

Niger Delta Restiveness in Nigeria: a Multimodal Discourse Analytical Study of Cover Pages of Selected Editions of Tell News Magazines

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Abstract

This study essentially is focused on the precarious security situation in Nigeria. In recent times, security condition in the country has worsened and the situation has been variously reported in Nigerian media. TELL, a foremost Nigerian news magazine has at various times run reports on the myriad of security challenges in the country. TELL reports mainly are on the restiveness of Niger Delta militants, Jos crisis, Boko Haram bombing spree, ethno-religious crises among others. The editors of the magazine have depicted some of these in their cover pages. Hence, this paper critically attempts a multimodal discourse analysis of the pictorial representation of these security threats vis-a vis the implication for Nigeria. In this paper however, our attention is basically on the restiveness of the Niger Delta Militants. A concise attempt will be made to critically analyse some of these images with a view to bringing out what they signify or represent. Also certain semiotic resources will be looked into such as the use of colour, symbols and gaze or posture.

Keywords: multimodal discourse analysis, representations, exploitation, Niger Delta, significations

Introduction

The insurgence and restiveness in the Niger Delta region is not a new phenomenon in Nigeria. Although the Niger Delta crisis has been around for several decades, the emergence of organized and militant pressure groups in the 1990s added a new dimension to the crisis.

The Niger Delta agitation for a fairer distribution of oil revenues started with a former police officer, Major Jasper Adaka Boro who recruited about 40 men into an organization known as the Niger Delta Volunteer Force. Boro and his men carried out several assaults on police stations and oil installations in the Niger Delta region. Some years later Boro and his men were finally suppressed, captured and sentenced to death. The agitation did not go down with Boro, rather it continued with renewed vigour and resilience. Unlike armed resistance movements in other countries, the Niger Delta gangs are not an organization operating under a common leadership with unified ideology. The agitators are made up of loose eclectic mix of several aggrieved and armed factions such as Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) and the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force. The agitation in the Niger Delta region has continued to the present time. Other notable figures in the Niger Delta struggle included Ken Saro Wiwa, Asari Dokubo, Togo and host of others.

However, a new dimension was introduced when, during the presidency of Late Umaru Musa Yaradua, amnesty was granted to willing and repentant militants. This made majority of them to lay down their arms. The amnesty programme was partially successful as only a handful skirmishes were reported after the programme kick started.

Meanwhile, until recently issues on the Niger Delta crisis has dominated the media space. Different news magazines and newspapers reported the stories from various perspectives. The reportage of these stories by various media both print and electronic created multiple and lasting effects on the psyche of the reading populace. Hence the style, method, choice of language adopted by the media and choice of pictures for cover pages are highly significant. This paper essentially therefore attempts a multimodal discourse analysis of the pictorial representation of Niger Delta crisis on the cover pages of TELL magazine. The aim is to critically analyse these pictures/ images with a view to bringing out what they signify or represent.

A Survey of Previous Works

In every imaginable public space, visuals are presented for viewer's consumption. The young and old alike are bombarded by a cacophony of imagery in traditional print; books, magazines and newspapers, through totalizing mass media formats and inside the expanding e-work of the internet. On almost every public space available, images confront viewers. Kress and Leeuwen (2006) assert that:

Images are produced in the context of real social institutions, in order
 To play a very real role in social life-in order to do certain things to or
 For their readers, and in order to communicate attitudes towards aspectsOf
 social life and towards people who participate in them, whether authors
 and readers are consciously aware of them or not (p 115).

Jonathan Bignell (1997:78) argues that the magazine is 'just a collection of signs'. These signs may include

paradigmatic and syntagmatic elements such as the title of the magazine, the fonts used, the layout, the colours, the texture of the paper, the language adopted, the contents of the articles and so on, and each of these signs have been chosen to generate a meaning. The magazine is therefore a complex collection of signs that can be extensively decoded and analysed by the reader. Magazines communicate their mythic meaning by means of signs, thus their representations of the imaginary are dependent on the symbolic, the signs which do the communicating (Bignell 1997:78).

Signs however, according to Saussure, consisting of two elements, the signifier and the signified, only gain meaning when “it has someone to mean to” (Williamson 1978:40). Based on this, the reader is therefore very important and will bring his own interpretations to the texts and images by drawing on their own cultural values and perceptual codes. As Daniel Chandler argues “decoding involves not simply the basic recognition and comprehension and evaluation of its meaning with reference to relevant codes” (Chandler, web source).

