


Original Research Article

# On terrorist attacks in Nigeria: Stance and engagement in conversations on *Nairaland*

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## Abstract

Terrorist attacks in Nigeria have generated a huge body of conversations and debates on the Internet. This study investigates the contents of these online conversations on *Nairaland* and how such conversations exhibit stance and civic engagement in response to the attacks. *Nairaland* is an online community and public space that serves as a meeting place for Nigerians at home and in the Diaspora, who constantly follow-up on the events in Nigeria and participate in political debates about the country. This study argues that the frequent negative evaluations of *Boko Haram* and the attribution of the activities to Islam and the consistent constructions of northern Nigeria as ‘violent people’ and Islam as an ‘evil’ religion in *Nairaland* are potential to further worsen religious and ethnic relations in Nigeria.

## Keywords

*Boko Haram*, *Nairaland*, Nigerian public, online community, stance

## Introduction

Recurrent terrorist attacks in Nigeria in the last 5 years have generated varied interpersonal and group reactions from the Nigerian public. Many of these responses, displayed in the rapidly growing online forums and digital communities, are supported by the Internet. By their nature, online forums and conversations reflect citizens’ civic engagement and political participation, which according to Tsaliki (2002), form the ‘newly emerged public spaces that contribute to the enhancement of public deliberation’

and reflect the extent to which ordinary citizens contribute to the political process through public debate online (p. 95). Online groups exhibit a wide range of characteristics and also serve a variety of purposes, ranging from small groups engaged in specific topics

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to wider and more complex online communities linked by similar interest simultaneously engaged in network exchanges. This community of interactants may be mobilised by political interests or the urge to advance a social cause or bring together dispersed members of professional, social or ethnic groups (Wilson & Peterson, 2002). Thus, online forums and conversations implement 'a high level of interactive communication, high degree of search for information, diversity of opinions and publics and a moderate degree of substantiated argumentation' (Tsaliki, 2002, p. 95). Members of the Nigerian publics, some of whom are also members of online communities and forums, are actively engaged in online conversations on Nigeria's fragile security situation and how the terrorist attacks affect them.

### Terrorist attacks in Nigeria

According to Dowd (2013), Nigeria possesses the highest number of documented cases of violence involving Muslim-affiliated militias in Africa between 1997 and 2012. *Boko Haram* (BH), an Islamist militant group, claims responsibility for most of the terrorist attacks in Nigeria. Between 2009 and 2012, the group was said to have carried out 552 attacks with 1932 fatalities in Nigeria and was said to be responsible for 2.4% of more than 23,000 terrorist attacks worldwide. The group advocates an Independent Islamic state of Northern Nigeria and full implementation of *Sharia* laws administered by *Sharia Courts*. The group is also asking for an unconditional release of their members in police custody. BH claims to rid the northern states of non-Muslims and Muslim governors who are accused of compromising Islamic teachings (see Chilwa & Adetunji, 2013).

BH began its armed resistance in June 2009. It launched several attacks on some designated targets including a customs office, a number of churches, police headquarters and two police stations, a primary school, a prison and a state employment bureau in various cities (see *START Report, May 2014*). These attacks, according to the group, were aimed at fighting corruption and Islamising the entire northern states. Some liberal Muslims who belong to the popular *Sufism* (i.e. the mystical

brotherhood), accused of compromising the Islamic codes of conduct, have also been assassinated. The group has formally confirmed its link with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Somalia-based *Al Shabaab* and operates also in Mali and probably Somalia. (see Blair, 2012; Olagunju, 2012). They have also pledged allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), promising to 'hear and obey in times of difficulty and prosperity' (*BBC*, 7 March 2015); and they were readily accepted by the Islamic state (IS). According to Jim Muir (a *BBC* correspondent in Beirut), this makes BH look like a global franchise. The terrorist group aims to establish a 'caliphate' similar to that being pursued by IS in Syria that would incorporate Northern Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon and Benin republic under a single political and religious leader governed by *Sharia* laws. This is not surprising because BH's ideology and operations are similar to those of IS. Recently, in pursuit of their agenda, BH carried out attacks in Cameroon and Chad killing 41 people and injuring many others.

Attacks attributed to BH became more frequent in 2011 at Maiduguri (Borno state), Damaturu (Yobe state) and Jos (Plateau state) of Nigeria. A series of bombings by the sect in the northeast before and after the general elections of April 2011 left many people dead. For instance, on 16 June, the group claimed responsibility for the bombing of the police force headquarters in Abuja. The attack was said to be the first suicide bombing in Nigeria (Chilwa & Adetunji, 2013). Over 400 people were killed in the various terrorist attacks in 2011 (Chilwa & Adetunji, 2013). More attacks and the resultant deaths in 2012 were to exceed the total fatalities recorded in 2010 and 2011 as BH continued their acts of terror and violence against Christians, some groups of Muslims and other categories of Nigerians. In the first 10 months of 2012, more than 900 people died in several attacks; armed assaults, with petrol bombs, guns and improvised explosives, were orchestrated (Agbibo, 2013). From the early part of 2012, the group began targeting telecommunication infrastructure, which they believed aided security agencies in Adamawa state.

Following the series of attacks that destroyed government buildings and led to the killing of

officials and civilians in northern states, the Nigeria government, in May 2013, declared a state of emergency in Adamawa, Borno and Yobe states, where the attacks have been concentrated, and ordered more troops to be deployed there (see *BBC News*, 15 May 2013). However, despite the state of emergency, BH continued their attacks. On 8 July 2013, the group attacked a boarding school at *Mamudo* in Yobe state, killing over 30 students and a teacher when their dormitory was set on fire (*Amnesty International*, 8 July 2013). In a similar attack, the sect murdered over 40 students at a college of agriculture at *Gubja* in Yobe state in the same month (see Chiluwa & Ifukor, 2015).

In 2014, the sect continued bombings and gun attacks in various villages in Borno and Kano states, killing several people and displacing thousands of villagers. On 19 January 2014, for instance, some members of BH attacked Alau Ngawo Fate village in Jere Local Government Area, killing 18 people (*Vanguard*, 21 January 2014). They also invaded the Kawuri District of Konduga Local Government Area of Borno State on Sunday, 26 January and set over 300 residential houses ablaze, killing more than 50 people including a soldier and some policemen and over 4000 residents were displaced (*Vanguard*, 27 January 2014). On February 2014, the sect again attacked a Federal Government secondary school at Buni Yadi in Yobe state and murdered 59 students while they were asleep in their dormitories (*Premium Times*, 26 February 2014). On 14 April 2014, BH again bombed a bus station at Nyanya in the Nigerian federal capital territory, Abuja, killing 75 people and injuring over 200. The following day, the sect kidnapped 276 girls at a government school in Chibok (Borno state) and burnt down the school. Forty-three of the girls escaped, and as at the time of this research, over 200 girls were still missing. According to *PM News*, on 26 February 2014, the Nigerian government had sought international cooperation from France and Cameroon in its battle against the Islamist militants. But with the growing BH-terrorist activities, following the kidnap of the Chibok girls, world powers led by the United States, Britain and France pledged their support for the Nigerian government and promised to send intelligence assistance to find the missing girls.

