

Language and Religious Interplay of Nigeria's in/Security Challenges on Selected Social Media Platforms

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Abstract: Social media in the last decade has increasingly become a veritable platform where people vent their minds on varied social and national issues. That Nigeria is bedevilled with myriads of security challenges – from terrorism, to banditry, kidnappings and secessionists agitations amongst others is not in doubt. What require amplification however, are how language forms and religious sentiments, particularly on social media, aggravate and or dowse in/security challenges. Adopting M. A. K. Halliday's Systemic Functional Semiotics (1978), this study examines selected social media platforms: Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and Twitter to determine how language forms and religious sentiments combine with images to flame or mitigate in/security challenges in Nigeria. The study found that religious sentiments – both positive and negative transcend language forms that comment on issues of conflict in the social media, while positive sentiments attempt to build/enhance/galvanise human coexistence, negative sentiments tend to engender acrimony and disaffection amongst people. These coupled with varied pictorial images greatly impact in/security situations in the country. An understanding multimodality as a feature of communication thus greatly enhances construction and deconstruction of text including issues of conflict.

Keywords: Multimodality, In/Security, Social media, Semiotics

I. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The notion of security has both a primordial and contextual meaning. The former perceives security from the preservation of what binds the people together: common language, tradition, quest for freedom and the like. While in an unnatural nation state, security could be seen in the context of bringing people together into a complex whole. Security thus presupposes a state of being safe and the absence of fear, anxiety, anger, poverty and oppression. Insecurity on the other hand, is an attempt by people/groups to get out of the nation state, most especially when their needs are not met. Insecurity also connotes a state of being open to danger or threat and or a lack of protection that characterize people's lives and property.

Nigeria in recent years is experiencing a build-up of insecurity and crisis in an unprecedented dimension with diverse militia-groups in different regions of the country agitating and causing security breaches. Boko-Haram – the largest Islamic terrorist group believes western education is forbidden and that politics, especially in northern Nigeria has been taken over by false Muslims, and as such the group is out to cleanse the system. This group is ravaging Nigerian communities especially across the northern part of the country. The Niger Delta militants had

their share of destroying oil installations thereby disrupting Nigeria's oil economy in the Niger Delta. Biafra apologists especially in the Southeast of Nigeria are threatening secession, as Arewa Youths (northern youths) are bracing up for the challenge holding and keeping political power. All these insecurity indices pose a threat on the unity and development of the country. While a myriad of studies abound on the remote and immediate causes and effects of these crises, this paper on its part focuses on how language and religious inclinations induce the crises and or mitigate and stem the tide of security challenges, such as is bedevilling Nigeria.

Conversely, social media refer to interactive technological innovations that allow for the creation of platforms for sharing and or exchanging information, ideas, interests, and indeed all other forms of expression through virtual communities and networks. These are mediums of communication that are available to the public, devoid of regulatory and government censorship to freely deliberate and vent their feelings on sundry issues. Some of the myriads of channels available for such communications include WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Tik Tok, Telegram, Snapchat and others.

Religion is an indispensable notion among humans that influences lives and existence. It is a system of faith and worship especially to a personal God. It embodies a great deal of emotions/sentiments in its expression. Nigeria is a nation with diverse cultural and religious beliefs that include Christianity, Islam and numerous Traditional religions. Religious interplay with language thus connotes the reciprocal relationship that comes about when religious beliefs are manifested or expressed in the cause of language use. On the other hand, sentiments are beliefs that individuals hold, and the basis of such judgments are not necessarily founded on proof or certainty. Such sentiments are made obvious in communicative interactions of people overtly or covertly. This study seeks to determine how religious sentiments, overtly or covertly, interplay in language use on selected social media platforms; and how such interactions exacerbate or mitigate crises. By religious sentiments therefore, it presupposes belief or judgement that are premised on doctrinal convictions of some religious faith.

1.1 Aim and objectives of the study

This study focuses on determining the role of language and religious inclinations in crises or conflict situations as is particularly applies to Nigeria. The specific objectives are:

- i. Identify religious sentiments expressed in communicative encounters on in/security situation(s) in Nigeria; and
- ii. Determine how language forms and religious sentiments abate or aggravate in/security situation(s).

