

Problematizing the Fight against Boko Haram: The Applied Theatre Alternative

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Abstract

This study explores the difficulties that the fight against Boko Haram presents; especially the failed attempts in the last two decades by the Nigerian government to bring the sect's nefarious activities to an end. It has been observed that the conventional western-styled counter-insurgency method of using military force is not yielding the kind of result that is expected. Having gauged this failed effort in the fight against terror in Nigeria, the paper suggests that the Applied Theatre approach to solving crisis is potentially capable of helping in the fight against insurgency if properly deployed. This suggestion is supported by Seth and Martins' argument that any type of negotiation that addresses the actual, ultimate goals of terrorist organisations and redresses grievances is a more effective way to end terrorism. It is therefore the position of the paper that although military action cannot entirely be ignored in the war against terror, it should be executed alongside other counter insurgency models, especially those that target de-radicalisation and de-popularisation of terror group members and the ideologies upon which they are founded.

To drive the discourse and arguments around this, I adopt the Emancipatory Counter-Insurgency Theory, which commits to a non-violent counter-insurgency alternative geared towards emancipating members of terror sects and their sympathisers/supporters from their cultic membership/followership of insurgent groups.

Key Words: Applied Theatre, Insurgency, Boko Haram, Terrorism/Counter Insurgency, Counter Terrorism Models

Introduction

Apart from the Nigerian Civil War of July 1967 to January 1970, the Boko Haram insurgency appears to be the most daunting internal security challenge the people and government of Nigeria have encountered since independence. More than any other revolt against the Nigerian State, the Boko Haram insurgents have shown capacity and ability to sustain their activities even in the face of mounting counter terrorism measures deployed by the government to bring their activities to an end.

The heinous activities of this dreaded sect in the last ten years has led to the deaths of thousands of people, Nigerians and foreigners alike. A recent write-up credited to the former Governor of Borno State, Kashim Shettima, by Tukur Sani (2018) painted a grim picture of the death figures. According to him, "the Boko Haram Insurgency has led to the deaths of almost 100,000 persons based on estimates by community leaders in the state over the years" (Online).

A Regional update released by the United Nations' High Commission for Refugees in the month of February 2018 revealed that as many as two Million, one hundred and eighty-one thousand, two hundred and eighteen (2,181,218) people were displaced by the activities of the insurgents. Between 2002 when Boko Haram began and now (17 years later), the sect has become bigger, stronger and more deadly in their operations. They have graduated from using AK-47 firearms to modern state of the art combat vehicles and anti-aircraft/tank weaponries. It is widely believed that their finances mainly come from criminal activities. Stewart and Wroughton (2014), quoted a U.S State official as saying, "any financial support AQIM (Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Magreb) might still be providing Boko Haram would pale in comparison to resources it gets from criminal activities" (Online). The U.S Secretary of State for African Affairs, Linda Thomas-Greenfield similarly states, "our suspicions are that they are surviving on very lucrative criminal activities that involve kidnappings" (Stewart and Wroughton 2014: online). Many reports have indicted some Nigerian politicians who are sympathetic to the course and the ideology that drives the activities of the sect. Marama (2016) reported that a Caretaker Chairman in Mafa Local Government Area of Borno State was arrested for hiding a top Boko Haram Commander in his house. The Commander of Operation Lafiya Dole, Maj. General Lucky Irabor confirmed this arrest in a press briefing at the Headquarters of the 7th Division of the Nigerian Army in Maiduguri. According to him,

All I can say is that the Chairman is a big supporter of Boko Haram...we heard that he harboured Boko Haram members along with his father. That he kept the Boko Haram members because his father begged him to do so...the Chairman was in the habit of accommodating people that had fled from the bush...we have also arrested the Vice Chairman of Kaga Local Government and he is undergoing interrogation (Online).

Sahara Reporters also stated that a self-proclaimed spokesperson of Boko Haram who was sentenced to three years imprisonment and later released was rearrested at the residence of a high-profile politician in the National Assembly. The same source mentioned Mrs. G.N Okafor, a Chief State Counsel to the Abuja Division of the Federal High Court as saying that the Court has evidence linking the politician to the terrorist. According to her Marawa (2016),

The prosecution has tendered in evidence exhibits p1-p3, which were statements the defendant made by himself...my Lord, these statements by the defendant connect him with the charge levelled against him (online).

