Boko Haram and politics: From insurgency to terrorism

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Abstract
Competing discourses are involved in a meta-conflict over the meaning of the Boko Haram uprising in northern Nigeria in July 2009. These discourses are characterised by different conceptions of the state. This study analyses the struggle over the meaning of the uprising, using the theoretical framework of ‘meta-conflict’ set out by Horowitz and Brass, and a discourse analysis methodology based on the work of Foucault, and Lakoff and Johnson. An analysis of media reports in the five weeks following the uprising reveals that embedded within reports on Boko Haram there are four competing conceptions of the state. The Socio-Economic discourse argues for the state as the provider of development, whereas the Political Agency discourse posits the state as the provider of order. The Religious Structural discourse emphasises the state’s secular role in containing expansionist Islam, and the Religious Agency discourse calls on the state to help mainstream Islam maintain control over deviant sects.

Introduction
Research on violent conflict tends to focus on trying to answer the primary-level questions about the cause and nature of violence. Equally important, however, is how the idea of violence is constructed and instrumentalised to support wider political narratives. This article analyses how different actors have given different meanings to the violence related to the Boko Haram uprising in 2009, and

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how those meanings have been reproduced through discourse. The language used to describe the conflict represents divergent understandings of conflict. This study asks what metaphors are used to describe the Boko Haram uprising and what model of the causation is assumed by such metaphors.

As Boko Haram-related violence continues to be a central political issue in Nigeria and in Nigeria’s relations with external states, the need for reliable empirical data on the violence, including details of the victims and transparency over government actions, is obvious. However, equally important is the need to understand what is at stake in discussions about Boko Haram. In talking about Boko Haram, commentators make implicit claims about how the state in Nigeria should operate. The main argument of this article is that the meta-conflict over the meaning of the July 2009 Boko Haram uprising in northern Nigeria is between competing discourses which are characterised by different conceptions of the state: the state as provider of development, the secular state, the state as provider of order, and the state as protector of the moral order. Each of the four major discourses employs metaphorical structures to imply different models of causation. Despite the differences in causation, all of them suggest that the state has responsibility to control the causes of violence. All argue that to solve the conflict, the state must perform its role better, but disagree over the state’s proper role.

As such, this study uses the discourses about Boko Haram as a window to explore salient themes and tensions in Nigerian politics and the international political environment. An analysis of how people talk about Boko Haram, and the themes and tensions within different accounts of the conflict, is relevant to understanding and situating the Boko Haram conflict in wider concerns. Depending on whether one believes that the root causes of the conflict are underdevelopment and bad governance, a lack of police control, the expansionist desires of Muslims, or a lack of regulation of Islamic teachings, one will come to different conclusions as to how peace and stability can be returned to the north-eastern states. The analysis below demonstrates that such core beliefs are often not stated explicitly, but embedded in the language used to frame the Boko Haram conflict.

The article has five sections. The first sets out the theoretical framework, defining two key concepts: discourse and meta-conflict. The second section reviews the literature on the Boko Haram uprising in July 2009, highlighting the confusion and lack of clarity concerning the group’s genesis due to uncritical use of sources. The third section sets out the methodology based on discourse analysis of newspaper reports between 26 July and 31 August 2009 and highlights the methodology’s limitations. In the fourth section I set out four major discourses about the meaning of the uprising: the Socio-Economic discourse, the Religious Structural discourse, the Political Agency discourse, and the Religious Agency
discourse. The fifth section picks up on specific tensions between the discourses and highlights how discourse analysis allows for the identification of metaphors that mask questions of causation. The article concludes with a warning to commentators to critically examine the sources they use and the hidden assumptions of the discourses they employ in discussing the Boko Haram conflict.

For the sake of brevity and clarity I use the phrase the ‘Boko Haram uprising’ to describe the period of violence in northern states from 26 July to 30 July 2009. The label is misleading insofar as violence was perpetrated by a variety of actors, not just by those referred to as Boko Haram. Moreover, the word ‘uprising’ has specific connotations of a unified political project with goals of overthrowing an oppressor. The appropriateness of this term is debatable, but beyond the scope of this article.

Meaning, representation and framing

There is the conflict itself, and there is the meta-conflict – the conflict over the nature of the conflict. Neither is coterminous with the other; neither can be reduced to the other. (Horowitz 1991: 2)

Discourse constructs the conceptual framework through which we interpret the world around us. Through the establishment of metaphors, exclusion of rival explanations and actors, and objectification of social groups into entities, discourses build up overarching narratives. In politics, discourse shapes how we conceive of our interests and identity (Horowitz 1991: 31). When conflict arises, discourse determines not only which side we take, but what we believe the conflict is about. This is evident in the current debates over Boko Haram: if the group is essentially a symptom of poverty and deprivation, then it is a conflict between those whose duty is to provide development (typically the state) and those who are the victims of their incompetence (in this case, unemployed northern youth). Alternatively, if the conflict is caused by deep religious antagonisms, then the only choice is whether to side with the Christians or Muslims. The scope of such discourses extends into the past to find causes for current violence and into the future by setting up expectations of future behaviour (Brass 1996: 2).