Also, in the analysis of the front cover of a female magazine, Davies says that since the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary and meaning is rooted in cultural values, we can argue that the potential interpretations of any given magazine are therefore endless” (Davies 2002:4). Dorothea Czerpa (2008) in her analysis of English and Swedish magazines declares that:

One of the most prominent features of visual medium is its multilayered and ambiguous moving-depending on many factors such as social environment, social status, country of origin, past experiences of the viewers/receiver, he/she will interpret the visual message in a particular way. Therefore these are no clear and ambiguous messages that can be read in the same way all over the world by everyone (p. 7).

This view above is that no two people can give the same interpretation to a particular visual image or text.

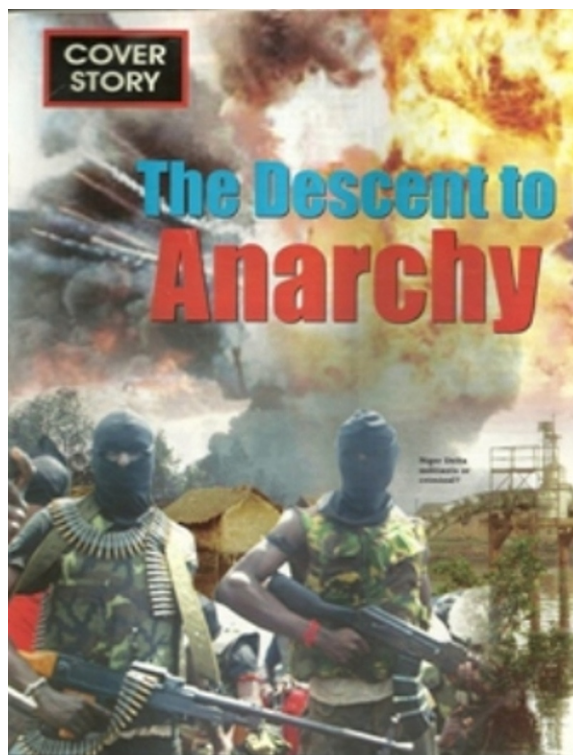
Finally, Olowu (2011) in his multimodal discourse analysis of selected editions of Christian Women Mirror Magazine finds out that visual texts have the potentials of establishing meaning more than the verbal texts.

Theoretical Framework and Data Analysis

The data for this study was analysed using the theoretical framework of multimodal discourse analysis as explicated by Gunther Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001). According to them, images carry semiotic codes very different from text in their ability to capture and encode societal norms, expectations and relationships. Kress and Van Leeuwen’s multimodal discourse analysis theory is the latest in theoretical approaches applied to the analysis of visual communication.

Through the extensive use of visual examples via art, print media and children’s drawing, Kress and Van Leeuwen strongly reinforce the notion that images carry social constructs with structural, political and cultural implications. Multimodal discourse analysis is therefore very useful in the analysis of images, colour, gaze, symbols, patterns and other concepts made possible by modern technology.

Multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) is an emerging paradigm in discourse studies which extends the study of language to the study of language in combination with other resources, such as images, colours, scientific symbolism, gestures, action music and sound (O’Halloran 2011:1). Multimodal discourse analysis is the study of the intersection and interdependence of various modalities of communication within a given context (Snyder 2009:1). Researchers in this area seek to identify the influence of mode on meaning within a given context, focusing on co-occurrence interaction between multiple semiotic system (Baldry and Thibault 2006:31). Multimodal discourse analysis is essentially concerned with the theory and analysis of semiotic resources and the semantic expansions which occur as semiotic choices combined in multicultural phenomena. The ‘inter-semiotic’ relations arising from the interaction of semiotic choices, known as intersemiosis, is a central area of multimodal research (Jewitt 2009:14). Multimodal discourse analysis is also concerned with the design, production and distribution of multimodal resources in social settings (Leeuwen 2008:32).



Text A

Text A is captioned ‘the decent to anarchy’. In this picture, we see the Niger Delta militants holding highly sophisticated weapons. Their faces were masked. Their dressing is intimidating. They dress completely in Nigerian army camouflage. We can see chains of bullet around their neck.

Also, from the background, we see a thick smoke billowing into the sky. It looks as if hell is let loose as everywhere is covered with smoke. Also, in the background we see some oil installations mounted on the sea. The impression given by the background suggests that it is a village as we can see at least a hut. There is an impression that the militants are many here. Some stand up why some others are sitting. They look comfortable but battle ready.

The whole picture here depicts the situation in the Niger Delta region. The precarious security in this region cannot be over emphasized. It is rather no news that the entire Niger Delta region of Nigeria is replete with incidents of killing, bombing, oil bunkering, kidnapping, rape, lawlessness etc. By extension, the security situation perceived in this picture is the condition of the country. The belligerent and restive Niger Delta militants have vowed to make the country ungovernable and they seem to be succeeding.