II. AN OVERVIEW OF EXTANT LITERATURE

The Cambridge Dictionaries (online) defines security as protection of a person, building, organization, or country against threats such as crime or attacks. Adebakin, (2012) views security as freedom from danger or threats, and the ability of a nation to protect and develop itself, promote and cherish values and legitimate interests and enhance the wellbeing of its people. This perception of security focuses on physical, emotional and psychological essence of belonging to a social group, by giving assurance of protection to all. Any situation contrary to this is regarded as a state of insecurity. The Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2022) defines insecurity as "the condition of being susceptible to harm or injury". It is the state of fear or anxiety; lack or inadequate freedom from danger. This notion of security reflects physical insecurity, which is the most visible form of insecurity. There are other forms of insecurity such as economic insecurity and social insecurity. It has been generally argued that security is not the absence of threats or security issues, but the ability to rise to the challenges posed by threats with expediency and expertise. One of the measures used to rise up to tackle security issues is dialogue, which involves communication. How language is used to communicate and the religious sentiments that play-out and the main issues this study seeks to unravel.

2.1 Multimodality

Multimodality is a "contemporary semiotic practice" (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001:2). The approach focuses on describing and analysing meaning-making resources such as designs, layouts, images, photographs, films, colours, scents, as well as spoken, gestural, and written texts that people combine and use in different contexts. Kress (1998:186) affirms that "language is no longer the central semiotic mode." By this, He believes that communication has never been limited to sign systems, rather "all texts are multimodal". Multimodality assumes that language resources are socially shaped and over time, they become meaning making resources that articulate the (social, individual/affective) meanings demanded by the requirements of different communities.

Existing literature on in/security situation especially in Nigeria abound that treated diverse aspects of security situations. Such studies include Onifade et.al (2013), Olusola et.al (2017), Olukoju et.al (2018) and Msuega Ahar et. al (2018) among others. Onifade et. al. (2013) argue that insecurity challenges in Nigeria has assumed a formidable dimension that not only requires a multiple-stakeholder approach, to quell the

conflagration threatening Nigeria's statehood. The study views security issues in Nigeria as the preference for violence in expressing pent-up frustration and disenchantment with the state. It advises leaders and politicians to endeavour to uphold moral values and virtues in all their conduct to lead by example and to avoid heating up the polity unnecessarily by their conducts and comments, which sometimes incite violence in their followers.

Olusola et. al (2017) see Nigeria as experiencing a build up to a foreseeable (though preventable) crisis of a gigantic magnitude. It traced that the democratic experiment in Nigeria is characterized by shades of crisis situation - from the genocide that occurred in the name of civil war in 1967 – 1970, to several ethno-religious riots, Boko Haram insurgency, Niger Delta resource control agitation, Biafra secession threats, cases of armed robbery and kidnapping to recession. The study opined that language and communication are important factors in national security. It submitted that language and communication are double-edged swords that provoke hostilities and used to reduce or remove hostilities. It recommended amongst others that citizens should be mindful of what they say, how it is said and when if peace and tranquillity is to be achieved. The present study brings in the aspect of religious sentiments alongside language and communication to determine how they combine to enhance or mitigate in/security.

Olarewaju (2018) did a sociolinguistic survey of approaches to security challenges and sustainable national development in Nigeria. The study argued that language and society influence each other. Thus, language is used to solve social issues that erupt. It shows how the multilingual nature of Nigeria imparts on security challenges in the country. The paper notes that the dominant use of English language against the indigenous languages in nearly all communicative domains in Nigeria has failed the nation in its bid to overcome numerous security threats.

These studies and many others tell us so much on the nature of security challenges especially as it relates to Nigeria, and how language and the society in general are imparted in various ways. This study builds on such extant works to determine how religious sentiments conveyed in language forms fan the embers of or extinguish in/security challenges. An understanding of these aspects will further enhance the management of security issues in Nigeria and even beyond.

2.2 Methods and theoretical approaches

This study is largely qualitative in its approach. Data were purposively sourced from social media platforms: Whatsapp chat-groups, Facebook posts, and tweets that portray religious sentiments and biases that relate to in/security situations in Nigeria. Forty-five (45) posts were screen shot across the selected platforms and the content – that largely conveyed religious sentiments in discussing in/security issues were subjected to a functional linguistic analysis.