For some scholars, discourse is a pejorative term which denotes a gap between what is said and what is true. On this view, discourse is something which obscures truth and must be ‘cut through’ to get to the truth underneath. The resulting scholarly account will not be a discourse; it will just be a neutral analysis of the conflict (McGarry & O’Leary 1995: 1; Lemarchand 1996: 17). However, there is no way of escaping the need to interpret the world around us. The use of discourse is neither optional nor inherently deceptive. Mills emphasises that, following Foucault, discourse is a universal filter, or lens of interpretation (Mills 2003: 55-56).
The purpose of analysing discourse is not to find out which discourse has the best claim to truth, because the criteria by which we might measure truth are internal to specific discourses and cannot be used to evaluate various discourses from an external, ‘objective’ standpoint (Mills 2003: 58). Rather, discourse analysis can help us to de-naturalise certain ways of interpreting the world and see things we would otherwise miss. Ordinarily, the ways in which discourse structures our understanding may seem so natural and automatic as to be invisible to us (Laclau & Mouffe 2001: 108).

The concept of meta-conflict originates in Horowitz’s work on South Africa (1991), but has since been applied more widely to analyse the 1992 Los Angeles riots and the Troubles in Northern Ireland (McGarry & O’Leary 1995; Mac Ginty, Roger & du Toit 2007). The concept of a meta-conflict can be seen as applying the tools of Critical Discourse Analysis to discussions on violent conflict. All conflicts are accompanied by a struggle for their meaning, explanation, and cause. Brass defines a meta-conflict as “the struggle for control over the meaning” of acts of violence and for “the right to represent them properly”. He argues that the struggle is not simply between parties to the conflict but includes the contributions to discourse from academics and journalists (Brass 1996: 1).

A meta-conflict is characterised by a “fundamental dissensus” about who is fighting whom and why (Horowitz 1991: 26). The different narratives interact in a conflictual manner. A key function of each narrative is to assign blame and responsibility. These are not just rival explanations which sit side by side; they actively attack the other explanations offered. Discourses seek to silence or marginalise other competing discourses, presenting rival explanations as attempts to whitewash the real causes of violence, or else discounting them as superficial and self-serving. This happens in two ways. Firstly, through rarefaction, discourse defines who has the authority to speak truth on a certain subject (Foucault 1982: 64; Mills 2003: 67-68; Foucault 2006). Secondly, via exclusion, discourse can exclude rival explanations. In addition to rarefaction and exclusion, discourse engages in objectification: the simplification of the messy and disparate elements of human experience into entities with defined properties as if they were physical objects.

An analysis of discourse is impotent without reference to the power struggles it relates to. For this it is necessary to have knowledge of the local context the discourse occurs in; otherwise, the significance of the ‘words’ and how they relate to pertinent local, national, and international interests will be lost.

Lakoff and Johnson argue that “our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature”. They give the example of an argument as a war. We do not simply talk about argument as if it is war; crucially, we also think about argument as if it is war. The linguis-
tic framework of the metaphor structures our conceptual reality, that is, the way we think about the world (Lakoff & Johnson 1981: 3). The analysis of metaphorical language in descriptions of violence in news reports, often in subtle ways, is a key aspect of Critical Discourse Analysis. The discourses on Boko Haram present events via metaphors in order to simplify and explain them.

Contested chronology and uncritical use of sources

There has been a steady increase in interest in Boko Haram from academics, government, and NGOs in the years since 2009, with an attendant increase in research output about the group. However, there is a lack of clarity over the chronology of events and the genesis of the group – what Eltringham calls the “factual chronicle” (2003). Not only are commentators interpreting events differently, but they do not even agree on what the events are.

There are a number of discrepancies in different descriptions of the history of Boko Haram. Onuoha (2010: 56) says that “the exact date of the emergence of the Boko Haram sect is mired in controversy”, but a survey of the literature reveals confusion rather than disagreement. Writers unintentionally contradict each other. Accounts of how Boko Haram developed are so profoundly different as to indicate a general lack of clarity and knowledge about the group, rather than a range of interpretations of agreed facts. Many authors cite unverified media reports, without critically assessing the reliability of such sources. A pair of news articles in Tell Magazine in August 2009 are cited for large parts of the description of Boko Haram’s activities and history by Adesoji (2011), Danjibo (2009) and Onuoha (2010), who are then cited, among others, in Bagaji (2012), Pham (2012), Aghedo & Osumah (2012) and Cline (2011). Ekanem et al. (2005: 190191) quote from Wikipedia. Other articles do not use citations at all for key claims, such as when Essiet talks about the “rapping [sic] of Christian women in Maiduguri” (Essiet 2010: 4) The Christian Solidarity Worldwide report on inter-communal violence in the years preceding the uprising attempts to evade the need for references by using phrases such as “it is widely held that” or “it appears that” (Christian Solidarity Worldwide 2004: 2).