Since the new government of Muhammad Buhari (a Muslim) was installed on 29 May 2015, BH have intensified their violent attacks that have claimed the lives of over 450 people. On 12 June, for instance, a night raid in six remote villages in Northeastern Nigeria resulted in the death of 37 people. BH also attacked N'Djamena, the Chad capital, on 16 June, killing 24 people and wounding over 100 others. On 22 June, the armed group also bombed a mosque in Maiduguri when two young female suicide bombers blew themselves up killing 30 people during the Ramadan prayers. In two successive attacks on 1 and 2 July, suicide bombers attacked other mosques in *Kukawa* village, killing over 200 people; some of the victims, among them children and young girls, were killed in their homes. On 5 July, a suicide bomber also attacked a church in Potiskum (Yobe state) killing five worshippers and injuring many others; moreover, on 6 July, two bomb attacks on the central Nigerian city of Jos left at least 44 people dead (see *AFP news*, 3 July 2015: <http://news.yahoo.com/nigerian-leader-condemns-inhuman-barbaric-boko-haram-attacks-135249565.html>; *BBC News, Africa*, 7 July, 2015: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-33406537>).

The continuous threats and attacks by BH have necessitated the establishment of a combined military force of Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, Niger and Benin to confront the Jihadists (see *Al Jazeera*, 11 June 2015). The United States has also recently deployed 90 military personnel to Cameroon and promised to send surveillance drones to gather intelligence on BH to assist in the counter insurgency efforts. The US Defence Department also plans to send about 300 US troops to Cameroon in a temporary mission against the Islamists (see *The Wall Street Journal*, 14 October 2015: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-to-send-up-to-300-troops-drones-to-fight-boko-haram-1444857072>).

The numerous attacks highlighted above have generated a huge body of online civil engagements, debates and arguments that also reflect the emotional involvements of the participants. The focus of this study is the investigation of the various negative evaluations and representations of BH, Islam and northern Nigeria in the Nigerian online communities and the danger these pose to national unity. In spite of the

huge literature on stance in discourse, the study of stance in online forums or conversations in the context of conflict discourse is not common. A study of online asynchronous texts and conversations will enable a careful investigation of a different kind of data that show how citizens (as victims, in this context) participate in political and cultural arguments and interact with and engage one another in online exchanges, particularly during crises. It is also capable of throwing some more light on the features and functions of language in communication during crisis situations and the relationship between language, communication and culture, particularly in the Nigerian unique ethno-cultural and religious context.

### **Nigerian online forums and digital publics**

The first Nigerian online community began with the forwarding of emails by Diaspora Nigerians to one another. By 1991, forwarded news items about Nigeria obtained from Reuters and AFP were being circulated by ‘netizens’ in the United States. Soon the first email listserv known as *Naijanet* was formed, comprising a few Nigerian youths living in the United States and their friends (Bastian, 1999; Ifukor, 2011). According to Bastian (1999, cited in Ifukor, 2011), ‘the various activities by Diaspora Nigerians via email, listserv and the Usenet newsgroup became the pillars for the construction of a *virtual Nigeria*’ (p. 111). According to Ifukor (2011), the Nigerian virtual sphere enabled Nigerian online participants to exchange news about the sociopolitical and economic affairs in Nigeria. Many of the netizens exhibited some nationalistic sentiments in the manner they discussed and argued on issues about the homeland. Before long, however, disagreements, debates and differences in opinions led to the formation of some new listservs, especially along ethnic lines such as *Oduduwanet* for Yoruba speakers in 1992 and *Igbonet* for Igbo speakers in 1994. Social and political events in Nigeria also led to the establishment of more listservs, Usenet newsgroups and online forums (Bastian, 1999; Ifukor, 2011; Moran, 2000).

At present, several online communities and digital forums for and about Nigeria have been created.

These serve as digital publics that enable members to respond to sociopolitical and cultural issues that affect their lives. According to *Internet World Stats* (2011), Nigeria ranks first in Internet use in Africa with about 44 million users, who are mostly young people. *Facebook* and *Twitter* are the most popular with about 71% of the youth within the age bracket of 18–34 years engaging in social media communication. Increase in social media practice has also increased the formation of virtual communities, most of which express tribal and ethnic identities (Heyd, 2014). Sociopolitical and economic interests, as well as events in Nigeria, have further helped in the establishment of online forums. These forums and online communities exhibit cultural products and artefacts (Wilson & Peterson, 2002); social categories such as race and ethnicity are also actively performed and constructed by participants in order to gain visibility online (Heyd, 2014). Among the most prominent online communities and forums are the *Nairaland*, *Nigerian Village Square* and *Naijapals*.

### **Nairaland**

*Nairaland* was founded in 2003 by Seun Osewa (a former student of Electrical Engineering at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria, who later abandoned the programme to pursue his interest in Web-hosting business). *Nairaland* was among the first three Web forums created by Osewa, which, according to the founder, ‘was the only Nigerian community that gave a voice to Nigerians at home. Most other Nigerian sites were owned and dominated by Nigerians in the United States and United Kingdom and covered only issues of interest to Nigerians abroad’ (see <http://www.jarushub.com/from-fun-to-millions-how-seun-osewa-built-a-multi-million-dollar-online-venture-with-nairaland/>). In an interview with *CP-Africa*, Osewa further explained the purpose of the creation of *Nairaland*, which started off as a small Web forum: ‘the topic section of the forum, covering topics outside telecommunication like romance and jokes was becoming more vibrant than the *Mobile Nigeria forum* (one of the three Web forums founded at the same time), suggesting the need for a more general-purpose Nigerian

forum' (see <http://www.jarushub.com/from-fun-to-millions-how-seun-osewa-built-a-multi-million-dollar-online-venture-with-nairaland/>). Thus, *Nairaland* was born as a general-purpose discussion forum with a strong bias towards issues of interest to Nigerians at home. Today, the forum has grown to become an online community of youths with over 1.4 million registered members (i.e. registered accounts), covering over two million topics. *Alexa.com* puts the total number of Internet users participating on *Nairaland* at 55 million (i.e. about 32% of the Nigerian population), making it the largest online community in Africa, ahead of other popular Web forums such as *NaijaHotjobs*, *NigeriaBestforum*, *Goal.com* and *jobberman*.

Describing the scope of the community, Heyd (2014) calls *Nairaland* a meeting place for local Nigerians, recent and longstanding migrants and outsiders who take an interest in Nigerian culture and language practices, comprising a broad range of sub forums including those that deal with aspects of daily living, science and technology, sports, jobs, culture, families, romance, politics and religion among others.

The activities of Nigerian participants in the Diaspora are significant because of their acknowledged contributions to both Nigeria's political and economic developments. They not only contribute to discussions and debates in online forums but also contribute to organising and mobilising offline protests (see Chiluwa, 2015). They have also utilised the forum to educate young Nigerians on their civic responsibilities and mobilising their family members to participate in the electoral process, especially by voting (see *African Sun Times*, 23 March 2015: <http://africansuntimes.com/2015/03/nigerians-overwhelmingly-praise-diaspora-nigerians-for-urging-nigerians-to-call-nigeria-to-get-their-family-members-to-vote/>). The Diaspora Nigerians have called on the Nigeria government to provide them the means of exercising their voting rights while abroad. The new Nigerian President has, however, explained the reasons why this may not be feasible at present such as legislation, logistics, financing and confidence in the electoral process (*Vanguard*, 26 August 2015: <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2015/08/buhari-why-nigerians-in-diaspora-cant-vote-now/>).