This study adopts Systemic Functional Semiotics (SFS) as theoretical framework. Systemic functional semiotics is derived from M.A.K Halliday’s (1978) social semiotic view of language, which views language as functional (in terms of what it can do or what can be done with it); semantic (in that it is able to construct meanings and reveal its differences between the different ways of describing events whether social, political or commercial. Halliday (1996:89) believes that “language is a product of the social process”. He affirms that in the study of language, there should be a shift from focusing on the sentence to the text since language consists of text. SFS focuses on paradigmatic relations of language and how systems (e.g., language, images, etc.) are used to encode meaning in different situations and context.

The possibility of Systemic functional semiotic to address both the linguistic and non-linguistic aspects of discourse serve as a useful tool in analysing social media platform discourses of Nigerians on crisis situations in Nigeria. The core idea of systemic functional semiotics has it that every semiotic artefact (semiotic system) operates on three levels. First, it represents ‘reality’ that is, it denotes objects, situations and actions (ideational). Second, it establishes a certain kind of social contact and interaction with the recipient (interpersonal). Third, it builds a textual structure whose parts cohere formally and contextually (textual). These levels are called “meta-functions” of semiotic objects or events.

SFS provides a useful framework for the analysis of images (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996, Machin, 2007). The data under study, which are taken from social media platforms, are multi-semiotic with varied images, which are there to not just embellish texts but also enhance meaning making processes. SFS’s approach in accounting for both linguistic and non-linguistic elements of discourse serve as a palpable reason in adopting the framework for using in engaging the data in this study. SFS presupposes that every semiotic piece/system operates at three levels. A semiotic piece first represents ‘reality’ by symbolizing objects, situations and actions, and accounts for the ideational function of language. Secondly, SFS establishes social contact and interaction between text composers and recipients, representing the interpersonal language function. Thirdly, the whole construct of the semiotic text builds a textual structure whose parts (verbal and visual) cohere formally and contextually, accounting for the textual language function. These levels of language functions generally called “meta-functions” of semiotic objects or events guide the analysis in this study.

III. DATA ANALYSIS

The analysis is guided by the objectives set above and identifies aspects of religious sentiments expressed in communicative encounters on in/security situation(s) in the data before going further to determine how the language expressions are capable of exacerbating or abating crises. The analysis also establishes how multimodal modes in the texts construe and enhance the deconstruction of meaning.

3.1 Aspects of religious sentiments identified in texts

A content analysis of the data gathered indicates that sentiments that tended to religious beliefs featured on two fronts. These are categorized as positive and negative religious sentiments. The excerpts and discussions that follow demonstrate how these featured.

3.1.1 Positive religious sentiments

By positive religious sentiments, it suggests aspects that tend to build/enhance/galvanise human coexistence. Some of such sentiments are exemplified in the following...



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

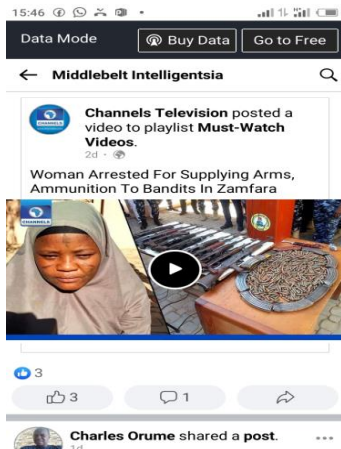


Fig. 3

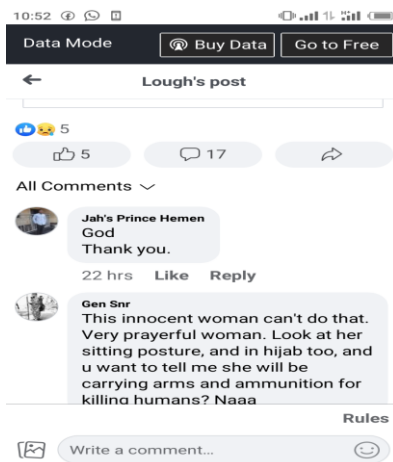


Fig. 4



Fig. 5

These representations of forms of positive religious sentiments came in the form of prayers, wishes and desires expressing goodwill over dastardly acts of disgruntled individual. They indicate submission, dependence and deference to a superior being or power thus eliminating acts of vengeance, reprisal and lawlessness. In Fig. 1 for instance, a conspirator to a crime is arrested and paraded and the commentator made a prayer for God to continue to expose such conspirators that involve such