Owing to the low visibility of the group before 2009, they attracted little academic interest before the uprising. Moreover, the difficulty of researching violent groups first-hand, combined with the escalating risks associated with doing research in the areas where Boko Haram operates in Borno, Yobe, and Bauchi states, means the prospects for empirical study of the group at present remain dim. Journalists, policy makers, and commentators should critically examine their sources when analysing Boko Haram and ensure that the confidence of any subsequent claims reflect the strength of the evidence available.
There is confusion over when Boko Haram first appeared. Onuoha presents one of the most detailed accounts. He quotes the Nigerian Director of Defence Information, who says the sect started in 1995 under Abubakah Lawan’s leadership and then changed name several times from Ahulsunna wal’jam’ah hijra, to the Nigerian Taliban, to Yusufiyya sect, to Boko Haram (Onuoha 2010: 55). However, the group have never referred to themselves as Boko Haram, calling themselves first ahl al-sunna wa-l-jama’a wa-l-hijra, and then from late 2009 onwards, jama’at ahl al-sunna li-l-da’wa wa-l-jihad ‘ala minhaj al-salaf (Loimeier 2012: 151-152). It appears that Yusuf and the group became associated with the phrase boko haram from 2005 onwards, thanks to Yusuf’s frequent decrying of “boko” in his sermons. However, up until 2009, press reports call group members “Nigerian Taliban” (Chouin, Reinert & Apar, this volume).

Aghedo and Osumah cite Onuoha for their historical overview section and yet say that Yusuf was the leader of the group since the mid-1990s (Aghedo & Osumah 2012: 858). Cook claims that Boko Haram first manifested in 2002, which is later than Onuoha’s 2001 date for their establishment but before his estimate of their first attack, 2003 (Onuoha 2010: 56; Cook 2011: 9). Danjibo agrees that Boko Haram has at times been called the Yusufiyya sect but that it was Yusuf who established it in 2001 not Lawan in 1995, whilst Cline says that in 2002 Yusuf merely took over the group, despite using Danjibo as his reference (Danjibo 2009: 6; Cline 2011: 281).

Onuoha argues that the first public attacks by Boko Haram came in Kanama and Geidam, Yobe State, in 2003, before the group was “dislodged” by the army and dispersed, returning to set up base in Kanama in 2004. The same year, the group attacked police stations in Gwoza and Bama, Borno State, which was met with police counterattacks (Onuoha 2010: 56). Cook echoes the 2003 and 2004 Kanama stories, but asserts that there were two other attacks in 2004, resulting in deaths and arrests before this, which Onuoha does not mention, in Damboa and Damaturu (Cook 2011: 9-10). Cline says Boko Haram started armed operations in 2004, which could refer to Kanama, but he does not give details (Cline 2011: 281). Okpaga et al. and Boas suggest that Yusuf operated in Maiduguri, not Kanama, in that time period, with Boas presenting Boko Haram as a different group from the ones that launched attacks in 2004 (Okpaga, Chijioke & Eme 2012: 82). Boas suggests that whilst the other more violent groups were crushed, before 2009 Boko Haram appeared to be a “harmless” complex comprising a school and mosque (Boas 2012: 3). Pham suggests that this period of “relative calm” only emerged sometime after they were repelled by security forces in 2004 (Pham 2012: 2-3).

According to Onuoha, skirmishes with the police continued at a low level until 2007, when Yusuf and a fellow member of Boko Haram were tried for terror-
related crimes (Onuoha 2010: 56-57). However, Danjibo and Bagaji both cite an article from *Tell Magazine* in 2009 that claims Yusuf and others from Boko Haram were arrested as part of Operation Sawdust in 2005 and held in police custody until 2007 (Danjibo 2009: 15; Bagaji *et al.* 2012: 38). Onuoha says that Yusuf was arrested again in 2008 and held until January 2009, though Danjibo does not mention this (Onuoha 2010: 56). Cook and Le Sage do not mention any arrests and say that between 2004/2005 and 2009 there was a period of truce between Boko Haram and the government (Cook 2011: 10), or at least an “inactive phase” (Le Sage 2011: 7).

In terms of the July 2009 uprising, it appears that there was an initial incident at a funeral procession in Maiduguri in June 2009 where 17 Boko Haram members were shot and wounded by police after a confrontation over motorbike taxi drivers not wearing helmets (Last 2008: 7; Okpaga, Chijioke & Eme 2012: 82-83). A police raid in Bauchi town, advised by the Nigerian intelligence services, then came in early July, resulting in a shoot-out at a police station where some Boko Haram members who were arrested in the raid were being held. Soon afterwards, Boko Haram members began to congregate in Maiduguri in preparation for more confrontations (Last 2008: 7; Danjibo 2009: 15).

Recently, rigorous work has been done to establish a reliable chronology of events, both in terms of the group’s development in the context of Islamic contestation in the northern states over a number of decades (Loimeier 2012) and in terms of lethal incidents in the Boko Haram conflict.² My aim in this study is not to resolve the discrepancies in the factual record but to analyse how the debate about the conflict illuminates wider political themes in Nigerian politics.

Despite the differences between different accounts of what happened, when, and why, there are three main events during the course of the uprising between 26 and 30 July that each discourse has to interpret. In rough chronological order they are the following: the uprising and associated violence perpetrated by Boko Haram between 26 and 30 July, whether in Maiduguri, Borno State, Bauchi, Bauchi State, Damaturu and Potiskum, Yobe State, or Wudil, Kano State; the response of the state, which involved immediate retaliation by police and then a military operation in Maiduguri starting on 27 July; and the death of the leader of Boko Haram, Mohammad Yusuf, in police custody on 30 July. In addition to these key nodes of analysis, articles refer to a range of other events in an effort to place the Boko Haram uprising in a broader context. This contributes to ideological discourses whose significance extends beyond the uprising.