**Figure 1.** The *Nairaland* logo.

*Nairaland* derives its name from the Nigerian currency (i.e. the *naira*, represented graphically as 'N' with two horizontal lines across it, as shown in the official *Nairaland* logo in Figure 1).

Because of its large membership base, it is difficult to give an accurate demography of its members. However, as highlighted above, *Nairaland* is an online community of mostly Nigerian youths, and those in the Diaspora, as well as 'friends' of Nigeria, mostly below the age of 50 years, who have some education, and are the more avid participants in social media platforms. Most of them, of course, would hold regular employment, especially those not in political positions (including the self-employed, the jobless and university students), representing what is often known as the 'general public'. It is also important to mention here that many of them have their political affiliations. And from the tempo of political arguments that often take place in the online community, it is obvious that many of the participants have political involvements and party loyalty. But it is not likely that politicians are members (or active members) of *Nairaland*, Nigerian politicians rather prefer *Facebook* and *Twitter*. For instance, the immediate past President of Nigeria utilised *Facebook* to extensively seek support and mobilise membership for his party and was referred to as 'our Facebook President' (see Chiluwa, 2011). The current Nigerian Vice President and Senate President are devoted 'tweeters' and have used this platform as propaganda to raise public expectations to the government and build a positive image for themselves (see *Twitter*, @profosibajo and @bukolasaraki).

While it is also difficult to give complete and accurate demographic information about participants on *Nairaland*, some development indicators such as education, computer literacy and social exposure can clearly show that male members are more than their female counterparts and also that male members are more active in the forums than the female ones. This is due to the cultural imbalance in the preference for and opportunities given to men than women, especially in the Northern regions of Nigeria, where women are not largely encouraged to acquire formal education. As we shall explain in more detail in the analysis, a greater percentage of the members come from southern Nigeria, where the rate of education and enlightenment is higher and where opportunities given to women are also higher irrespective of religion.

Significantly, by the nature of its membership profile and interaction, *Nairaland* appears to have broken the strong ethnicity divide that has plagued Nigeria's social integration for a long time. Members while debating or interacting on some topics often anchored on ethnic and cultural debates tend to forget their cultural and ethnic differences. For instance, bombings and suicide attacks in mosques and market places in Northeastern Nigeria have attracted wide condemnation from both Christian and Muslim participants on *Nairaland*. This is not the focus of the present study. The article is interested in cases of discriminatory discourse, where ethnic and religious sentiments expressed in the Nigerian virtual sphere threaten religious and social harmonious relations in Nigeria.

### **Structure and style of online conversations**

Online forums (or bulletin boards) enable online conversations to take place among participants, exemplifying a digital public sphere as a discursive platform that promotes citizen debates, deliberations, agreement and/or disagreement, as well as collective actions (Cammaerts, 2007). Conversations are represented as sequences of posts, or threads, where the posts reply to one or more earlier posts. In other words, interactions come in the form of writing, reading and responding to notes or posts as

participants exchange information about experiences or brainstorm solutions to problems (Putman, Ford, & Tancock, 2012). However, Dixon (2012) argues that while conversations may occur in an online forum, much of what happens in most forums are hardly conversations because a member asks a question and various other members provide an answer or respond to a comment. There are little back and forth interactive movements among participating members; participants simply make their own statements reflecting their opinion and may not even have read others' comments before stating theirs. Kim, Jarvenpaa, and Gu (2013) also argue that an important feature of conversation, which is absent in online forums, is 'collective elaboration', that is, when a number of questions generate a number of responses from interactants. Kim argues that learning (in educational forums) takes place among groups only when responses have high levels of collective elaboration and when participants from other networks join in the discussion. Sun et al. (2011) add that users are more motivated to take part in online discussions by observing other users' participation. Generally, asynchronous online communications do not provide participants with mutual interactional benefits as it is the case in a real-life offline conversation. Thus, a lot of features of interpersonal interactive dynamism are lost in online conversation.

However, Rovai and Jordan (2004) maintain that asynchronous online discussions have been observed to promote 'a level of reflective interaction often lacking in a face-to-face teacher-centered classroom' (p. 3). Aumayr, Chan, and Hayes (2011) further maintain that online forums afford their users a platform for questions to be asked and answered, information to be disseminated and public discussions on all types of topics to be carried out. And, according to Putman, Ford, and Tancock (2012), participants in online conversations are free from the constraints of time inherent in face-to-face interaction or real-time computer-mediated platforms like instant messaging or chats. This enables participants to reflect properly on questions or responses before sending them. Hence, online conversations or discussions meet very important criteria for conversation in terms of content and message structure. They further contend that the 'threaded nature of forums allows us to

follow the conversations, and thus study interesting problems. For example, users can be profiled and analysed based on their replying behaviour, which is extracted from the reply structure of forums' (p. 26). This method was used by Chan et al. (2010) to profile users and group them together into 'user roles of common behaviour'. The roles were then used to delimit forums into percentage of users playing particular roles. Wang, Ye, and Huberman (2012) note that there are underlying rules in common for online conversations in different social media websites, and that empirical researches show that the dynamics of conversation threads play a fundamental role in opinion spread and formation, word-of-mouth effects and collective problem solving (p. 1).

### ***Nairaland* as 'public sphere'**

The term 'public sphere', credited to Habermas (1962/1989), refers to a portion of people's social experience in which they assemble to discuss problems of society and consequently motivate political action. It represents 'a discursive space in which individuals and groups congregate to discuss matters of mutual interest and where possible to reach a common judgement' (Hauser, 1998, p. 86). Habermas (1962/1989, p. 30) explains the term with reference to Greek philosophy by pointing out the difference between *polis* (the public) and *oikos* (the private): the former captures free citizens' open interactions in the area of politics and the latter refers to free persons' interactions in domestic life. However, given that private individuals make up public individuals, who participate in political debate, the two spheres are inseparable (cf. Calhoun, 1992). Thus, 'the public sphere and the private sphere can be considered mutually inclusive, rather than mutually exclusive, social realms' (Susen, 2011, p. 43).

Going by these definitions, participants on *Nairaland* could be said to constitute a public which converges to deliberate on Nigerian social and political issues. While the sociogeographical and historical origin of the term 'public sphere' associates it with a physical assemblage of people in actual settings, its adaptation to the Internet setting of *Nairaland* precludes a real individual-physical gathering. The photos or other choices of self-identification of individual

participants iconize their physical presence and their contributions symbolise their voices.