The sympathy and support the group enjoys from some Nigerians is cultic. Some parents donate their children (especially girls) to be strapped with Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) and blown to pieces as their contribution to Boko Haram

in the fight against the state. This fact was made in a statement signed by the Director of Army Public Relations (DAPR), Brigadier-General Sani Usman, in a report by Omonobi and Erunke (2017) that “many of the girls used for suicide bombings who were arrested or who were lucky the IEDs planted on their bodies failed to detonate, made the confession to the military authorities.” It is safe to argue that it may not be possible to force Boko Haram to surrender through the use of brute force by the military. Though the consistent assault on them by the military and the heavy casualties they suffer in those operations should deplete their ranks and lead to surrender, they have remained formidable and increasingly deadly. This may be adduced to the existence of a pool of sympathetic fanatical young men and women always willing and ready to join the sect, believing that there is reward for them in heaven for doing so. There is also the problem of people from neighbouring countries who constantly join the fighting force of the insurgents in order to make money.

It is important that the mind-set of these people, especially those who sympathise with the insurgents on different grounds, be disabused, and the ideology that foregrounds “Bokoharamism” be made unattractive to them. They must be de-radicalised because the fight against radical ideology can only be won when the mind is reconstructed through systematic communication. The applied theatre approach to resolving social, cultural, political and religious crisis is one means by which this can be achieved.

Conceptual Clarifications

There is the need for some of the terms or concepts used in this work to be clarified. Such terms include applied theatre, insurgency, Boko Haram sect, terrorism/counter terrorism, and counter terrorism models.

Boko Haram Sect: This sect is a deviant Nigerian Islamic group formed in 2002 by Uztaz Mohammed Yusuf, out of grievances against the Nigerian State with the aim of imposing a Sharia State. Like other insurgents, the perpetrators of Boko Haram think that the solutions to the challenges and problems of the society should not be put in the hands of the masses. They therefore mobilise and coordinate themselves, claiming to fight on behalf of the majority. As a group, Boko Haram operates on the basis of shared beliefs and specific objectives directed at overthrowing the government and enthroning an Islamic state governed by Sharia.

Insurgency: There are myriad of definitions to the concept of insurgency. The different perspectives are political, professional, military and international legal conceptions. Broadly speaking, insurgency is a conflict between rebels and a constituted and recognised authority of state. Insurgency manifests in irregular unconventional warfare against a State. The state would usually have a bigger and more formidable fighting power over the warring rebels whose aim is to effect a radical change, and ultimately control state resources and institutions.

According to Metz and Millen (2004),

insurgency is a strategy adopted by groups which cannot attain their political objectives through conventional means or by a quick seizure of power...insurgency is characterised by protracted, asymmetric violence, ambiguity, the use of complex terrain (jungles, mountains, urban areas), psychological warfare, and political mobilisation-all designed to protect the insurgents and eventually alter the balance of power in their favour (2).

By way of classification, I will mention two types of insurgency namely: national insurgency, and liberation insurgency. In national insurgency the fight is usually between the rebels and a legitimate national government. The liberation insurgents usually seek to liberate their nation from 'foreign' occupiers who rule over them. These occupiers are sometimes not foreigners but are addressed as 'foreign' due to race, ethnicity, religion or culture. In spite of the distinction between the two types of insurgency, it must be known that each of them can contain elements of both. In the light of this, Boko Haram is a national insurgency.

Counter Insurgency: Ewa (2015), observes that much of the literature on counter insurgency have carefully avoided attempts at furnishing any concise definition on the term. However, because of his experience in counter insurgency operations, he referenced a definition by the United States of America

which says that insurgency is a "comprehensive civilian and military efforts taken to simultaneously defeat and contain insurgency and address its root cause" (35). Similarly, according to Stigall, Miller and Donatucci (2019), counter terrorism is the incorporation of military tactics, techniques, and strategy that government, military, law enforcement, business, and intelligence agencies use to combat or prevent terrorism. Since its radicalisation, Boko Haram, originally known as *jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-jihad* (which means people committed to the prophet's teachings for propagation of jihad) has continued to wax stronger in spite of efforts by Nigerians and her foreign allies to contain and defeat the group. It is my opinion that the counter terrorism model embraced has failed.