criminal acts to their shame. This kind of prayer lays credence to the commentator's religious inclination; and because the prayer does not in any way denigrate the suspect's tribe or religion but his action it is thus considered here as positive religious sentiment. Equally, Fig. 2 reveals another prayer made by a commentator on the plight of the residents of Southern-Kaduna, who have for some time now being a theatre of communal, tribal and religious conflicts and recently banditry. The commentator affirmed God's resolve to stand by the people of the area and the need for unity and steadfastness. This prayer indicates an act of deference to God and as against taking laws into ones hands. The commentator equally did not resort to name calling and the casting of aspersions to people, tribe or religion and is hence considered as positive religious sentiment. Fig. 3 reflects comments made about a woman allegedly caught conveying ammunitions concealed in her hijab to terrorists as captured in Fig. 3. The two commentators in the excerpt – Fig. 4, all made allusions to their religious inclinations. While the first praises God for exposing the alleged culprit and not allowing her carryout the said nefarious act, the second accesses the posture and the pious disposition of the alleged suspect and dissociates her from the said crime allegedly committed. In the two comments, what is obvious is the deliberate ploy to avoid attack on the person, tribe or religion but the act in question. Fig. 5 shows another prayer that is calling on God to expose the culprits behind the dastard act that led to the killing of a former gubernatorial aspirant. Here again we see a display of religious sentiments devoid of attacks on tribe and religion. In all, the comments looked at here qualify as what is categorised as positive religious sentiment as they exhibit religious inclinations that are not derogatory to tribes and religions, but are rather made in a manner that make for harmonious coexistence.

3.1.2 Negative religious sentiments

These forms of religious sentiments are such that engender acrimony and disaffection amongst people. The following examples exemplify how they feature in texts.



Fig. 6

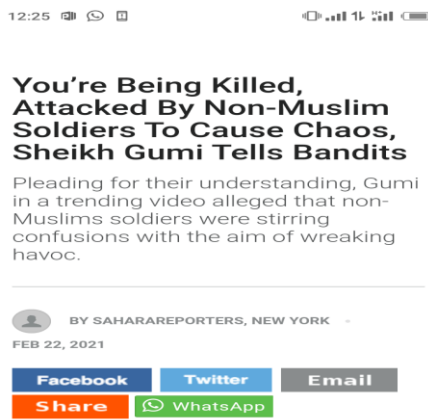


Fig. 7

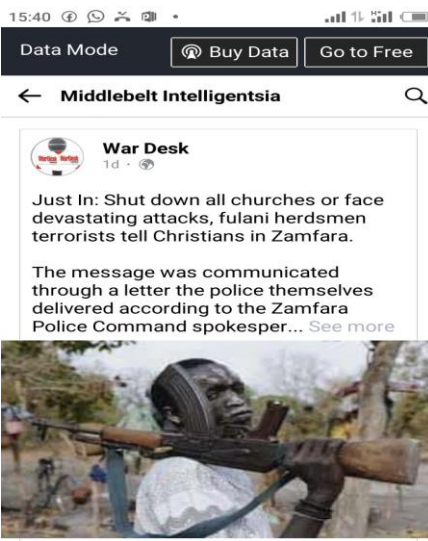


Fig. 8

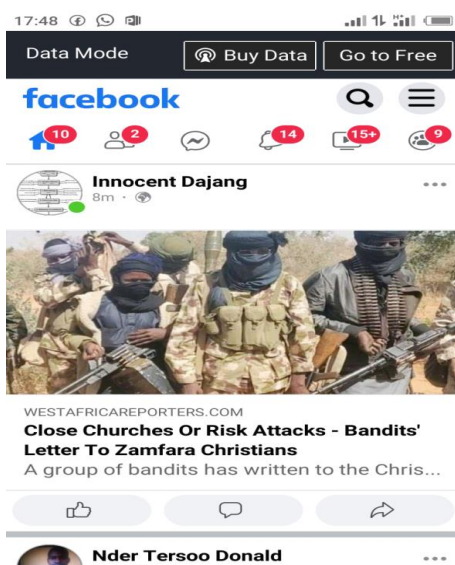


Fig. 9

Negative religious sentiments are those that do not possess the tendency to foster harmonious coexistence but tend to fan the embers of disharmony, bitterness and hatred. Anything that possesses the quality of engendering disaffection is here qualified as negative religious sentiments. These as got from the researched text are exemplified in the excerpts that follow.