Furthermore, the online convergence of Nigerians on *Nairaland* to debate issues of national interest typifies civic engagement – 'individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern' (American Psychological Association, 2015, not paginated). The encounters of the participants live up not only to the individual voluntarism dimension of civic engagement but also in part to the other dimensions of civic engagement: organisational involvement and electoral participation. In the context of voluntarism, participants freely and critically discuss issues with the goal of solving a social or political problem. Situated within individual voluntarism, *Nairaland* encounters propose solutions through generations of consensus on issues debated. Members encourage one another to vote in elections, offer their services to the National Electoral body (Independent National Electoral Commission (NEC)) as volunteers and refuse to be engaged by politicians as political thugs. And given the social standing and profiles of individuals involved in the debates, the Nigerian government has had to reckon with a number of the proposals. A manifestation of this recognition is evident in the Nigerian government's positive responses to opinions expressed in the social media. One way in which the last Jonathan's administration responded to public opinion on *Nairaland*, in addition to commenting on his *Facebook* and *Twitter* accounts, was to appoint a Special Personal Assistant on Social Media, who educated the government on popular feelings and demands of the people. Interestingly, the results of the April 2015 general elections in the country were first published on social media and circulated on *Nairaland* by non-partisan and 'citizen journalists' before the official announcement. This prompted the NEC to warn the public against reliance on 'unofficial results' on social media. But the fact remains that the government and political parties became aware that some results that were believed to be credible were already made public via social media; hence, they threaded with caution. This helped to curtail irregularities. Moreover, during the screening of the ministerial nominees of the current Nigerian President

by the Senate, the opposition raised an allegation on one of the nominees on account of reports they got from the social media (including *Nairaland*) about her state of origin. The case was investigated by the Ethics Committee that examined cases involving the nominees. The case was later resolved when relevant documents that authenticated the nominees' state of origin were produced. This shows how important the social media and the online communities are in the political process and governance in Nigeria. Interestingly, this shows that the online community has a strong link to social and political events in the offline community. This was clear during the 'occupy Nigeria' protests that paralysed social and economic activities in Nigerian in 2012; the protests were largely organised, mobilised and monitored via social media and *Nairaland* among others (see Chiluba, 2015).

Although *Nairaland* succeeds in providing a public sphere and voice for 'ordinary' Nigerians, political and social arguments in the community have often reflected ethnic and religious sentiments. Members have also, at various instances, expressed opinions that show that they are non-committal when issues associated with civic engagement are discussed, which again brings to the fore the fragmented nature of online communities. As a matter of fact, ethnic and religious arguments sometimes threaten the peace in the forums, where members introduce issues that are not connected to the topic being debated. This has also resulted in several forms of verbal abuse and disparagement. In this regard, *Nairaland* fails to provide and support a neutral social media forum for 'all Nigerians' as it claims. What is clear, however, is that the BH insurgency appears to have placed Nigerians on a common ground as victims and as a community of victims (in this case *Nairaland*), which appears united on the surface, especially in their condemnation of the attacks. Moreover, the disunited 'offline' Nigeria often re-echoes when ethnic and political topics are discussed, which had also threatened robust civic engagement of the participants in the real sense. As this study argues, the BH activities are already being attributed to the North, and unfortunately to Muslims as a whole, which, by implication, reflects the usual ideological polarisation: Christians

are good, Muslims are bad; the North is unsafe; the south is safe.

## Stance and engagement

*Stance* is a theoretical concept that has been used to describe how speakers or writers express their viewpoints, opinions, judgements and attitudes about a topic being conveyed through lexico-grammatical options (see Biber, 2006). This process has also been described as *evaluation* (Bednarek, 2006; Hunston & Thompson, 2000), *appraisal* (Martin, 2000) or *attitude* (Halliday, 1994). Biber and Finnegan (1989) define stance as 'the lexical and grammatical expression of attitudes, feelings, judgements or commitment concerning the propositional content of a message' (p. 124). These are expressed as *epistemic* and *affective* stances. Epistemic stance is a 'socially recognised disposition', while affective stance is a 'socially recognised feeling, attitude, mood or degree of emotional intensity' (Ochs, 1990, p. 2). Beyond the expression of commitment, opinions and judgements, stance is 'positioning' the writer and enabling them to 'stamp their personal authority onto their arguments or step back and disguise their involvement' (Hyland, 2005, p. 176). According to Du Bois (2007), positioning is the act of situating a social actor with respect to responsibility for stance and for invoking sociocultural value (p. 143).

*Engagement* is the point where 'writers acknowledge and connect to others, recognising the presence of their readers, pulling them along with their argument, focusing their attention, acknowledging their uncertainties, including them as discourse participants and guiding them to interpretations' (Hyland, 2005, p. 176). According to Hyland, stance and engagement overlap being two sides of the same coin and contribute to the interpersonal aspect of discourse.

This study identifies lexical indices and labels of stance that reflect negative valence such as those that express anger and hate towards the terrorist group. However, the study argues that certain subjective and emotional negative representations of BH tend to misrepresent reality about the militant group; more importantly, they pose the danger of promoting ethnic hatred and religious intolerance among the



Nigerian ethnic nationalities. The representation of Islam in the thread below (from the data) is an example:

The world would be a better place without Islam because that thing called Islam is a problem anywhere in the world. We may pretend and even claim that what is happening in the north today is more of political issues than religious issues, but i tell you the whole thing is about religion. People that refer to Islam as religion of peace are either playing with our intelligence or they do not know what they are talking ... Shekau challenged Islamic clerics all over the world to come out and prove him wrong if they think what he is doing is not in accordance with the instructions of their Allah and we have not seen anybody yet. Tell me which Muslim has sincerely condemned the activities of Boko Haram in Nigeria up till date. (danny301, 4.01 p.m. Sept. 9, 2012)

While BH operates in the name of Islam, many Muslims claim that their activities do not represent the true values of Islamic Faith (see Alexseev, 2001; Al Sayyid, 2002). Unfortunately, the BH terrorist activities in Nigeria are likely to create a wider gap between Christians and Muslims, and since it appears that most sect members are Hausa and Fulani, northerners are mostly likely to be constantly branded 'fanatics' or 'violent'. If a reprisal attack occurs from Christians in the south, all northerners living in south will be attacked; this is has happened before.

Because writers see their readers as active discourse participants who are capable of disagreeing with their arguments and lines of thought, they employ discursive strategies to 'engage' them in order to persuade and convince them. Hyland (2005) offers two reasons why writers employ engagement strategies: first, the need to meet the reader's expectations and include the reader in a kind of disciplinary solidarity; second, to rhetorically position the reader, thereby pulling the reader into the discourse, predicting possible objections and guiding the reader to particular interpretations with questions, directives and references to shared knowledge. Within the framework of the appraisal theory, engagement accounts for linguistic resources with which the authorial voice positions itself with respect to other textual voices, including alternative positions in a

given discourse context (Martin & White, 2005). Thus, engagement not only accounts for evaluative uses of language by which speakers or writers adopt a particular position or stance but also those devices by which they interact with potential or real hearers or readers such as evidentiality, modality or hedging (Arrese & Perucha, 2006). Hyland (2005) proposes five 'main elements of engagement', which he describes as *reader pronouns*, *personal asides*, *appeals to shared knowledge*, *directives* and *questions* (p. 182). Four of these elements are relevant to the present study namely, (1) reader pronouns, (2) appeals to shared knowledge, (3) directives and (4) questions. These are described and explained in detail in the analysis.

## Methodology

The data for this study are obtained from the *Nairaland corpus* (compiled from the *Cyber-creole project* of the University of the Freiburg) comprising 14 million words. The corpus comprises data samples from online conversations/threads on *Nairaland* from July 2009 to January 2014. Qualitative analysis of stance and evaluation is carried out at the level of vocabulary, alongside the elements of engagement. Some grammatical expressions that reflect negative valence and evaluative judgements that are of high interest to the study are also analysed. 'PO' in the samples stands for 'post'. For constraints of space, only few very important samples are reproduced in the analyses.

## Analysis and findings

The qualitative (critical) discourse analysis of stance and evaluation carried out here, based on the appraisal framework, examines the possible consequences of the various (affective) ideological representations of BH in the forum and how these may further endanger religious and ethnic relations in Nigeria.