The Applied Theatre: When theatre practitioners go to people with the art of theatre and allow the people to use the art to interrogate their problems, applied theatre is being employed. This is in contrast to conventional theatre where people go to the theatre to watch theatrics. It is a theatre experience that allows people to create and tell the stories of their experiences and challenges in their languages, songs, dances, and other cultural dynamics that they can easily relate with. Though not always performed by theatre practitioners, professional theatre artists for the host community's consumption guide the performance process. The people generate the stories from the community. It is called applied theatre because the challenges identified from the data gathered from the community are transformed into drama skits

for the people to watch. At the end of the performance, the problems or challenges raised in the skits are subjected to discussions with a view to finding lasting and practical solutions to them. Of the many definitions of applied theatre available, I find O'Connor and O'Connor (2009) description of this unconventional theatre-type useful towards appreciating the relevance of applied theatre as a veritable tool for the management of social, political and religious challenges; especially those that have defied known conventional crisis management methods. They see applied theatre as,

An umbrella term that defines theatre which operates beyond the traditional and limiting scope of conventional western theatre form...constructed as a response to social or political challenges and is seen as a process where difference and change can be wrought through its making (473).

The terms used for theatre practices of the applied theatre family include, but are not limited to the following: Participatory Theatre, People's Theatre, Theatre for Development (TfD), Popular Theatre, Theatre for Integrated Development (TiDE), Community Theatre, and Theatre in Education (TiE). Taylor (2002) posits:

It is applied theatre because the art form becomes a transformative agent that places the audience or participants in direct and immediate situations where they can witness,

confront, and deconstruct aspects of their own and others' actions. Applied theatre is committed to the power of the aesthetic form for raising awareness...to make the world a better place (xx).

According to Taylor, there are five different purposes for applied theatre programs which he identified as: "raising awareness, posing alternatives, healing psychological wounds and barriers, challenging contemporary discourses, voicing the views of the silent and marginal" (xxi). In the words of Epskamp, theatre for development or popular theatre as it was called in the 70s is an attempt to use drama and other performance forms, combined with discussion, as a vehicle for community education (14). In the light of the foregoing, it may be argued that if properly handled, applied theatre can be a potent communication strategy for addressing problems. This is because the process is highly interactive and presents a democratic space for negotiation and experimentation with different solutions to problems.

The Research Problems

As already implied, Nigeria has witnessed different security challenges in her history as a nation. These security challenges include ethnic wars, political and religious crises, agitations for resource control, kidnap for ransom, herdsmen/farmers crisis etc. Negotiation and military action may have helped to deal with other security challenges but the Boko Haram insurgency has not yielded to these approaches. Established

policies of certain world super powers like the United States of America and the United Kingdom have discouraged any form of negotiation with terror organisations. They believe that negotiating with terrorists encourages more terrorism. As a result, there have been attempts to strike an international consensus to ban negotiations with terrorists. An example is the G8 pact in 2003 that seeks to stop paying ransom to terrorists which is probably explains why the Nigerian government cannot openly negotiate with Boko haram. On the other hand, the attempt by the government to terminate the insidious ideology of Boko Haram with bullets has not yielded expected results. Rather, the military action has succeeded in creating monsters.

Nigerians, especially those in the Northeast live with harrowing experiences of suicide bombings and other forms of attacks, which has led to hundreds of thousands of deaths and creation of humanitarian crisis. People get displaced from their homes and means of livelihood, and are forced to live in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps with their attendant challenges in the areas of security, health, education and feeding. In the face of all of these threats to people's survival, there seem to be no solution in sight any time soon.

Today, there is global concern for more effective models of countering terrorist activities. To this end, I have observed that the strength of the Boko Haram is in their supply chain of fighters usually drawn from radical Islamic extremists, from within the country and outside, who share their ideology, and not in their fighting capacity and ability. I have also observed that

scholars and researchers of insurgency and counter insurgency give little attention to the de-radicalisation of insurgents and to willing recruits who consider it a privilege to fight on the side of 'Allah's army'. It is this challenge that the paper seeks to address.

Objectives of the Research

The aim of this study is to draw attention of the government and scholars/researchers of terrorism and counter terrorism to why combating Boko Haram has not been successful in Nigeria, and to suggest the applied theatre, a potent communication strategy for addressing problems, as a possible solution to the lingering conundrum of combating global terrorism.

The objectives of this research work are to:

1. Boldly state that the seeming invincibility of Boko Haram is occasioned by the sympathy and support they get from sister insurgent groups abroad, and from Nigerian politicians who fund their operations, as well as young men and women who ignorantly present themselves for recruitment into the ranks of the insurgents.
2. Establish that Government's reliance on force to quell the activities of Boko Haram is responsible for the failure of the campaign.
3. To argue that if the war against terror in Nigeria were to be won, government must consider other counter insurgency models that have

the capacity to de-radicalise and emancipate the insurgents and those who sympathize with their course.