Fig. 6 and 7 are credited to and an Islamic cleric, Sheik Gumi, who has been in the vanguard of advocating for the plight of the Fulani militia group(s) and Bandits. In the two (2) excerpts, the cleric singles out a specific group, based on their faith, and pitches them against another, based also on their faith. This is considered detrimental to harmonious coexistence as it portends ill feelings and disaffection between one group and another. Such a posture is regarded as negative religious sentiments because it does not suggest a deliberate use of religious sentiments to bring about uplifting and fostering of togetherness but division. It is unarguable that crime knows no religion; people from all faiths have criminal elements amongst them and are not known to segregate among themselves. Equally, security personnel cut across different tribes and religion and they are not sent to any assignment considering their tribe and or religion. It will also be difficult determining whose shot cause death or bodily injury from a battalion of security operatives. Therefore, to isolate a particular sect as been responsible to the death of a group of people as conveyed in the excerpts is none the less despicable and malicious and intended to cripple every likelihood of peaceful coexistence and harmony amongst the two groups. This is thus considered negative religious sentiments, as it does not tend to use religion to build but destroy humanity.

Fig 8 and 9 further expose negative religious sentiments. The two figures convey threats to a specific religious sect to shut its activities in a state or face attacks. These kinds of threats do not portend well for a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious society like Nigeria. The tendency for such kind of unguarded utterances is to further polarise, deepen ethnic and religious divides, and entrench disharmony and acrimony. Such divisive tendencies and utterances with religious colourations that tend to put different religious groups against themselves are what this study terms negative religious sentiments.

3.2 Determining how religious sentiments can abate or aggravate in/security situation(s)

This section tries to ascertain the impact of religious sentiments on already distressed in/security predicament of the national polity. The following excerpts are taken to guide the focus of the discourse and argument.