The militants here are having a good day. Though battle ready, they seem to dare any hindrance or opposition to their diabolical mission. They claim their mission is to liberate Niger Delta region from oppression and exploitation. They also claim Niger Delta has suffered concurrently in the hands of successive Nigerian leaders. No doubt, the Niger Delta region is an oil rich base of the country. Nigeria is a major exporter of crude oil and only the Niger Delta region produces oil in Nigeria. The region comprises nine states. These are: Bayelsa, Delta, Rivers, Cross River, Ondo, Imo, Akwa Ibom, Edo, and Abia. It is also important to note that oil is the mainstay of Nigerian economy.

This picture also signifies the incapability of the Nigerian government to arrest this ugly situation. The Nigerian police are ill equipped for this onerous task of restoring normalcy into the Niger Delta region. If proper attention has been given to developing the region, it would have been possible to nip the situation in the bud. But due to conflicting variables and continued prevarication by the federal government, the Niger Delta crisis deteriorates into anarchy, terror and a revolving criminality. Hence, the picture we see here is a true signification of federal government incompetence in handling the reign of terror in the Niger Delta.



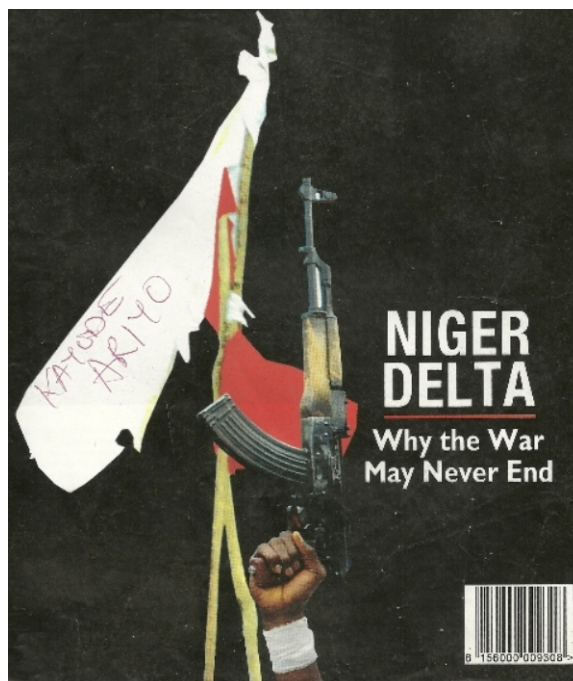
Text B

In text B, we see the picture of several Niger Delta militants who are displaying their guns. It looks as if they are undergoing some kind of training. They are holding different types of rifles. One thing to note here is that they use highly sophisticated weapons. Most of them also dressed in Nigeria army camouflage. Their faces were masked obviously to hide their identity. They looked resolved and determined to carry out any operation and most importantly to repel any opposition that may come their way.

In this picture also, we see the Nigeria police marching just in front of the militants. They unlike the militants don't look battle ready. They seem to be afraid on their mission. Their guns were rather too inferior to that of the militants. One thing is very clear from this picture. The juxtaposition of the picture of the militants and that of the police is a ridicule of the Nigeria police force in particular and an affront to Nigeria security system in general. The Nigeria police seem quite incapable of arresting the terror unleashed by Niger Delta militants. The reason for their inability is not far-fetched. Corruption and insincerity in the force are major reasons. The militants can boast of superior fire power than the police. The corrupt tendency of senior officers in the force has prevented the force from getting necessary and sophisticated weapons needed. Also, the training and logistics needed are always thwarted. The force cannot account for the several billions of naira the federal government is spending on it annually. Inadequate training, poor logistics, acquisition of less sophisticated weapons are some of the evils bedeviling the force. These account for the incessant defeats and heavy casualties they normally record in most of their face-offs with militants.

Hence, the picture in its entirety signifies the helplessness of the masses who are always the victims of militant onslaught. The hope of the masses is hinged on the ability of the federal government to wrest power and control from the militants in the Niger Delta region. Consequently, they can heave a sigh of relief from frequent kidnapping, killing, bombing and restiveness witnessed in the Niger Delta region which of course have become recurrent decimal. Government's docility has exacerbated the precarious security threats in the Niger Delta region. The whole region is fast becoming heavily militarized as both the young and old now carry guns. Many young chaps have been recruited and have since resolved to militancy. Militancy has become a high paid job in the region.