## Discursive representations of BH

The constructions of BH in the conversations in most cases express negative valence (e.g. anger and

hate). In addition to some main lexical items, the inclusive pronouns ‘we’ and ‘they’/‘them’ are frequently used to emphasise membership of the Nigerian populace often constructed as victims. Thus, ‘we’ textually constructs the writer and reader as participants with similar understanding and perspective; ‘they’/‘them’ refers to the BH as the ‘other’ and who in most cases are constructed as ‘evil’ or are explicitly referred to as ‘the beast’ as in **PO1** below. In some of the samples, ‘these people’ also refers to BH, and the use of ‘these people’ in context frequently connotes negative evaluation as in **PO4** and **PO5**. On the other hand, the Nigerian people are referred to as ‘our people’ or rhetorically referred to as ‘light’ that cannot co-exist with darkness (‘darkness’ refers to BH). Hence, some of the participants recommend ‘death penalty’ for ‘them’ (**PO5**). This representation of BH and Nigeria is quite interesting, because judging from the complex ethnic, political and religious differences in Nigeria, the participants were probably for the first time, beginning to see each other as one. The perception of BH as a problem and the form the BH’s attacks had taken possibly suggest the creation of a sense of nationalism in Nigerians. However, some of the instances of ‘they’ and ‘them’ in the texts refer to the Nigerian government or the armed forces and in many cases has no ideological implications. In the samples below, words and expressions that are significant in terms of their evaluative properties are highlighted.

**PO1.** But dis *beast* called Boko haram are *they* humans or devils?

**PO2.** Now we have an *evil* about to *consume* the whole country as a result of this. Wouldnt it be better if *they* taught themselves proper lessons, but na naija? The best thing for *them* to do is to just *kill* each new person who claims themselves as the leader. Maybe *they* want to die like the first guy. It’s okay, *they* said *they* would die if it came down to it. Can’t we just kill all of *them* already? Waste of life!!!

**PO3.** Dialogue with *terrorists* is ridiculous in the first place

*To hell* with Boko Haram ...

**PO4.** Jst got a call now. 2bombs *exploded* inside a catholic church in Madalla Niger State a town that border Abuja FCT details later. What is wrong with *these people*.

**PO5.** On Xmas day!!! *These people* are *barbaric* and deserves nothing but *death penalty*. Why all these and will people go to hell fire if they don’t worship God today or conduct today’s service from their home? This is just *very sad*.

Most of the contributions were reactions to reports of bombings and threats associated with BH. For instance, **PO2** above was reacting to one of BH’s threats (e.g. ‘we will teach Nigeria a lesson’). **PO4** was also responding to the report of the bombing of a Catholic Church at *Madalla* on the Christmas day of 2012. Lexical labels that express negative valence towards BH are mostly descriptive words (adjectives), used within nouns phrases, for example, ‘ruthless bastards’, ‘bloody moronic imbeciles’, ‘confused retarded hypocrites’, ‘barbaric animals’ and so on. Similarly, BH’s activities are explicitly described as ‘horror’ or ‘horrendous’ (**PO6**). Words (verbs) that express actions attributed to BH such as ‘killing’, ‘destroying’ or ‘hate’ are also highly emotional. ‘Killing’ is a keyword in the corpus, which occurs 9910 times (0.0678%, see appendix below). These emotional negative evaluations are understandably due to what is known about the terrorist group and their activities; their behaviour is judged according to ethical standards of behaviour which BH is known to constantly violate. Nouns that refer to BH also express negative evaluation, for example, referring to them as ‘terrorist’ or ‘fools’; some of the nouns and noun phrases are rhetorical devices (e.g. metaphor), referring to them as ‘darkness’ (**PO7**) or ‘sons of dogs’ (**PO9**). The implications of these negative judgements are to construct the image of the Nigerian tragedy in order to establish not only the attitude of the writers and participants but also to negatively influence the public opinion of and assumption about BH.

**PO6.** pls whoever is within d environ shud pls come out and help. D scene here is *horrendous*, bodies scattered everywhere. It luks lyk sumtin from a *horror* movie

**PO9.** njokusboy: *Sons of Dogs* ... I am sure most of those canines cannot even spell their name ... The only thing they are gud at is clutching rifles and charging lyk rams ...

**PO10.** *Spinless bastards!! Bloody móronic imbéciles* wasting innocent lives because their god promised them virgins!!

**PO12.** May God continue to protect his people from dis *barbaric animals*.

The *Nairaland* forum is structured as a platform for conversations, where participants engage in actual interactions and not just a sequence of posts and responses; thus, participants present propositions, ask questions and take stance. Thus, engagement resources are characterised as dialogic in the sense that they are the means by which the textual voice represents itself as acknowledging, engaging with, challenging or aligning itself with other utterances (White, 2003). One of the engagement devices in the forum is *questioning*. According to Hyland (2005), questions are a strategy that invites engagement and brings the interlocutor to where he or she can be led to the writer's viewpoint. 'They arouse interest and encourage the reader to explore an unresolved issue with the writer as an equal, a conversational partner, sharing his or her curiosity and following where the argument leads' (p. 185). In the data for this study, however, most of the interrogatives are rhetorical questions which are not intended to elicit specific answers but are used to express viewpoints, and in this context, they express emotional viewpoints. In **PO7** and **PO8** below, rhetorical questions are asked in order to 'propose a revolution' in Nigeria, which the writer of **PO7** says is 'now'.

**PO7.** Why are people so *wicked*? Why are people so *heartless*? *Light* and *Darkness* cannot co-exist!

The time is now!

**PO8.** Okay, when are we gonna take this *fight* into our own hands? I *propose* a revolution to completely eradicate these *rutless bastards* *spoiling* our name, *killing our people*, and *destroying* our properties.

While the various negative representations of BH in the corpus appear factual (e.g. referring to them as terrorists – the words 'terrorists' and 'terrorism' are keywords in the corpus occurring 5332 times or 0.0365% and 4851 times or 0.0332% respectively), we argue that some of the negative evaluations are misleading about the true character and intentions of the group. For instance, referring to them as 'fools' or as 'schizophrenic brain dead idiots' as in **PO11** below is simply an emotional reaction to the bombings meant to insult the group and not necessarily to represent facts.

**PO11.** *Fools* that *hate* westernization yet, they use youtube to upload their *crimes/claims* to *genocides*. They drive western cars. Live in western houses. Use western weapons to kill innocent civilians. *Confused retarded hypocrites!!* Preaching against a notion they use in their everyday lives. *Schizophrenic brain dead idiots*

The contributor in **PO11** denigrates BH with such choices as 'fools', 'confused retarded hypocrites' and 'schizophrenic brain dead idiots'. These choices which largely emerged more from the psychological context of anger than from a careful, scientific thought blatantly condemns the operations of BH. In a way, his affective stance relates to his judgement of BH's attacks as insensitive, and therefore, senseless. This justifies his choice of disparaging lexemes. However, a careful look at the BH group practically disproves the applicability of folly or idiocy in the real sense. And constructing their identity in this light would not be helpful in coming round the crisis. In point of fact, the group must be seen as one of the most sophisticated armed militants in Africa engaged in coordinated attacks never witnessed in the history of terrorism in Nigeria. For instance, BH initiated suicide bombing in Nigeria, and most of the attacks have been highly successful. The former Nigerian President Jonathan himself admitted that BH had infiltrated the Nigerian government (see Chiluwa and Ifukor, 2015). While many of the BH members are indeed uneducated *almagiris* (converts??), their membership comprises university lecturers, politicians, lawyers, bankers and so on (Agbiboa, 2013),

and they receive support from other members of al-Qaeda operating in Mali, Somalia and possibly Libya. BH is consistently and assiduously pursuing their political and religious agenda of creating an IS in northern Nigeria (see Agbibo, 2013; Chiluwa & Adetunji, 2013). These are not the activities of ‘schizophrenic brain dead idiots’ in the real sense. They are the actions of a determined group that is utilising all their resources to achieve a political revolution, as well as advance the global objectives of al-Qaeda in the world.

