama in nearby Yobe State." (9). After Ali's death Mohammed Abubakar took over and presently Abubakar Shekau took over after the death of his predecessor.

The paper uses New Historicism to pursue the discourse. This is the formidable theories suited for such as it seeks to understand a culture's power structure owing to the fact that literature

addresses cultural concerns that can affect society's attitudes and values. Nonetheless, a good number of writers in Nigeria are involved in various ways in the struggle for the salvation of the local communities from the harsh effects of agitations in Nigeria. Thus, New Historicism explores meaning in a text by considering it within the context of the prevailing ideas and social assumptions of the historical era in which the text is produced. New Historicists such as Stephen Greenblatt, Louis Montrose, and Jonathan Goldberg, concern themselves with the political functions of literature and the concept of power, the complex means by which cultures produce and reproduce themselves. The New Historicists seek to understand literature from a historical perspective, which they feel that the New Criticism did not provide As a theory emerging as a reaction to old Historicism which viewed the text "as an autonomous entity" (Ryan 128), according to Mukesh, New Historicism "reposition the text in the original discursive reality of the age in which it was produced" (118). Led by Greenblatt, the New Historicists view history as not just an account of events that took place in the past, but rather an intricate description of human reality which is regarded as a tenet by the society in question.

While a literary work may or may not tell about the factual aspects of the world from which they emerge, they are mainly concerned about the prevailing ways of thinking at that particular time. It is in this line Sharma asserts that literary work "should be considered a product of its time, place and circumstances of its composition rather than an isolated creation of a genius" (47). The political and cultural angle that the theory provides in the interpretation of any literary work encourages literary studies to re-establish a link with the political and social world that gave rise to it.

A New Historicist Discourse in *Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree*

One way to apply a New Historical discourse to a text according to Ann Dobie, is to look out for:

> The world of the author, personal, and public; the historical-cultural environment of the text, both the one it depicts and the one in which it was produced; and the internal world of the text itself, the discourses that generate the narrative. In the case of all the three, you should be attentive to the power structure that is in place, questioning inequalities and pointing out social forces that build community and those that destroy it. (192)

Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree is a novel addressing prevalent issues and the captivity story of teenage girls like the Chibok girls who were abducted on 14-15th night of April 2014 in Nigeria, and enslaved in the notorious Sambisa forest. As a fiction based on real accounts of survivors of the Chibok girls, the author exposes the ordeal of female captivity in strikingly lucid vignettes. Apart from journalistic and historical writings on insurgency in Nigeria, Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani's novel is one of the few literary works to vividly project the voices of Boko Haram's female abductees on the national and global stage. *Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree* is the writer's attempt to humanize the stolen girls and put a face to the countless victims of the worst insurgent violence in Nigeria. In the text, the author depicts the insurgent group as

destroyers of dreams and communities as they fight to eradicate every trace of western ideas and civilization. In the text, it is believed that;

> THEY USE CHARMS THAT make them appear and disappear," Abraham says. Many travelers have their journey cut short when men with bomb and guns suddenly appeared in the middle of the highway, Elijah says. They load goats, cows, donkeys, camels with explosives, then send the livestock wandering into public places where they would donate Caleb says. That's how they bombed the market in Banki and Bama, Isaac says. And the market in Damboa…. They are talking about Boko Haram. (75)

The novel is set in a tranquil village in Borno State, where Christians and Muslims coexist. Children, especially girls, are brought up under strict gendered and religious codes. The schools are remarkably ill-equipped, and sporadic donations especially sanitary pads from humanitarian organizations are highly valued by the community as different organizations try to create awareness about the usefulness of sanitary pad to the young girls and tell them that "every woman goes through the same changes. ...it should not mean you have to miss school. You don't have to miss classes because of the changes in your body" (38). The schools usually experience high rate of absenteeism among the female student population due to their menstrual issues and school authorities seem indifferent to the monthly challenges of their teenage female students.