The entire Niger Delta region has been made completely unsafe for ordinary people and poverty has taken a turn on the lives of the people. It is significant to note that in spite of the wealth that accrues to the nation from oil exploration, the people in the Niger Delta still wallow in excruciating poverty. Roads are in terribly bad state; hospitals wherever available lack basic facilities and most parts of the region lie in infrastructural decay. There are no provisions of the essentials of life such as housing, electricity, water etc. Per capital income has come to its lowest ebb while majority of the populace can no longer perform their filial responsibilities. The devastation, deprivation and total denial of essentials of livelihood to the Niger Delta people in spite of their contributions to the nation's economy is the major reason while some youths in the region decided to take up arms and claim to be fighting for their liberation. Years of oil exploration by multinational companies have resulted in severe consequences: the ecology has been destroyed by continual oil drilling and as a result the natural environment has been polluted by oil spillage and as such, making it quite inhospitable for the people. It is an understatement to say that the Niger Delta people are poverty stricken people who live daily in unimaginable squalor and overwhelming nightmare. A feeling of uncertainty hangs everywhere. Yet, the federal government is dozing in its docility. What is the hope of the common man?



Text C

In this picture, we have two flags hoisted on two sticks. One is white while the other is red. The implication of this will be discussed under the use of colour. Beside the flag, we see a rifle lifted up. The individual who holds the gun is battle ready since we can see his index finger clinching on the trigger. The caption of the picture is “Niger Delta: why the war may never end”.

The picture here is a signification. The hoisting of flags represents a republic. And here it signifies a republic created by the Niger Delta militants. Here, we have a republic within a republic, i.e. republic of the militants within a sovereign nation. The picture of the rifle reveals the ingredients of this republic. It is indeed a republic of terror, criminality, lawlessness, militancy etc. The paradox here is a question of how can a republic of terror and hate thrive within a sovereign republic? This picture really delimits the power of the federal republic of Nigeria.

There is a sense of felony in the picture. The Niger Delta militants dare the federal government to challenge their republic of terror. As if they know the incapability of the federal government, they relish in their satisfaction at holding Nigeria to ransom. At a time, when kidnapping and killing got to a highest point, most oil multinational companies closed down their operations in the Niger Delta region. Literally, they took over the reign of the area and dare any challenge to their supremacy. The inability of the government to anything about this siege speaks volume about the security situation in the country.

The Use of Colour

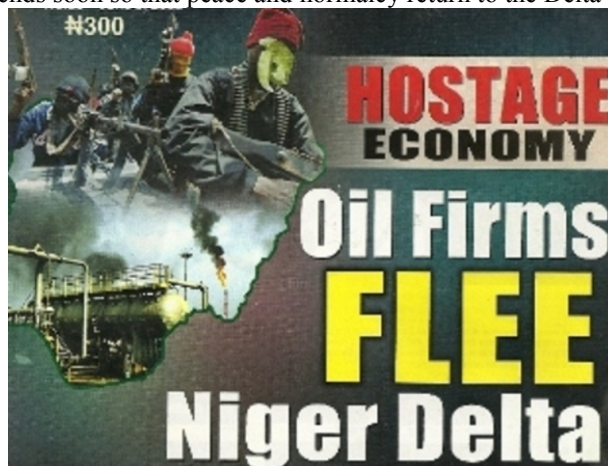
The use of colour in most parts of this picture is highly significant. It is reasonable to infer that colour is a mode. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2001:27), colour is believed to constitute a mode “instead of ‘signs’”. They signify certain ideas and are therefore a kind of resource used in designs to create a cohesive message (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001:59-62). In text A, the word ‘anarchy’ is written in red. Colour red in this part of Africa signifies danger. Hence the word is rightly coated in red colour. Anarchy means chaos or crisis. All of these words are negative words. The use of the colour goes beyond the word. It signifies the activities of the Niger Delta militants in the activities of the Niger Delta militants in the region. Their major intention is to cause anarchy. They involve in kidnapping, maiming, killing, terror and all that can be named with them. Hence, the use of colour red is perfectly in order.

Also in text C, the two flags are in two different colours. One is in white and the other is in red. This is significant. Colour white in most parts of Africa means peace. As stated earlier, colour red means danger white colour black means grief or sorrow. The background of this picture is black and the verbal anchorage is in white colour. All of these are significant. The militants purposely hoisted two flags in two different colours. They offer blood and peace to government. The one in red colour seems to tell the government that the militant one more than ready for any opposition from them. In other words, if the government decides to use force, the militants will be ready to repel all attacks and quench all hindrances to their operations. But is the government ready for dialogue? They too are ready for dialogue in as much as their demands are met. Dialogue we always bring peaceful resolution crisis. Hence, the militant in a way sue for peace if the government will be ready for same.

This is the signification of the white flag.