### Constructing religious affiliation

Religion and religious affiliations are a very sensitive social factor in the Nigerian society as it has a major influence in the Nigerian politics. Nigeria is often viewed as the most religious country in the world (see Chiluwa, 2008) and constantly pulled to different directions by two powerful religions – Islam, predominantly in the north, and Christianity, dominating the south. However, studies have shown that a good number of Christians live in the north. While Christianity dominates the southeast and ‘south-south’, the southwest is made up of Christians and Muslims (see Salawu, 2010). Overtime, the struggle to propagate one religion above the other had resulted in major religious conflicts in the country (Chiluwa, 2008). According to Muhammad (2008), the antagonism between Islam and Christianity poses obvious threat to the sociopolitical and economic stability of the country and nothing suggests that there would not be ‘a full-blown religious war’ in the future ‘given the trend and character of religious conflicts’ (p. 121). It is also important to note that

ethnicity and religious bigotry have become a fulcrum of various forms of nationalism ranging from (the) assertion of language, cultural autonomy and religious superiority to demands for local political autonomy and self-determination ... These sometimes lead to some forms of contextual discrimination of members of one ethnic or religious group against another on the basis of differentiated systems of socio-cultural symbols and religion. (Salawu, 2010, p. 346)

Interestingly, the recurrent violence in Nigeria attributed to BH has tended to ‘unite’ Christians and

Muslims participating in the *Nairaland* forum as they together condemn the activities of the group. However, in most of the threads, Christian voices are the more prominent, where the inclusive pronoun ‘we’ refers to Christians and ‘they’ refers to Muslims. However, even with the obvious violence perpetrated by BH, there is still the struggle to defend the virtues of Islam, which Muslim members of the forum argue have been contradicted by the activities of BH as in **PO18**. Most of the samples below exemplify Christian voices, denouncing and discrediting Islam in reaction to the report that ‘BH killed 10 Christians in Borno State’. One way this is done, is by rhetorically extolling Jesus Christ as in **PO12**, indirectly implying that Christianity is by far, better than Islam. While rhetorically addressing Jesus in **PO12**, the writer adds, ‘You never asked your disciples to force any one to believe in you and to kill anyone who do not believe in You’, obviously alluding to the assumed superiority of the Christian leader over that of Islam.

**PO12.** I love my Jesus!!! A peace maker, a loving son of most most High God. You came to this world you preach peace, you heal the sick, you raise the dead, You make barren women to bear children. You give hope to the hopeless. You never preach for violence, You said to your disciples go and preach the good news to the rich, to the poor, and to the sick, for those who believe in you shall find peace in their heart. *You never asked your disciples to force any one to believe in you and to kill any one who do not believe in You.* You are the way, the truth and the life. In you, i will give my entire life!!! Every where He go, He was doing good. He is the price of PEACE.

PO12 shows that Islam is generally constructed as a religion that promotes violence, and Muslims are represented as violent people. Interestingly, in order to prove their point, the writer of **PO14** (below) quotes the exact passages in the Quran where Muslims are enjoined to killed non-Muslims. Muslims are also associated with occupations that are generally regarded in Nigeria as ‘low’ or ‘undignified’ as in **PO13**. Ironically, some of the online participants who live in Europe or America do similar jobs and even worse; but in the forums, these occupations are used as identity markers for

Muslims. Moreover, Muslims are constructed as ambivalent migrants, who are not happy in the Muslim world but find happiness in Western nations. They are said to wish to convert the nations where they are happy to where they are not. Using the rhetorical method of repetition (or parallelism) (e.g. Muslims *are not happy, they're not happy* in Gaza, *they're not happy* in Egypt; *they're not happy* in Libya etc. – **PO15**), the writer, applying a narrative style, further appears to taunt Muslims.

**PO13.** Is high time *we start bombing & killing* all dis *miserable* Muslims in de south eastern states ... bt *dey* re all *miserable gays ... shoe makers, tailors* etc. *We* are now reaping the fruit of what was sown 9 years ago (or thereabout), when sharia law was established in Zamfara.

**PO14.** Quran 9:123 says, o ye who believe! Fight those of the unbelievers who are near to you and let them find in you hardness ... Qur'an:9:5 'Fight and kill the disbelievers wherever you find them, take them captive, harass them, lie in wait and ambush them using every stratagem of war'. Qur'an:9:112 'The Believers fight in Allah's Cause; they slay and are slain, kill and are killed'. Qur'an:9:29 'Fight those who do not believe until they all surrender, paying the protective tax in submission ...'

**PO15.** carujmonella: Muslims are not happy! They're not happy in Gaza. They're not happy in Egypt, They're not happy in Libya, Morocco, Iran, Iraq, Yemen Afghanistan, Syria. In Lebanon they're not happy. So, where are they happy? They're happy in Australia. They're happy in England, France, Sweden, Norway. They're happy in USA. They're happy in every country that is not Islamic! And who do they blame? Not Islam. Not their leadership. Not themselves. They blame the countries they are happy in! And they want to change them to be like the country they came from, where they were so unhappy.

Emotional negative evaluation is further expressed in the descriptions of and labels for Muslims such as 'miserable Muslims', 'shoe makers', 'tailors' and so on. As pointed out above, 'shoe makers' actually refers to cobblers and 'tailors' here are the mobile freelance tailors, whose jobs are to mend torn clothes. In Nigeria, these occupations are looked down upon

and are usually the works of the local Hausa *mal-lams*, who migrated to southern cities like Lagos or Port Harcourt. These occupations generally give them the identity of social misfits and are used to taunt them. Unfortunately, the Christian apologists generally associate this with religion and construct the identity of Muslims in terms of poverty and social degradation. The kind of negative affect expressed in the forum towards Muslims is apparently that of hate and anger. For instance, the writer of **PO13** emotionally recommends the 'bombing' and 'killing' of Muslims living in the southeastern states. Unfortunately, the writer and others who least understand the complexity of the BH insurgency view it as a religious war between Christians and Muslims with many recommending reprisal attacks on Muslims. Because social media promotes anonymity, participants do not often take responsibility for their comments regardless of how radical and unreasonable some may sound; participants on *Nairaland*, in some cases (like this one), sometimes say things they would not generally say in offline political discourses. Hence, emotional outbursts, criticisms and social analysis in the social media and online forums are not the same in the offline community.