The story opens on a poetic note and captures the opinion about dreams of a young girl at the point of transformation. The narrator who is also the protagonist, fondly called "Ya Ta" by her parents, grows up in a closely-knit communal settlement defined by family, school, and church. Her growing consciousness of self is shown by her sense of duty as the only daughter among male siblings. When her school acquaintance and close friend, Aisha, marries, becomes pregnant, and drops out of school, one would think that Ya Ta will trail a similar path. But, she is dreaming bigger dreams about college, scholarship, and an occupation with the prospect of giving back to humanity. According to her: "that is the good thing about dreaming with my eyes wide open. It's like molding a calabash from wet clay (2). In the same vein, Papa wants her "to grow up and be like the women wearing white coat in the Maiduguri General Hospital" (Nwaubani, 2018:3) but she is yet unaware that, like the calabash, dreams can be broken, and one cannot always dream from where one left off. Fortunately she eventually earns the Borno State government scholarship for "exceptional children from disadvantaged homes (15)", the principal pays an unannounced visit to her family with the good news.

However, her dreams are threatened and then crushed by Boko Haram's destructive agenda. Nwaubani, while dealing with fact and fiction, links this coming of age story with the slow infringement towards Boko Haram terrorists. Her depiction of the wishes and vision of the young narrator and her peer friends make their capture and exploitation more tragically heartbreaking.

She recalls some of her happy moments while she was with her parents as they now live a different lifestyle in the forest with their abductors:

I remember my first day of school. Prancing behind Papa in my brand-new white and blue pinafore, clutching my new exercise books and pencil. …Papa waited in the queue until my full name had entered in the register, then he turned to me and smiled. "Make sure you study hard so that one day you can teach me how to read and write…and maybe how to speak English as well. (210)

But her dreams of acquiring a western form of education and the expectations of her friends are shattered as their community is immersed in fear because of the Boko Haram attacks. Ya Ta and her friends Sarah and Aisha are kidnapped while their families are murdered, and they make the difficult choice to do whatever they need to, to survive. They are forced to learn verses from the Quran, marry Boko Haram militants as the girls are used to compensate the fighters - "Rijale, great fighters, commander of the great army of Allah…. These are the virgins that Allah prepared for you" (176-177). At this point young and innocent Ya Ta wakes to reality that "the rest of us have been preserved for Rijale. We are their reward for being brave murderers" (177). The young girls are indoctrinated with their version of Islam, but YaTa knows this is not true Islam because of the Muslim friends she has grown up with. It is this interpretation of Islam that Nwaubani is careful to repeatedly point out is radical.

For Ya Ta, death seems to be the only feasible option of escape. They battle with hunger, sexual violence and abuse daily. "Night after night, I pray it will not be my turn. I pray that Al-Bakura and Malam Adamu will choose someone else" (146). In the forest, time becomes worthless. "I arise each morning with no strength to think of tomorrow morning or the morning after tomorrow. I retire at night with no courage to think of tomorrow night or the night after tomorrow" (169). Ya Ta is also the extreme spectator of her captive surroundings. Through her observations, Nwaubani disclosures the schemes by which terrorist groups persuade their female hostages and make them suicide bombers. This makes Ya Ta to start questioning Boko Haram's beliefs about Islam and western education and settles that "Boko Haram has nothing to do with Allah" (157). She uncovers the group's contradictions, seeing that the insurgent group flourishes on the very things they denounce. "If they hated Western education so much, why did they bother with guns and trucks, which you could learn how to make only by going to school" (158). Boko Haram condemns western education, but, paradoxically, uses western combat technology to commit killings.

A number of symbols highlight the novel's themes. Starting from the radio, also known as "Papa's radio" (11), is a significant property in Ya Ta's family; the "Voice on Papa's Radio" undertakes a formidable role as the family's source for world news. With the radio, news about international events and Boko Haram's terrorist attacks filter into the community. The writer compares noteworthy events happening in the United States of America with the prowling nuisance and destruction by Boko Haram, hence, plainly opposing safety and progress of the

West with the anxiety, recurrent violence, and economic inactivity in north eastern Nigeria. The voice on Papa's radio reveals that;

US PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA has vowed to make 2014 'a year of action' in his annual State of the Union address to Congress. He pledge to bypass Congress if necessary to tackle economic inequality and raise the minimum wage…. A car bomb has exploded in the northeastern Nigeria city of Maiduguri, killing at least seventeen people. The Islamist group Boko Haram said it carried out the attack. A suspect has been arrested, the military says (43).