² www.nigeriawatch.org
Methodology and limitations

My analysis was conducted on 186 newspaper reports from a five-week window extending from 26 July to the end of August 2009. The vast majority of articles I looked at were news reports rather than analysis or editorials, meaning that the process of interpretation is manifested in how the author tells the story, rather than in explicit editorial opinions. Articles from outside that period, or from other news sources, are included where they help illuminate an overarching discourse which articles from the time period fit into.

Discourse is not limited to the written word; however, for the purposes of this study the primary sources selected come solely from the national and international newspaper press. Non-literate media, such as TV and radio, were excluded from the dataset, as were news sources such as BBC Hausa Service and Aminiya, which do not broadcast in English. There are difficulties in ascertaining the size of the readership of newspapers and thus in determining how representative of the views of the general population discourses reproduced by newspapers are. However, there are reasons to believe that newspapers reach a significant portion of the Nigerian population (Bakker 2011: 5-6). Copies are passed from person to person, around offices and workplaces, and archived in libraries. Furthermore, this does not include online readership. This means the real readership is likely to be many multiples higher than the sales figures.

For domestic newspapers, I looked at Daily Trust, perhaps the largest-selling English-language newspaper in the North; The Nation, aimed at the business elite; The Guardian, secular and aimed at the educated elite; and ThisDay, with a similar audience and genre to The Guardian (Stanford University Libraries). Not all Nigerian newspapers have online archives going back to 2009, so I was unable to include Punch in my analysis, despite its apparently having the highest circulation. For others (including The Nation and The Guardian), archives were available only on news aggregation websites, meaning that they may have published articles which were not picked up by the website and thus not included in my analysis. Therefore I chose my sources based on the following criteria: whether they were available online, whether they had a significant readership, and whether across all the sources there was a good cross-section of the views available. Newspaper publishing is concentrated around Lagos, with the Daily Trust being the only major ‘northern’ newspaper included in the study. The New Nigerian, established by Sir Ahmadu Bello in 1963, was for a long time the mouth-piece of the northern establishment. In 2009 it was still active, yet archives are unavailable online and it is therefore not included in the analysis.

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3 Newspapers are archived at, among other places, the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, and the National Archives, in Ibadan, Kaduna, Enugu. For more information about the holdings of various Nigerian archives, see http://archiveswiki.historians.org/index.php/National_Archives_of_Nigeria
For foreign newspapers, I applied the added criteria of whether they discussed the Boko Haram crisis, as the coverage was patchy. From the foreign press, I looked at *Foreign Policy*, BBC News Online, Al Jazeera English, and the British newspaper *The Guardian* (from here on, *The Guardian [UK]*).

The Boko Haram conflict has expanded in geographic scope, number of causalities, and political and social consequences since 2009. Several different phases have developed, with substantial shifts in the leadership of the group, their methods, their communications, and their international links and outlook. Accordingly, the number of media and academic reports on the conflict has exploded. A full analysis of the meta-conflict over the meaning of the violence would take account of these growing bodies of discourse. Notably, some key discourses have emerged which are not touched on in this study but have been dominant in certain sectors: the discourse of foreign influence as the cause of Boko Haram violence; of Boko Haram being used as political thugs by ex-Borno State Governor Ali Modu Sheriff; and a growing discourse of civil war between Muslim North and Christian South, linking Boko Haram to violations of the Presidential zoning agreement. Rather, this study takes only a small snapshot of discourses that were in circulation in a limited number of newspapers very early on in the conflict. This snapshot is then used as an opening to analyse more general themes and concerns in Nigerian politics, through the lens of the Boko Haram conflict.

Framing and blaming: Discourses on Boko Haram

In the media in the five weeks during and after the uprising, there are four major discourses on the meaning of the Boko Haram uprising: the Socio-Economic discourse, the Religious Structural discourse, the Political Agency discourse, and the Religious Agency discourse. All offer an explanation of the conflict whereby it fits with a broader worldview. The discourses locate the violence related to the Boko Haram uprising in different contexts, identifying its causes and assigning blame. Through this interpretive process each viewpoint contains a conception of the state which links context, cause, and blame to an implied understanding of how the state should respond to violence. These conceptions are in conflict: each discourse seeks to undermine rival discourses via exclusion and rarefaction.

*Socio-Economic discourse: The roots of underdevelopment*

The socio-economic view holds that the Boko Haram crisis is merely a symptom of the larger underlying problem of poverty and exclusion, which is at the heart of all violence in Nigeria whether in the Delta, Jos or Maiduguri. *Foreign Policy* (FP) magazine summarises the socio-economic view:
With Yusuf out of the picture, it would be silly to assume that the trouble is over. These sorts of episodes will keep popping up as they have throughout the North for the last decades until the root of the problem is fixed. (Dickinson 2009a)

The discourse uses metaphorical language to suggest that all incidents of violence have the same cause. This objectifies the cause of violence into a single entity, like a root, and homogenises all violent incidents, as if they are plants linked by an underground root system. This is evident in phrases such as “these sorts of episodes”, “uprisings like this”, “this most recent eruption”, and the description of Boko Haram as “the northern Nigerian version” of violence in the Niger Delta (Dickinson 2009a; Herskovits 2009).