4. Suggest that the applied theatre methodology and process be considered as alternative to the traditional counter terrorism models.

Theoretical Framework

The Emancipatory Counter Terrorism Theory has been adopted as the framework for this study. Several criticisms of dominant contemporary counter terrorism models abound, especially because these models are dominated by the use of violent military force, and are fraught with practices such as torture and targeted killings. The efforts meant to counter and reduce terrorism under these models have over time proved to be ineffective. This is evident in the war against terrorism in Nigeria. The Boko Haram fighters have become even more agitated and have unleashed more devastating attacks on the country. As a result, it has become imperative for an alternative counter terrorism strategy rooted in the notion of ‘Emancipation’ to be considered in the campaign and fight against Boko Haram in Nigeria. The Emancipatory counter terrorism model constitutes a radical rethinking of the dominant contemporary policy agenda of counter terrorism. It rejects the use of violence in counter terrorism. The model shows that it is possible to offer a non-violent emancipatory alternative to the violence-based war on terror. It must be said that this counter terrorism model is already being practiced by Norway in their fight against insurgency and this suggests that it is practically feasible.

Review of Relevant Literature

According to Steven Metz (2003), “fighting insurgency...require acknowledging the grievances of the insurgents...the insurgents often do have legitimate grievances, so the challenge is to recognise those, while not sending the message that violence pays” (33). Metz’s opinion tilts towards the emancipatory counter terrorism model which seeks to ‘emancipate’ rather than brand the insurgents’ ‘enemies’ of the state and go all out to silence them through brute military intervention; a strategy that has become increasingly unattractive in the fight against insurgency. In the words of Akpan, Ekanem, and Olofu-Adeoye (2014),

There are sufficient data which suggest that Boko Haram insurgents are driven by a combination of factors such as poverty, unemployment, bad governance and politics of North-South divide...other intervening variables such as political rivalry amongst politicians in the Northern States and religion fuel their insurgent activities (152).

The fact is that most of the variables indicated above may not be effectively addressed with the fire power of the military. Instead, they require psychological therapy. And this brings to question the correctness of militarising the fight against Boko Haram in Nigeria. As already stated throughout this work, modern counter terrorism studies have repeatedly frowned at the use of force. Kitzen (2012) agrees that

the use of force against insurgents is an essential part of counter insurgency, but warns that, 'indiscriminate violence, however, might harm the counterinsurgents' objectives beyond the amount of damage it causes to the insurgents (10). Citing the example of the series of attacks by the United States in June and July, 2004, - against suspected Al-Zarqawi safe houses in Fallujah during which a total of 84 civilians were killed by heavy bombs or missiles, none of whom were insurgents - he argued that this action led to the diminishing of support by inhabitants for the new Iraqi government and its American allies.

Kitzen (2012), argues that brute force alone will not do in the war against insurgency. He suggested that, "instead of an indiscriminate use of force, a counter insurgency campaign should provide support to an insurgency-threatened government by the deployment of a range of military, political and socio-economic measures" (10). Emancipatory counter terrorism theory, which has been adopted for this work, allows for a soft-line approach, focused on diplomacy, compromise and social reform in the fight against terrorism.

The impact of Boko Haram terrorism is felt most in the North - East Geo-political zone of the country. Interestingly, this part of the country is the most backward educationally. This fact speaks to the connection between illiteracy and religious extremism/terrorism. During a meeting of Kano elders in 2014, the Emir of Kano, Alhaji Sanusi Lamido suggested that illiteracy and poverty leads to insurgency:

If you see a seventeen-year-old carrying bomb, we have to ask ourselves a question; was she brainwashed because of illiteracy or how much she was paid because of poverty. We know they are teenagers, but who are they? Why are they doing this? We need to understand all these if we want to solve the problem.

Majority of the Boko Haram fighters are indeed illiterates in the western sense of illiteracy, and there is a large illiterate youth population in the North-eastern part of Nigeria willing and ready to join the insurgents and get radicalised. Sodipo (2013), posits:

Radicalization is a process by which an individual or group adopts extreme political, social or religious ideals that rejects the status quo, undermine contemporary ideas regarding freedom of choice and expression, and condone violence to achieve ideological ends, including undertaking terrorist acts (2013).

Extreme ideals are by every means ideological, and, as already established, ideologies are not conquered with brute force but through soft and non-coercive methods of de-radicalization that are capable of winning the hearts and minds of insurgents. The implication is that a new and more effective approach to fighting insurgency is necessary if the war against terror is to be won. In the words of Metz and Millen (2004), the world has entered another period when insurgency is common and

strategically significant...As the United States confronts this threat, extrapolating old ideas, strategies, doctrines, and operational concept is a recipe for ineffectiveness. Reconceptualization is needed (vi).