Fig. 10

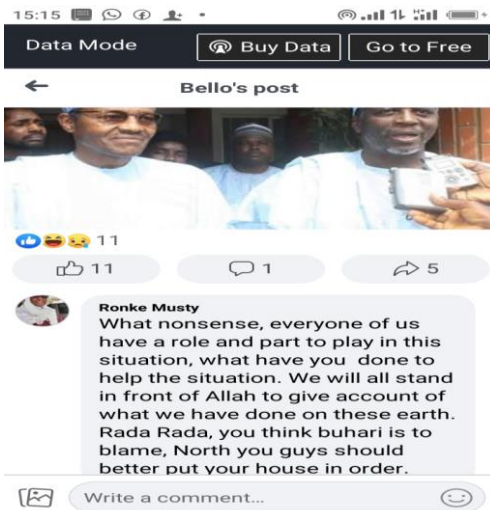


Fig. 11

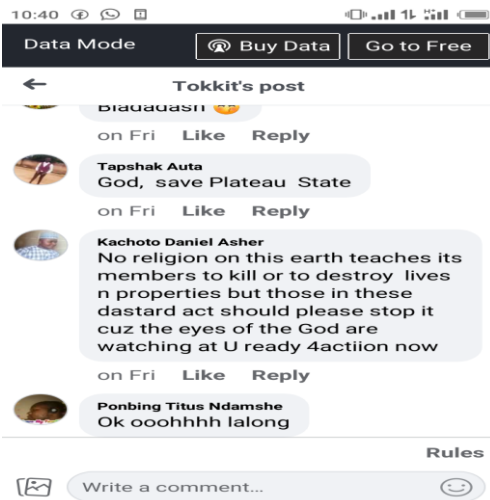


Fig. 12

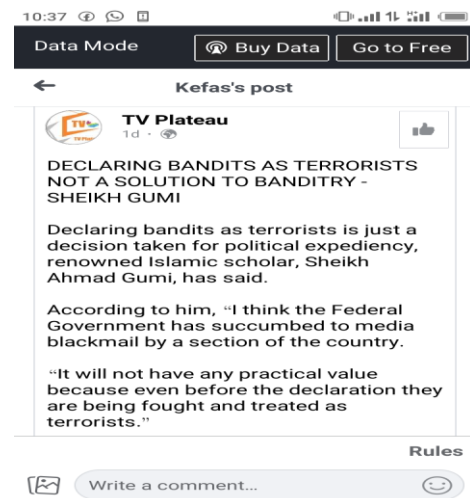


Fig. 13

Language as a tool can be used to create so many things. When used metaphorically it paints mental pictures. Language is also used to perform actions that are referred to as ‘speech acts’ – actions performed via acts of speaking. In a similar vein, language can also be used to build or destroy peaceful coexistence among people. It is on record that to change course of actions and redirect actions and inactions, people have used motivational speaking and oratory. Wars are known to start by specific utterances of people and end by the utterances of others, (Alte Hetland 2011, on “Words and wars” – How important are words and language on the road to peace) refers. If language use is this critical and could make or mar the corporate existence of a country, what then does the religious sentiment deployed in expression conveyed in the excerpts above portend for the wellbeing and harmonious coexistence of Nigeria as a nation?

Fig. 10 gives an account of someone who even though is of the same faith with Sheik Gumi calls to question Gumi’s type of Muslim faith based on comments coming from him. This comes on the verge of prevailing narratives in the nation where communities shield their bad eggs and criminals and only point accusing fingers at others. It is pertinent to note that when as a people, we individually and collective, begin to speak up and condemn evil across board, whether it concerns us or not, we will be moving a step towards harmonious living and coexistence amongst ourselves. In that case evil will be evil, no matter who perpetuates the evil or where it is perpetuated. Fig. 11 shows the comment made by someone in response to a former governor of Sokoto state Attahiru Bafarawa, who stated that the president of the nation, Mohammadu Buhari, will answer to Almighty Allah for all his actions and inactions on the security situation in Nigeria. The commentator argues that, Mohammadu Buhari will not be the only one answerable to God on the situation in Nigeria; the former governor is equally asked the role he has played in the crisis. It summed that everyone will answer for the roles s/he plays in the security situation. This suggests that language choices at times like this should not just be fault-finding and blame apportioning but an

all-encompassing approach, where everyone is involved is seeking solution to the crisis in the country.

Fig. 12 dissociates true religious adherents from teaching and practicing mayhem and destruction of life and property. This presupposes that any act perpetrated by anyone in the name of any religion and aimed at destroying lives and property is fake and practicing lawlessness and not true religion. These kinds of sentiment tend more to building and upholding virtues that uphold harmonious living and coexistence and not divisiveness. Nations tend to develop better and faster when there is peace and harmony while wars and crisis bring about backwardness, destruction and bitterness. It therefore behoves on well-meaning individuals to tour the path of peace in all forms of communication amongst other measures so that peace can be fostered across the nation.

3.3 Multimodality and meaning making in texts

These highlight the interface between the verbal and visual aspects of texts to determine how meaning construction are intended and understood. Social media platforms enable the construction of text with diverse modes. Taking from the excerpts used in the forgoing, this section illustrates how the interfaces between the modes enhance the construction and deconstruction of meaning.