The role of religion in the conflict is acknowledged but presented as epiphenomenal and relatively unimportant. The metaphors of depth are used to characterise the ‘real’ causes of violence, reinforcing the idea of the causes of violence as a root of a plant which spread below the surface. In contrast, rival accounts of the conflict are excluded by labelling them as superficial, using metaphors of shallowness. FP writes: “Religious violence is a much simpler answer – and on the surface, a correct one” (Dickinson 2009a). The ‘surface’ is irrelevant because the real cause – deprivation – “digs deeper” and it “stretches all the way back to Abuja” (ibid.). The root cause lies under the surface ready to be triggered: “the only question is what will trigger the next spate of armed mayhem, and where. It could be anywhere” (Herskovits 2009).

Even explicitly religious events cannot be explained with reference to religion, but by socio-economic factors. The cause of violence is socio-economic deprivation, and the blame lies with the corrupt political elite, which has failed in the state’s primary task to provide development. Conflict should be seen in the context of Nigeria as a weak or failing state. For example, in 2000 “secular institutions were not delivering justice. Sharia, it was hoped, would do a better job” (ibid.). The FP blog argues that people were indifferent to Shariah “as a religious tool” but interested in it as a solution to a “backwards system” (Dickinson 2009a).

The solution is to replace the failing state with one that delivers development according to good governance models. The failure is not of the model of the state but of the individual office holders’ inability to perform the functions required by the Western liberal free-market model of the state. The root cause of socio-economic deprivation would be solved if the state operated correctly. The opposition ANPP support this view, arguing that the problem would be solvable were different actors, namely the ANPP, in charge at a federal level (Bisalla 2009).

The socio-economic view criticises the government as part of a process of rarification. Officials are portrayed as incompetent and not a credible source of knowledge. FP calls the government “unprepared” and its views “silly” (Dickinson 2009a; Herskovits 2009). It mocks the president for going on a “jaunt” to
Brazil during the uprising (Dickinson 2009b). This discourse is largely held by Western commentators, including *Foreign Policy* magazine and the United States government, who position themselves as experts or representatives of the state as provider of development.

It empowers those who can be presented as the victims of state-led underdevelopment, such as Boko Haram, because their grievances are seen as somewhat justified. The socio-economic view downplays the threat of Boko Haram and contrasts it with “the excessive force” of the state’s response (Herskovits 2009; Kawu 2009). Descriptions of Boko Haram attacks are absent or brief and are referred to as “attacks on police stations” and then “clashes between” the group and the security services. In contrast, the focus is on the aggression of the police, saying that the military “compounded the misery of people in Maiduguri” thanks to the “indiscriminate killing of guilty and innocent alike” (Herskovits 2009).

**Religious Structural discourse: Muslims versus the rest**

The religious structural view presents the Boko Haram crisis as just one example of an intrinsic tendency within Islam, which causes periodic episodes of violence. The Boko Haram uprising is essentially a religious conflict, like past instances of communal violence in Jos and Kano. Conflict should be seen in the context of northern Nigeria as the site of repeated jihad, going back to 1804, and as part of a global struggle against Islamism and terrorism.

Violence is described in religious terms and with a focus on details which highlight the Islamic-ness of the actors involved – that they were “chanting ‘God is Great!’” (Smith 2009a), or were “wearing long-beards” (Smith 2009b). Muslims are objectified and portrayed as having essential characteristics. The specifics of Boko Haram are only relevant insofar as they uncover deeper, more essential characteristics that all Muslims share.

The objectification of Muslims can be seen in the wider literature on religious violence in Nigeria. Christian Solidarity Worldwide groups all Muslims into a single monolithic entity and then homogenises ‘the rest’, constructing a binary between Muslim and non-Muslims. ‘Non-Muslims’ becomes a unitary actor which thinks and acts as one. For example, “the non-Muslims of Plateau State view the situation altogether differently” (Christian Solidarity Worldwide 2004: 1).

The entity of ‘Muslims’ is extended in two directions to form a spectrum of ‘extremist’ to ‘moderate’ Muslims. At one pole are Al-Qaeda terrorists (Clark 2009) and at the other are everyday Nigerian Muslim social customs (Essiet 2010). Yet, because everything on the spectrum shares the same basic characteristic of being Muslim, the differences between them are presented as being of degree rather than categorical. On this view, extremists are therefore simply un-
inhibited moderates. Moderates and extremists share a desire to impose their beliefs, but moderates will not act upon them. This supports the idea that the threat of Islam is bubbling below the surface. An individual Muslim might appear to be moderate but beneath their inhibited, civilised front lie threatening Islamic tendencies: extremism can erupt from seeming moderacy. The religious structural view implies that violence will stop only when the underlying cause of structural religious antagonism is resolved.

Furthermore, the religious structural view merges state and society, to create an impression of Islam as all-consuming. Bagaji et al. (2012) use the phrases “secular state” and “secular society” interchangeably, both of which are presented as the target for Muslim aggression. Individual liberty and safety, therefore, are equated with a secular state. The conception of the state this implies can be seen in the following quote:

The church, which blamed the Federal Government for the proliferation of the Boko Haram movement, urged government to take urgent steps to contain the current upsurge in religious militancy in the country as propagated by the sect. (The Guardian 2009c)

Therefore the problem is one of religion, but it has a political solution for which the state is responsible. The biggest threat to society is the inherent expansionist tendency of Islam, and therefore the primary function of the state is to protect against it. The state can be judged by how well it protects its secular status to keep Islam at bay. But the major conflict is not between two religions – Islam and Christianity – but Islam and ‘the rest’. Therefore the state’s role is to protect its secular status, which mainly involves containing or repelling the expansionist tendencies of Islam. When the state fails in this role, the state is to blame for the violence, because it has neglected its responsibilities.