The above excerpt reveals Boko Haram's use of violence to overthrow the impalpable presence of western power and eradicate every form of western view or knowledge in the north east and Nigeria as a country at the detriment of the citizens. They see it as power struggle and superiority dominance, that is why like death, they strike unexpectedly "… when your sleep is sweetest" (54). As the insurgents' invasion dominate conversations among the villagers, since it is believed "Maybe they use charm" (77) it becomes obvious, however, that the government is challenged and seemingly incapable of controlling the advancing insidious group. When doomsday finally arrives to Ya Ta's village, the residents are taken unexpectedly, mistaking the booming sound of gunfire with the sound of thunder revealing the end of drought. The people's expectation of life-giving rain is thwarted by the deadly violence of terrorist attack. Eventually captured and enslaved in the Sambisa forest by the dreaded Boko Haram, Ya Ta and her school friends, Aisha and Sarah are converted from obedient daughters and students to slaves and wives of insurgents. With their names and identities changed, the captives are entrapped in a surrounding where violence rules their lives. "We are like dead people mourning other people who are dead" (123).

The Baobab tree is a central image in this novel. In the Sambisa forest, this symbol which the villagers with western knowledge take as protection and nourishment is turned into a mass burial site, signifying Boko Haram's contrary view against the west and transgressors of cultural principles which they suspected to emanate from the western ideas. In the text, Ya Ta and her peers come of age, not in the sanctioned safety of home and community, but in the wilderness of the Sambisa forest, where the baobab tree signifies only death. In a world ruled by terrorism, insurgency, and lawlessness, death and destruction become the natural outcomes. As they kill and torture those with western education they believe they are invariably defeating western power and usurping their supremacy.

As the novel underlines the impact of violence on their captives, it also exposes a growing national and global problem with regards to power struggle and that of the liberated captives who survive the fight of 'two elephants'. For the liberated captives, the future will certainly not be as they had previously dreamed it. Ya Ta desired to 'fly" but her dream of going back to school is

subdued by the knowledge of her pregnancy for a masked terrorist husband, whose identity she may never know. A man who only talks whenever he is seeing Boko Haram videos defeating Nigeria troops in his laptop which make him to shout praises to Allah. She recounts in one of the videos

They leap off the vehicle and plant the black and white Boko Haram flag in the front of a building with a sign that reads "Gwaza Local Government Authority". Then they set fire on the green-white-green Nigeria national flag and cheer. Allah be praised my husband says (202).

The violence and fight against western belief preoccupied the novel as the voice of Boko Haram's many female victims, the protagonist narrator occupies an important position. She is the readers' eye into the terrorists' camp. As a male reporter advises her, "It's important that you tell her your story. … You have to tell her everything that happened. That is the only way the world can know, so that they can continue to look for the other stolen girls and rescue them from Boko Haram" (287).

In all, Nwaubani articulates in this intriguing story of power struggle in the form of violence and its human and material costs, the challenges of the twenty-first century. Readers will find Viviana Mazza's Afterword, "The Chosen Generation", and other online resources very useful for understanding the history and activities of Nigeria's disreputable insurgent group. She provides information on the journalistic collaboration behind the story, as well as the obstacles to reintegrating female survivors, such as the prevailing "strong culture of honor based on a woman's body and her virginity (321). *Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree*, indeed, pays tribute to the faceless victims whose captivity presents an endless certainty of pains.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is obvious that the actions of Boko Haram insurgency have really hindered the communal existence of Nigeria and decreased her economic prosperity. Their activities have attracted untold hard times to individuals, groups, families, foreigners, state and federal governments, and to the Nigerian economy. In order to remedy or rectify this predicament the federal governments should genuinely and practically embark on job creation for the unemployed youths, especially for the youths in the troubled regions. The Federal Government also should focus on enabling the incorporation and self-reliance of the forcibly displaced, irrespective of where they are relocated to; i.e. host communities, communities of origin etc., while taking into consideration both the immediate needs expressed by the affected populations for survival and the necessities for sustainable recovery and development required for longer-term regional and national stability.

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