This brings us to our main argument in this article that BH's activities may be misinterpreted and result in a more serious religious intolerance in Nigeria because the escalation of violence against Christians in the northeast can lead to reprisal attacks and killing of innocent Muslims in the south. In February 2006, for example, 33 people, mostly Christians, were killed and about 30 churches burnt down in the northern cities of Bauchi and Maiduguri when Muslims rioted over Prophet Muhammad's cartoon caricature. *Voice of America* reported that reprisal attacks on Muslims living in the southeast of Onitsha claimed the lives of about 64 people, mostly Muslims after 5 days of violence. This is probably the reason why the writers of **PO16** and **PO17** below wondered why Christians were still residing in the north or not defending themselves. But indeed, Christians have been reported as defending themselves. According to *NewsRescue.com* of 17 June 2012, Christian groups in anger and frustrations over BH's bombing of three churches leading to the death of 20 Christians in Kaduna, rioted and killed about 40 innocent Muslims,

who had nothing to do with the terrorist attacks (<http://newsrescue.com/nigeria-boko-bombs-kill-13-innocents-in-kaduna-churches-christians-kill-11-innocent-muslims/#ixzz37pBX16vn>). Words that reflect negative affect in the samples below such as ‘silly’ or ‘looking’ idly are used to describe the unwelcome supposed attitude of Christians. The writers, therefore, advised them to ‘arm and defend yourselves’ and ‘be wise’.

**PO16.** This *silly* Christians!!! you’re there *looking*. you *better arm* and *defend* yourselves una wey dey stay village for borno again kai ... una go dey slip dey drool like say nofin dey happen

**PO17.** But i still don’t *understand* why Christians are still in the north ... And some of them had faith but also died in sin, which means HELLFIRE ... Be wise xtians.

Thus, tension between Christians and Muslims has remained acute in Nigeria, and conflicts of a seemingly socioeconomic or political nature have often divided people along religious lines. In the forum, non-violent Muslims dissociate themselves from the activities of BH, and where possible as in **PO18** below, attempt to give reasons why BH’s stance on religion and violent actions cannot represent the position of all Muslims. Using the engagement strategy of questions, the writer, responding to an earlier post, tries to draw the attention of the writer or reader to some illogical inclusion of Muslim faithfuls who are in the majority with the terrorist Muslim minority. Interestingly, the recent frequent bombings of mosques in the northeastern Nigeria are beginning to give some insights to the true character and intentions of BH.

**PO18. *tmotmo*:** I agree with you that Boko haram is doomed. However, your last 2 sentences are wrong and misleading. Boko haram claimed they are killing for Allah, but Boko Haram, al Qaeda, alshabab and the likes constitutes less than 2% of over 2 billion Muslim population of the world. Now tell me how could their views be the correct representation of the majority if not for your bigotry and stereotyping?

The contributor of PO18, which ends on a typical note of disparagement, engages with an orientation

to the Leechian approbation maxim. At the initial stage, he affiliates with the stance of the preceding contribution. With the concessional subordinator, ‘however’, in the second sentence, he disaffiliates by argumentation which faults the claim that BH’s killing operations represent a fulfilment of an Islamic tenet. The last sentence however insults adding to the pool of expressions on *Nairaland* with the potential to stir religious crisis.

## Constructing ethnicity and identity in the forums

Some studies on ethnicity and identity in the context of computer-mediated communication have established that virtual communities provide the platform for ‘doing ethnicity’ through some racial and linguistic labels by different ethnic identities (Heyd, 2014). An online community is also a virtual space where the oppressed groups assert their identity, resist discrimination and struggle against ethnic domination (Chiluwa, 2012; Poster, 1998). The *Nairaland* is a virtual community that clearly illustrates the struggle for tribal and ethnic self-determination and also reflects the view that overarching ethnic consciousness often endangers national consciousness (see McLaine, 2003). With over 400 ethnic groups and languages, Nigeria has remained a multi-ethnic nation constantly grappling with the problem of ethnicity and ethno-religious conflicts. Some ethnic groups have also demanded economic and political independence as well as social security. This has led to the emergence of ethnic militias such as MEND (movement for the emancipation of the Niger Delta), MASSOB (movement for the actualization of the sovereign state of Biafra), OPC (O’dua people’s congress), Bakassi Boys and so on (see Chiluwa, 2011; Salawu, 2010). This separatist feeling, now exacerbated by BH’s activities, has increased ethnic consciousness. Many of the participants in the forum (notably, the Igbo) view the BH’s menace as the last call to breakup Nigeria, which to them is long overdue (Chiluwa & Adetunji, 2013).

Naturally, Nigeria is divided by two rivers (i.e. River Niger to the east and River Benue to the north). Hence, the constant reference to ‘north’ and ‘south’ is borne out of the perceived natural and historical,

as well as cultural consciousness of being different. Despite the colonial policy that made Nigeria one nation, most of the ethnic groups still see themselves as different from one another. Also, the fact that the south of Nigeria is more developed in terms of university education and technological awareness; it is believed that the majority of participants on *Nairaland* are south-born youths, living in Nigeria and abroad, many of them are Christians. Therefore, the kind of 'ethnic' consciousness expressed in the forum is that of belonging either to the north or south rather than orienting to tribal identification because even in the south, tribal and ethnic barriers remain intractable. In this context, 'we' and 'us' refer to the south, while 'they' and 'them' refer to the north. For example, the inclusive 'we' in **PO19** and **PO20**, as an engagement strategy, seeks to create that regional (southern) feeling in the reader.

**PO19.** I think *we* southerners need to listen to the wisdom of Wole Soyinka. I keep saying *we* need to cooperate much more than *we* are doing now; make una shine eye or one day de trap go close.

Kech:

**PO20.** Well if the story is true I would advise every *southerner in the north to hurry back home*. But those guys should know that whatever *they* do would have implications, let *them* come *we* shall be ready. I can see an *end* to Nigeria.

Incidentally, the 'wisdom' of Wole Soyinka (the Nigerian 1986 Nobel laureate in literature) referred to in **PO19** has no direct link with warring against the north as implied in the threads. In an interview, Soyinka had remarked,

... in all these incidents both government and the citizenry had exhibited complacency in the matter of extra-judicial killings ... I abhor all forms of extra-judicial killings and there is no evidence of a rigorous attempt by government to pursue the killers and everyone went to sleep and these again went unchallenged. So these are the root causes of Boko Haram where language of appeasement has been used to encourage it or these things are happening with government's tacit support ... (see <http://www.thisdayonline.com/nview.php?id=151635>)

Perhaps, the writer is making reference to what Soyinka said earlier. Some directive (physical) acts in **PO19** are used to engage the reader, instructing him or her to do something such as 'make una shine eye' (open your eyes) in readiness to revenge; another writer recommends a *cognitive act* such as 'be wise' (in **PO17**) in order for them to defend themselves.

In the construction of the southern Nigerian identity, the north is constructed as a hindrance to the progress of Nigeria. Hence, the solution to meddling with the north is a breakup. Some of the posts explicitly call for this breakup of Nigeria for two reasons: first, the north, according to them, is populated by a violent people, who are obsessed with the feeling having 'the monopoly of violence' (**PO21**). Second, they over-rely on the southern Nigerian economy for survival. Hence, one of the participants emotionally recommends the killing of all the Hausa by the Joint Military Task Force (JTF; set up by the Nigerian government to combat BH) (**PO22**). The writer of **PO21** had earlier recommended making life miserable for the northerners living in the southwest, south-south and southeast. Notice that 'we' indicates positive action followed by positive evaluations, while 'they' or 'these people' (referring to the entire northerners) are attributed to negative actions, also negatively evaluated. For instance, 'we' (the southerners) are 'priceless asset', (**PO25**), while 'these guys' (the northerners) 'have refused to go to school'; 'we' (the southerners) have all the oil, (**PO29**) and 'they' (the northerners) are 'drawing us back'. The north is also metaphorically referred to as 'dead weight' (**PO32**).