In terms of the wider power hierarchies reinforced by this discourse, Christian groups such as the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) gain authority to represent the conflict in such a way that it emphasises religious difference and position themselves as speaking for the innocent victims of the struggle against expansionist Islam. Newspapers like The Guardian often give column inches to Christian organisations condemning the violence (The Guardian 2009c). Muslims are seen as perpetrators of violence and Christians as peace-loving victims (The Guardian 2009f). The Guardian (UK) repeats four times in one article that Mohammad Yusuf said he and his followers will fight to the death, reinforcing the idea that he is mad or irrational (Smith 2009a). This excludes discourses which advocate negotiation with the group or appeasement through development in the North. This discourse undermines the ability of Muslims to speak with authority on the conflict, and of those who are seen as too politically correct to admit that the problem is Islam.
Political Agency discourse: The volatility of violence
The political agency view casts Boko Haram-related violence as part of the state’s continuous efforts to maintain order against the forces of chaos and disorder. The state’s purpose is to provide order, and this is threatened by the existence of violence, which is apt to spread by contagion. The language used suggests a metaphor of violence as a liquid seeping through gaps in the state’s protection. The metaphor helps construct a binary between soft, chaotic, non-state violence and the hard control of the state. Like water, violence is fluid and evades control: it “spreads” (Idris et al. 2009), militans “proliferate”, there are “upsurges” (The Guardian 2009b) and “outbreaks” of violence (The Guardian 2009f). In response to the unpredictable fluid movements of chaos, the police must “contain and repel” the threat (Abdulfattah 2009a). Any lack of control is characterised as loose, lax or volatile. Reports refer to poor policing as “exposing the country to danger”, which reinforces the idea of danger as softness or an opening (The Guardian 2009e).

The political agency view presents violence by non-state actors as especially dangerous. Boko Haram’s attacks are described in literal, evocative terms, focusing on the physical acts of violence: villages are “stormed” and “razed”. “[A]nother civilian was burnt to ashes” as Boko Haram “used sharp knives and inflicted serious injuries on the necks and body parts of seven other police officers” (Idris et al. 2009).

In direct contrast to the visually evocative descriptions of Boko Haram, police are presented as rule-driven. The acts of state violence are described in orderly terms, and the police’s physical actions are almost never mentioned. Instead, they are described as if in a constitutional document. They submit “comprehensive reports” (The Nation 2009a), continue “heavy bombardments” and “successfully crushed the uprising” (The Guardian 2009d). Furthermore, police officers are the frontline of the fight against violence, because they are the guardians of the forces of order (Idris & Haroun 2009).

In certain situations, however, the police or the government are to blame for failing to exert enough control. The state should not show signs of weakness – for example, indecision, unwillingness to be violent, or mercy – because these are as bad as the violence itself. The idea that violence is the result of weakness is echoed in the wider literature about terrorism. Forrest & Giroux (2011: 12) use terms which denote softness or opening to describe the risks posed by terrorists: for instance, terrorists might find “sanctuary”, “operational freedom” or a “safe-haven”. They describe a lack of government control as government “softness” (ibid.). Soft openings are bad because danger could penetrate the gaps, like water leaks through holes or weak points in fabric. This excludes discourses which focus on the causes or justifications for non-state violence.
For politicians, the solution is to impose more order. The plans proposed by a group of northern governors involve increasing government control in general. They “resolved to monitor the activities of all religious groups to forestall recurrence of unrest” (sic), and traditional rulers will be “empowered to enforce relevant laws that guide and regulate the establishment and activities of religious groups or sects” (The Guardian 2009f). All the verbs are all about control: resolve, monitor, forestall, empower, enforce, guide, regulate. The state should be synonymous with control and order; thus, the response to violence is to extend the control of the state. In the literature on terrorism, we can see similar conceptions of violence as the result of the state’s failure to be strong and provide order. Forrest & Giroux (2011: 12-13) write that terrorism could be addressed by helping African militaries and police services to “strengthen” themselves or encouraging “non-state actors ... [to] undertake local policing duties”.

This discourse serves the interests of the police, because it marginalises members of Boko Haram as “dangerous lunatics” and “religious fanatics”, who are “awfully superstitious”, and justifies police killings of suspects. BBC News, The Nation, Al Jazeera and ThisDay also reproduce this discourse.

Religious Agency discourse: deviance and order within Islam

The view put forward by some of the northern Islamic establishment is that the Boko Haram crisis is a religious issue, but one caused by an Islamic agent whose views and behaviour are an aberration, not the norm. The Arewa Consultative Forum and editorials in the Daily Trust newspaper present this view (Ebije 2009). It emphasises the benign nature of Islam in the North and focuses on the ways in which individuals such as Yusuf have manipulated normal Muslims to make them act in anomalous ways. Muslim leaders engage in a complex process of including and excluding Boko Haram from wider Islam. Mohammad Haruna writes in a Daily Trust editorial: “Billions of others, including his fellow Muslims, would equally disagree [with Mohammed Yusuf]”. The idea of “fellow Muslims” who are in disagreement reflects this tension (Haruna 2009). On the one hand, they do not want Islam to be associated with violence, so they condemn Boko Haram as “un-Islamic” (Daily Trust 2009h). On the other hand, they want to resist the socio-economic view which labels religion as unimportant, a superficial symptom of underlying deprivation.