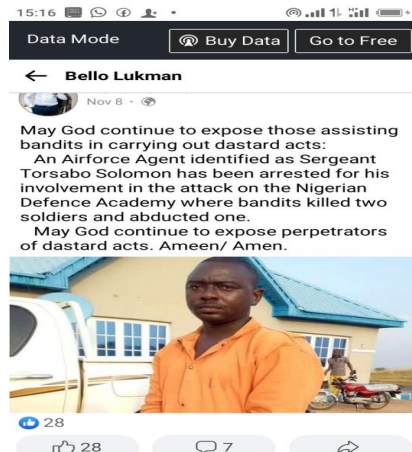


Fig. 14

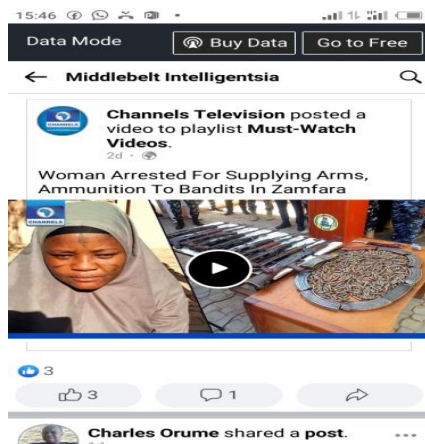


Fig 15



Fig. 16

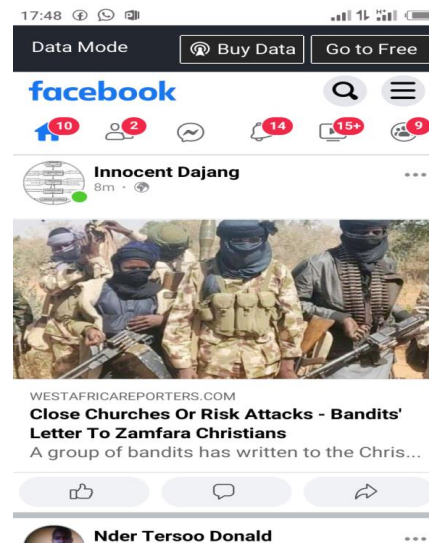


Fig. 17

The foregoing excerpts represent aspects of verbal and visual elements in communicating meaning. Excerpt 14 for instance, has verbal elements that mention a suspected collaborator to a crime by name and his alleged role in the said crime. The verbal element is corroborated by a picture of the supposed suspect to the crime as a way of laying credence to the story. The aspect of talking about someone and displaying a supposed picture of the person simultaneously shows the interconnected between what is been said and what is represented in the picture as the same. This interface between the verbal and visual elements reinforces the encoding and decoding of meaning in discourse.

Similarly, excerpt 15, carries a story of a woman supposedly arrested for being the supplier of arms and ammunition to bandits in Zamfara State, Nigeria. The wordings conveying this news are accompanied with a picture of a woman, and in the background are assorted weapons and ammunition. The pictorial reinforces the alleged claim in the wordings of the news alleging the woman involvement as a supplier of weapons

to bandits to carry out their nefarious acts in Zamfara State. This interface of the verbal and the visual elements in discourse helps language users to better encode meaning just as the receivers of such information rely on the same multimodal modes to better decipher intended meaning in the discourse.

In another instance, excerpt 16 relays the story of the murder of a former gubernatorial aspirant in Zamfara State, Alhaji Hamidu by bandits. The picture of the said Alhaji Hamidu accompanies this story. This is to eliminate any form of ambiguity and a possible misrepresentation of which former gubernatorial aspirant, and or Alhaji Hamidu is been referred to as the victim of the murder. In this vein, even if there are different people bearing Alhaji Hamidu, which the possibility is very high; and even if a number of them bearing the name Alhaji Hamidu have once contested the gubernatorial seat of the State, the verbal and visual elements in the story will lay to rest any misconception. Multimodality thus engenders better encoding and decoding of meaning in discourse events.

Excerpt 17, conveys a story of a communiqué by armed bandits to a religious sect to close down or risk attacks. A pictorial of a militia accompanies this supposed threat message, parading assorted arms and ammunitions that indicate the readiness and will to execute the threat if defied. The verbal-visual modes thus emphasize intention and meaning in the discourse in question. The combination of the verbal and visual modes in this regard ensures enhanced meaning making and comprehension of texts.

3.4 Summary and conclusion

Overall, this study has accounted for how language and religious sentiments can and does impact on crises to either abate or exacerbate it. The study argues that language as a tool is a means and not an end in itself. What language does is dependent on the intension the language user puts language to use for. Language use could be destructive if the user intends

mischief; it could equally be constructive if used for the purpose of building harmonious leaving. The two most popular religious sects in Nigeria – Christianity and Islam anchor their faiths on Love and Peace respectively. It behoves on all adherents to adhere to the tenants of their religious beliefs in speech and conduct to engender peace and harmony across the nation. It is worth reiterating that how language is construed and the religious sentiments it conveys can either enhance harmonious coexistence or create divisiveness and acrimony – we must choose our words wisely.

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