The background is intentionally coated in black to depict the gloomy condition of the country. It is grieving in a country where some people can just be parading excesses and hold a whole region into ransom. These are incidences of kidnapping, killing, terror and looting. What could be sadder than the fact that the government is unable to do anything about it..

Yet, the verbal anchorage is in white colours. This reflect the opinion of TELL writers. The use of white colour here means that they sue for peace. Although, they submit reasons why the war may never end and, they however wish that the war ends soon so that peace and normalcy return to the Delta region.



Text D

In text D, the word “hostage” is written in red while “economy” is in black. This assumes semiotic significance. “Hostage” literally means a person seized or held as security for the fulfillment of a condition. But in this case, it is not a person but the economy of Nigeria is in hostage in the hands of Niger Delta militants. This finds expression and meaning when we consider the fact that Nigeria depends mainly on oil for survival. And the entire Niger Delta region where oil is exploited is under siege of the militants who have shut down multinational oil companies in the region. Giving this impression, it will not be out of place to infer that Nigerian economy is a hostage of Niger Delta militants.

Furthermore, the word ‘economy’ is coated in black colour. As stated elsewhere in this paper, colour black in this part of the world is interpreted to denote sorrow, despair, grief or sadness. The economy is in sad state. It is at the brink of collapse since its mainstay which is mainly oil is under siege.

The Use of Symbols

In all the texts analysed, there are common symbols of identity of the militants. Guns (AK47, rifle, pump action, machine gun, etc.) and grenades are means of identifying the militants. A gun is a weapon of destruction while grenades are used to wreck major havoc. The message here is simple. Militants are destructive.

In text C, a gun is raised up with the flags of Niger Delta Republic. Gun then becomes iconic symbol of a militant. This means that a militant is largely associated with terror and anarchy. The militants are always identified with guns, grenades and chains of bullets. In this wise, they conspicuously represent a reign of terror and all that is associated with it.

One other thing noticed is that they always use facemasks. This is intentional. They love to use masks to shield them from being recognized during their operations. Hence they dwell in anonymity. This is also very instructive and significant. It is easy to wage a war against a known enemy. But when the enemy becomes faceless and dwell in obscurity, it is pretty difficult if not impossible to achieve victory.

Gaze and Posture

Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996:122) identified some semiological concepts which include social distance, visual modality and behavior. With regard to behavior, Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996:122-3) discuss the way in which interaction between the viewer and the individual shown in the image is affected by the gaze of the represented participants. Images makes demands when participants look directly on a formal (and imaginary) level:

.....the participant’s gaze(or gesture) demands something from the viewer. It demands that the viewer enters into some kind of imaginary relation with him or her

In text A, the posture of the militants speaks volume. They seem to be at alert. They look battle ready and do not want to take any chance. They hold tenaciously their guns and their index fingers clinch primarily on the triggers of their guns. This posture seems highly confrontational, daring and an act of uncommon bravery. They seem to dare anybody to challenge them including Federal government troops.

The posture of the militants in text B is also significant. They appear to be jubilating while holding conscientiously unto their guns. Although in a relaxed mood, they are probably not unaware of the risks and uncertainties their job imposes. They tend to be having a field day and completely on their own world without any disturbances whatsoever. The opposite is seen in the disposition of the Nigerian police. They seem to be walking blindly not in awareness of the intensity, danger and rigour required in their task of maintaining peace in the Niger Delta region. They look apprehensive. We see glaringly in their disposition an atmosphere of uncertainties. The reason for their apprehension may not be far-fetched. They may be on the way to their end since they are ill equipped, poorly trained and logistically imbalanced.



Text E

In general, the posture of the militants is intimidating and overwhelmingly fearful. The posture in text E is particularly war-like. It can only be compared to the gaze of American Army during the Gulf War. The militants stayed glued to their rockets, machine guns, pump actions and bomb haulers. They seem to be at alert and battle ready to quench all offenses.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have attempted a multimodal discuss analytical study of cover pages of selected editions of TELL magazine. Only 5 pictures were purposively selected and each has been critically analysed. We have relayed the significations and representations observed in these images as they are used by the editors of TELL magazine to develop the theme of militancy as a security challenge in Nigeria and particularly in the Niger Delta region. Also the use of colour and symbols in these images received our attention. The interpolation of Gaze and posture were also discussed.

However, it is instructive to note that interpretation of images is by its very nature subjective, and an image can carry multiple messages dependent upon the nature of visually interpreting culture. This study essentially emphasizes the vitality of visual elements as important devices in information dissemination in the media. It reveals the deployment of various visual resources such as colour, symbols, gaze, posture, etc. in passing information to the consciousness of the reading public.

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