**PO21.** Its time Nigeria broke up. Seriously, what makes *these people* think they hold the monopoly over violence? *We* need to make *life miserable* for their brethren in the SW, SS and SE. Maybe *they* will tell their brothers up north to behave.

**PO22.** JTF pls *kill* all northerners! They are all one and d same! *Kill* dem all!

**PO23.** I think it's time we separate in Nigeria, we are not one, honestly.

**PO24.** But i still want Nigeria to be one!! can't *we* just be happy living in the same borders? i want peace to really come and the north end this sharia nonsense.

also use the oil to better Nigeria and stop being greedy. But i would always choose peace over war, any day, anytime.

**PO25.** No Amaka mba

*These guys have refused to go to school. We want nation builders. We the southerners are a priceless asset, and we are on the threshold of national service to our nations building. Nobody can afford to draw us back.*

The conversations constantly harp on the age-long resource control question, which has been the heart of the Niger Delta (ND) crisis. There seems always to be the feeling of deprivation on the mind of an average southerner in relation to the north – the fact that ‘we’ produce the oil and ‘they’ produce nothing; ‘our’ oil is used to develop ‘their’ cities. This is the feeling that led to the armed resistance of the ND youths. ‘Oil’ is a keyword in the data, which implies that it is both textually and discursively significant, occurring 9551 times (i.e. 0.0653%). Words and expressions that represent the state and actions of the north indicate negative evaluation such as *loss, misfortune, have nothing, move backward, Sharia nonsense* and so on. On the other hand, ‘we’ (the south) move the nation ‘forward’. Notice the emphatic ‘No Amaka mba’ in **PO25** reflecting anger. ‘Mba’ is an Igbo word for ‘No’ ! The writer of **PO24** (Amaka) had suggested living happily together with the north to which the response was an emphatic ‘no’ !

**PO26.** Nigeria *break up* is imminent: northern states = 19 including Abuja (please if *you* are an indigene of kogi, kwara, fct please *renounce* your membership and join the south southern states = 18 (including Jos)

**PO27.** Then *the south can take its oil* and be happy!!!!  
!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! YES!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

If that ever does come about ...

**PO28.** i will see another civil war coming.

Nigeria *isnt going to let* the south go that easy.

**PO29.** We have all the oil. *They* know when they let us go *they* will have NOTHING.

**PO30.** Then *they* will realise their *loss and misfortune*. After decades of treating the south like nobodies they will realise they *should have respected us* and allowed us to worship freely.

**PO31.** Nigeria is supposed to me *moving* forward not backwards. The north can *move backwards* back to 500 B.C. with their boko haram and sharia law nonsense.

**PO32.** While the *south* will take all its oil and put it to good use and *move the country forward*. i call the north *DEAD WEIGHT*.

As mentioned and demonstrated above, rhetorical questions appear to be one of the most frequently used engagement strategies in the forum. Whenever the few northern voices in the forum appear to take on an argument, they always do so by asking a question, not necessarily expecting a clear answer, but to pull the interlocutor into some aspects of an ongoing argument as in **PO33** below. The writer, most likely a Christian northerner, makes reference to Jesus Christ and argues that the north (perhaps northern Christians) can survive without oil if Nigeria breaks up. This interesting dimension of the argument is probably an aspect which many advocates of the breakup on the basis of religion have not deeply considered – the fact that not all northerners are Muslims. If Nigerian breaks up on account of the north ‘producing nothing’ or that they are ‘Muslims’ and are ‘violent’, what happens to northern (Hausa) Christians? What happens to southern Christians living in the north? Some of the participants in the conversations appear to be completely ignorant of the complexity of the Nigerian ethnic problem, let alone problems associated with the economy and the distribution of wealth. That is why the construction of ethnic identity in the forum is highly ideological, most of the times, comprising mere emotional negative evaluations of the ‘other’.

**PO33.** What did we do to you? Is it only the northern states that benefit from oil wealth? Did we mismanage the oil wealth? Majority of us, 80% have nothing to do with oil money. We *will survive* with or without oil. Oil *is not* the necessity of life. If Jesus *came* to this world when it has *no oil* we shall still prosper with or without oil.



**PO34.** @Ayo Olu2, Now cos of BOKO, y'all are calling for the disintergration of Nigeria, but Ojukwu did the same thing & all other tribes in Nigeria waged war & carried out POGROM on the Igbos, 'the evil that men do, and History will vindicate, fill IN the rest. EVERYONE WILL TASTE THE BITTER PILL. Confuse nation & confuse people.

One of the few elements of engagement in the forum is *appeal to shared knowledge*. This positions the reader within some apparently common contextual understandings with the writer. According to Hyland (2005), the notion of 'sharedness' is often invoked by writers to 'smuggle' some contested ideas into their argument, but in the context of the conversations on *Nairaland*, the writer refers to common history and calls to remembrance some familiar events in the past to buttress his or her argument. Sometimes, the reader can only agree with the writer by identifying with some common knowledge upon which the writer draws. In **PO34**, for example, the writer appeals to the common knowledge of the Nigerian civil war to engage those calling for the disintegration of Nigeria. The call for the breakup of Nigeria rekindles an anger in the writer, who is likely an Igbo and supporter of the Biafra campaign group (Chiluwa, 2012), against those who supported the war against the Igbo. Implicitly, the writer constructs Nigeria as a nation that lacks the understanding of what it really needs; thus, it has become a 'confused nation', with 'confused people'. In other words, if other southern tribes had supported Ojukwu to achieve the Biafran revolution, the south would have been free from the north today. He or she further implies, therefore, that it is too late to seek disintegration. As a matter of fact, the BH insurgency is viewed by indigenes of Igbo extraction as a just retribution against southerners for the death of over three millions Igbo people in the Nigerian civil war (see Chiluwa, 2012).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this article argues that the various negative evaluations of BH and their extension to the entire northern Nigeria is a dangerous development in the social and political discourse of *Nairaland*. The consistent constructions of northern Nigeria as

'violent people' and Islam as an 'evil' religion is likely to further worsen religious and ethnic relations in Nigeria. Many of the participants in the forum fail to realise the religious composition of northern Nigeria, and the fact that a breakup of Nigeria is not likely to achieve the kind of Southern economic autonomy they anticipate. Also, they appear to misunderstand the complexity of the process of disintegration itself. Emotional evaluation of the 'other' in the conversations mostly reveal negative valence, that is, anger and hate against BH, Islam and northern Nigeria. Elements of engagement in the conversations have been mainly the use of the inclusive pronoun 'we' to construct the positive actions and attributes of Christians and southerners often constructed as the victim and 'they'/'them' to construct BH, Muslims and northerners. Questions, mainly rhetorical, have been used to take stance and reveal the position of the writer; and an appeal to previous knowledge of the Nigerian civil war is basically used to pull the reader to the side of the argument proposed by the writer.

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