The Religious Agency discourse resolves this tension by saying Boko Haram is a religious problem which therefore needs a religious solution (Abubakar 2009; Ebije 2009; The Guardian 2009a). Contrary to the Socio-Economic discourse, religion is not epiphenomenal. The direct causes of violence are incorrect teachings and a lack of moral order. This empowers Islamic leaders as experts, who can solve the problem of bad religious teaching through producing CDs with
authoritative preaching (Daily Trust 2009a) or religious radio programmes that “debunk the myths of Yusuf’s teaching” (Daily Trust 2009b). The Daily Trust newspaper devotes large sections of news reports to quoting Islamic leaders’ condemnations of the violence (Daily Trust 2009a). This sets up an opposition between a minority and the majority of Nigerian Muslims. Boko Haram is marginalised through the description of weird beliefs held by the group, which distinguish it from normal Islam. The Daily Trust notes that schools linked with Boko Haram taught children not to eat Maggi – a ubiquitous food brand – or wash with soap (Fidelis 2009).

Whereas the religious structural view presents the difference between extremists and moderates as a matter of degree, the religious agency view presents extremism as an aberration. Rather than Boko Haram being an “eruption” of underlying extremism, Yusuf’s ideas are portrayed as externally imposed, like a sickness, a delirium or a spell (Idris 2009). Boko Haram members are “misled” (La-lo, Agbese & Muhammed 2009) and “ill-informed, perhaps brainwashed” by Yusuf (Daily Trust 2009f), and “innocent children ... were unconsciously initiated into the sect” (Daily Trust 2009c). This discourse emphasises Muslim victimhood both in terms of the members of Boko Haram who “lost their lives” and the “bereaved” families they left behind without breadwinners (Gusau & Bashir 2009; Idris 2009).

The state, in its primary role as the upholder of moral order, should reaffirm and strengthen the proper forms of Islam, supporting mainstream Islam to overcome its misguided deviant fringes. This discourse is ambivalent towards the current government, at times blaming the police for anti-Muslim violence and, at others, seeking to harness the power of the state to license and control religious activities (Kwaru, Salkida & Idris 2009).

Tensions, metaphors and hidden assumptions

Violence does not speak for itself; violence must go through a process of interpretation where it is turned into an event, with a cause and a context. The above analysis demonstrates that in the case of the Boko Haram uprising in 2009, there is dissensus over the meaning of violence. Where are the points of tension in the meta-conflict? How do the various discourses competing for dominance attempt to exclude and marginalise rival discourses? In this brief discussion section, I highlight how these tensions play out in practice, using the example of a specific discursive interaction between the Socio-Economic discourse as reproduced by Hilary Clinton and the Political Agency discourse as reproduced by the then President Umar Yar’Adua. Finally, I analyse two instances where metaphors are used to mask questions of causation and naturalise certain simplified ways of
seeing the world. Such analysis is by no means exhaustive but illustrative of the ways in which discourse embeds certain assumptions.

**Shared ground and areas of tension**

In general it is worth noting that the political agency view is most prevalent, finding widespread support among the Nigerian press and Yar’Adua. Internationally, the socio-economic view is most popular, whilst the religious structural view is held by a minority of foreign commentators and some Christian organisations in Nigeria. The religious agency view is the least prevalent, with support confined to Muslim commentators in the North. The four discourses at times overlap. In particular, all the divergent discourses are tinged with the political agency view, which focuses on the state maintaining control over the forces of chaos. Moreover, the first three are statist. They all present the state as the key to both the problem and the solution, whilst advancing competing views of the appropriate role of the state. The final view presents the state as an auxiliary actor in the solution, fulfilling only a supporting role to the northern Islamic establishment, whose role is to uphold the moral order.

Boyd says some resolution of the meta-conflict is necessary, and Horowitz argues that dissensus in the meta-conflict “increases the difficulty of finding ways for the parties to the conflict to seek accommodation and inclusion rather than hegemony and exclusion” (Horowitz 1991: 21; Boyd 1992). Indeed, the four conceptions of the state are not necessarily incompatible; there is a degree of shared ground where dialogue can happen. There could be a state that provides development and order, is secular, and ensures the upholding of multiple schemes of moral authority. But this is a tall order for a state which has low capacity, resources, and legitimacy. The different conceptions pull in different directions, and tradeoffs will require prioritisation of certain functions of the state over others. For instance, a discourse which emphasises the inevitability of conflict will counsel a different course of action from discourses which identify specific grievances as the cause of conflict. Where discourses pull in opposite directions, many of the available options will be not only undesirable but illegitimate for key sections of society. For example, the possibility of strengthening Muslim leadership in the North as a way of safeguarding against deviant forms of Islam would be a solution on the religious agency view, but for the religious structural view it would threaten the key secular role of the state.