Talking about an alternative theatre-type, Prentki and Selman (2003), say that popular theatre “seeks to be part of social movements which pursues justice and equality. As such...it tends to pursue change within and for a variety of sectors of society...” To this extent, alternative theatre can be deployed as a tool for de-radicalization of extremists who can be won over when treated with respect and dignity instead of attempting to bully them out of their belief. In the words of Thompson (2008), applied theatre is “participatory theatre created by people who would not usually make theatre (those who are not professional theatre practitioners). It is a practice by, with and for the excluded and marginalised” (15). In the opinion of Baldwin, applied theatre refers to the use of theatre, drama and/or performance for the achievement of outcomes beyond the artistic experience itself (2). Prentki and Preston (2009), suggest that applied theatre is born, ‘in the soil of progressive, radical people’s movements in various places of the world (13).

Applying the Applied Theatre in the Fight Against Terror in Nigeria

As already implicated, the Nigerian government has made concerted efforts but failed to counter the activities of the Boko Haram insurgents. As attention begins to move away from the American-styled war

model of counter insurgency, serious consideration must be given to more persuasive models targeted at disabusing the ideologically framed minds of terrorists and their sympathisers. To this end, it is my opinion that the applied theatre approach to addressing conflicts and developmental issues portends a high utility capacity in the fight against terror. The questions that would arise are: “what makes applied theatre different from the conventional theatre?” and “what can applied theatre achieve that known counter insurgency models have not achieved?” Prentkin and Selman (2003) observe that:

Levels of participation and the nature of the contact with the audience often set the popular apart from the mainstream. The popular theatre movement, in whatever form it casts itself, is set up in opposition to the notion of leisure consumption which underpins other kinds of theatrical activity (130).

Mainstream theatre entertains and educates essentially, and so reproduces the surface appearance of social relations responsible for the inequalities and injustices of the contemporary world, while the alternative theatre seeks result in the sphere of social action that allows for probe beneath the surface to reveal underlying, structural systems which require change for oppressions to be effectively addressed. The strength of applied theatre lies in its belief in a participant-centred pedagogy that places people’s interest first and puts them at the centre of their quest for change through the

active involvement of the audience in its process.

Through audience involvement, applied theatre investigates responses to oppressive social and political circumstances, and because terrorism is often provoked by oppression, it is safe to say that applied theatre methodology and process can be an effective tool in the global fight against terrorism.

When the narrative built around insurgency is dramatized by known people in affected communities, it gives the audiences first hand opportunity to see the circumstances that led to the taking up of arms against the State. In line with alternative theatre tradition, the people stop the play at any point where they notice oppression against people by other(s), or by the government. The facilitator(s)/the theatre experts get a member or members of the audience to take the place of the character(s) believed to be oppressed and try out possible actions that could stop the observed oppression. This is played to a point of crisis, and then the audience is turned to for advice, assistance and analysis. Characters are made to respond to complex issues in the play, thereby deepening the discussion and analysis of the oppressive issues in the play. Arising from the play on the cause of the insurgency, many contradictions play out during discussion and analysis. The facilitators then guide the process to the next level of de-radicalization. They leverage on the community's popular world views, language, cultures, and religion to demonise the activities of the insurgents.

Conclusion

It is the position of this paper that the use of military might in the fight against Boko Haram is ineffective, and that the mainstay of the insurgents is the pool of sympathisers and believers of their ideology, from where they recruit fighters whenever they have need for them. It is therefore my belief that there is need to consider a counter insurgency model that thrives on de-radicalisation of the insurgents and sympathisers who form the feeder pool from where the insurgents draw new members.

In place of dominant use of military force and violence in the fight against terrorism globally, the paper suggests that, if properly deployed, the applied theatre approach to solving crisis may yield more results in counter insurgency operations. This approach aligns with the emancipatory counter terrorism theory. For this reason, it is suggested that the Nigerian government and the military should leverage on the problem-solving capacity of the applied theatre. This may be deployed alongside the use of military aggression to counter terrorist activities.

Insurgents would always have something to demand for. Like the emancipatory counter terrorism theory that frowns at the use of military force, applied theatre appeals to the mind and therefore has the potential to emancipate insurgents and their sympathisers from extremist ideological beliefs and indoctrination.

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