A key example of these conflicting conceptions of the state is in the tension between the Socio-Economic discourse and the Political Agency discourse. Both present the state as a solution to violence, but their conceptions of the state differ. For the commentators in *Foreign Policy* and in the United States government, the state’s primary offering is development; for many Nigerian politicians, it is order
and control. Hilary Clinton visited Nigeria as American Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs two weeks after the violence. Her comments emphasised conflict’s socio-economic causes:

The most immediate source of the disconnect between Nigeria’s wealth and its poverty is a failure of governance at the federal, state and local levels ... Lack of transparency and accountability has eroded the legitimacy of the government and contributed to the rise of groups that embrace violence and reject the authority of the state. (The Nation 2009b)

At first glance, the then President Yar’Adua agreed with Clinton’s analysis, saying that he “promised the United States that his administration would not falter in the war against corruption” (The Nation 2009c). However, Clinton’s conception of the state as provider of development is met with a conception of the state as the provider of order. The president’s conception is based around improving the state’s strength and control – for instance, winning the “war against corruption” and not “fal[ling]” (Abdulfattah 2009b).

The Political Agency discourse, which portrays non-state violence as chaotic and unpredictable, contrasts with the Socio-Economic discourse, in which Boko Haram is portrayed as predictable and rational. Herskovits says that the violence “did not surprise the people of Maiduguri or anyone else in Nigeria”. She suggests that Boko Haram’s anti-state beliefs are widely held: “even established leaders of Islam in the north ... are aware of how government has failed Nigeria’s young” (Herskovits 2009). More broadly, the tension between the socio-economic and political agency views can further be seen in the discussion of amnesty for Boko Haram. For the former it is a rational response to violence which expresses political grievances, but for the latter it represents weakness and permissiveness, going against the core purpose of the state. Under stress, the small area of overlap between the conceptions – for instance, the shared importance of the rule of law for the political agency and socio-economic views – will disappear as different actors cling to the core elements of their worldviews.

The discourses differ in how far they treat the police as an authoritative source of knowledge. Newspapers that reproduce the Political Agency discourse, like The Nation, ThisDay and The Guardian, frequently quote police spokesmen uncritically. In contrast, the Daily Trust articles, representing the Religious Agency discourse, undermine the police as authoritative sources of knowledge by contradictory reports – for example, when paraded suspects protest their innocence (Daily Trust 2009d; Daily Trust 2009e; Daily Trust 2009g; Idris et al. 2009).

For both the Socio-Economic discourse and the Religious Structural discourse, the focus is on general, longstanding structural causes of violence. This allows commentators to explain the violence with little reference to local context and facts on the ground. Whilst the religious agency view puts local actors in a position of expertise – because they know the specifics of Boko Haram’s teaching –
structural views empower international commentators who are able to ‘stand back’ from the conflict and look to the wider, supposedly deeper, causes, whether socio-economic or religious.

Objectification of violence and social groups
The discourses about Boko Haram exemplify how metaphors are used to think about different non-physical aspects of our experience in the same ways that we can think about physical objects and substances (Lakoff & Johnson 1980). Metaphors can obscure empirical questions about the cause of violence, by replacing causes with inherent causal properties of the metaphorical objects they create. For example, the Political Agency discourse presents the metaphor of violence as a fluid. In describing violence as if it is a disembodied phenomenon that can spread like water through a country, it becomes un-linked from its human agents. The fight against violence stops being a fight against other human beings, and the human cost of retaliation is sidelined. Such discourse naturalises state violence, making it comparatively invisible.

Just as violence can be discursively constructed into a physical object like water, social groups can be objectified into a single entity. The Religious Structural discourse objectifies social groups into homogenous categories of ‘northern Muslims’ in Nigeria, and ‘Muslims’ in general across the world. Therefore, the explanation offered for the violence relies on the assumed violent characteristics of ‘northern Muslims’, masking the need to explain how frustration among that group leads to conflict. Within this metaphorical conceptualisation, Muslims react violently because they are the sort of thing that reacts violently. In seeking to simplify and explain the world, we must be cautious not to allow analytic categories to slip into being treated as “really existing” physical categories (Eltringham 2004).

Whilst the religious structural view objectifies all Muslims into a monolithic entity, the religious agency view highlights the individual agency of Muslims and the plurality of beliefs. For instance, the Daily Trust reports on ordinary people who tried to convince their relatives not to join Boko Haram. When Mohammad Yusuf was invited to Dumbulwa to preach, the local population is presented as going out of their way to prevent his visit, including climbing trees to remove the sound system (Idris 2009). Disaggregating the category of ‘Muslims’ allows for a more nuanced ascription of motivations and interests to various individuals and communities who are affected by the conflict in different ways.

Conclusion
It is wrong to say that there are two conflicts in Nigeria, the conflict and the meta-conflict, because only the first is bounded by location. The second extends
beyond the state’s borders to encompass all those who contribute to the circulation of discourses which deal with the Boko Haram uprising. The media will inevitably use different frameworks or interpretive lenses for making sense of events in Nigeria and the rest of the world; neutral reporting is not an option. This article sets out the beginnings of a framework whereby commentators can tease out the underlying assumptions of different ways of telling the story of Boko Haram. There is no objective way of ranking the views, because they rely equally on material facts, normative beliefs, and subconscious assumptions about social realities. Journalists should be aware of the power hierarchies they are supporting when they subconsciously use certain metaphors to describe and explain the conflict, not just in editorials and analysis pieces but in ‘factual’ news reports. Rather than striving for our work to be neutral in its effects, we should seek to participate in the meta-conflict responsibly.

References


