

9/11 and the politics of counter-terrorism: Writing temporality in(to) counter-terrorism rhetoric and discourse in Nigeria

Counter-terrorism has been described as a 'powerful political discourse and a set of institutional practices with its own assumptions, symbolic systems, and rhetorical modes and tropes' (Jackson 2005). Indeed, more recently, much accepted knowledges and practices around counter-terrorism is largely informed by the events of 9/11 and the accompanying 'global war on terror', thus reproducing itself in different contexts with potentially varied consequences (Jarvis 2008, Toros 2017). In this piece, I briefly explore the way in which 9/11 functions as a discursive resource in framing –and responding to– specific terrorist threats in Nigeria. I attempt this analysis by looking at rhetorical statements and texts developed by the Nigerian federal government. This, indeed, is part of my PhD thesis which offers a compelling interpretivist assessment of Nigeria's counter-terrorism strategy.

My contention in this piece, specifically, is that the terrorist attacks against the U.S. on September 11, 2001 is mobilised in official rhetoric and discourse of counter-terrorism in Nigeria, producing different temporal forms and ideas about specific terrorist threat, Nigeria's vulnerability to this threat, a contestable notion of national identity, and provides justification for routinising, and dramatically, expanding state intervention. Of course, this temporal reductionism goes along with other far-reaching consequences too, as demonstrated below. Nigeria's National Counter-terrorism Strategy provides a good entry into this discussion: "since the coordinated terrorist attacks of 9/11, in the U.S. by Al-Qaeda, the phenomenon has assumed a global dimension. No country, including Nigeria, is immune to attacks by terrorist groups" (NACTEST 2016, p.6). The text further indicates that, "even with a robust programme in place, complete prevention of terrorism acts cannot be guaranteed. Therefore, stringent measures will be required to minimise the threat" (NACTEST 2016, p.20). This storying presents, at least, two clear temporal chronotypes and of course a range of unsettled presuppositions marking its contours. Let us consider these in turn.

A first configuration is temporal discontinuity (Jarvis, 2008), instituted by the terrorist attacks on 9/11 forging an incarnation of a dramatically 'new' and potentially deadly threat with an equally unprecedented global reach. Dasuki (2015), Nigeria's National Security Advisor, rhetorically described such terrorist threats as a "millennial challenge," which reinforces common accepted claims about recent terrorist violence (Stohl 2010, Aghedo 2015). This is not the place to rehearse the debate of new and old terrorism. However, this perfunctory a-historizing of significant political violences in Nigeria's history –such as Maitatsine uprisings in the 1980s and the attacks by the Movement for the Advancement of democracy in 1993, for example– set the scene for a radically different security environment in Nigeria, but not without an equally steeped rationalisation of Nigeria's vulnerability.

This leads us to a second temporal shape of infinite continuity or timelessness. As Aradau and Munster (2010) show, for example, the 'war on terror' and the need to respond to 'uncertainty' and 'danger' thus permits the collapsing of present and future constructions of time given an enduring and perpetual battle of which 'no country, including Nigeria, is immune.' Still, Nigeria's National Security Strategy writes: "if the U.S. with its military might and technological advancement could be vulnerable to such scope of attack, then no country

is immune” (NSS 2014, p.14). Such articulation of susceptibility invoking a perpetuity of fear, increasingly enables the othering of different countries and societies according to time, in which “advancement or military might” (present) directly signify a backward or weak ‘other(s)’ (past) (Hindess 2007).

This layering of meaning in respect to 9/11, moreover, permits the writing of a deeply problematic notion of national identity and provides justification for the routinising of security practices ostensibly in response to “global Islamic terrorism.” Turning again to the NSS which writes: “attacks on the U.S. is an unambiguous indication of the threat from global terrorism...directed at disrupting democratic, social and political institutions” (NSS 2014, p.14). Likewise, NACTEST (2016, p.10) states that “as with other notorious terrorist groups like al Qaeda, the trend is to attack symbolic structures...Boko Haram has included Christian worship centres to its list of targets...to inflame ethno-religious sentiments and further cause divisions in the polity.” For Jonathan (2015), ‘terrorists seek to destroy our cultural way of life, our democracy, which took years to build.’ This evidently suggest a temporal linearity productive of a specific national identity underpinned by democratic and progressive ideas. Such narrative about securing “our way of life” or democratic values widely populate discourses around the global war on terror (Jackson and Gunning 2011). However, this linearity seeks to eclipse varied notions of subjectivity that make up the Nigerian ‘society’ according to a highly restrictive idea of secularism and progress (Olaniyan and Asuelime 2014). As Buhari (2015) commented, “Boko Haram’s war is about values between progress and chaos; between democracy and the rule of law.” One immediate implication of this, among many others, is the delegitimising and othering of ideas and practices, including indigenous and religious knowledges, constituted as undemocratic or backward (Koelble and Lipuma 2008).

A final temporal chronotype considered here is, once more, temporal linearity, legitimising routine security practices. NACTEST indicates thus: “the assumption is that future activities of Boko Haram will evolve in accordance with the modus operandi of global Islamic terrorist groups, which provides the opportunity to make predictions and develop a strategy” (2016, p.10). While this implies a knowable trajectory of terrorist attacks in Nigeria and beyond, it is dramatically and inherently unstable, as the NACTEST subsequently writes: “Nigerians should be aware and come to terms with the fact that it is a phenomenon that would require long-term measures to contain. What is happening now is not an anomaly. Rather, it is an unfolding reality of the twenty-first century” (2016, p.10). Here we see a rather alternative writing which positions 9/11 as well as the terrorist threats in Nigeria as fundamentally predictable and normal, as opposed to the above-discussed representations of temporal rupture or discontinuity. Moreover, this permits the normalizing and routinising of counter measures supposedly “to contain” evolving threats in a security environment marked by assumptions of (un)foreseeable violence.

In sum, I have offered a terse account of the writing of temporality in the rhetoric and discourse of counter-terrorism in Nigeria focusing mainly on official articulations which, though offering an important account, present profound limitations.¹ And given the significance of – remembering or forgetting – 9/11 to knowledge and practices around counter-terrorism and security more widely, I would like to conclude this intervention by arguing for more work focusing on other sites beyond official representations (this has been consistently argued in critical terrorism studies, critical security studies, and beyond these

fields). In the case of Nigeria, future research should move beyond problematising the impact of counter-terrorism practices on the society or everyday life to identifying local alternatives, approaches, and ways of reconfiguring the increasingly securitised state. Such research enterprise could further explore other forms of temporality in Nigerian counter-terrorism discourse -and practice- which highlights the significance of non-violence and peaceful approaches.

Notes

¹ Official discourse may offer a partial understanding of the social and political landscape, and also reproduces existing power relations in Nigeria. Thus, ignoring important interpretations of counter-terrorism produced at other sites within and outside the Nigerian state, including the experiences of individuals and communities, state and local government levels, International Organisations, governments, and other external actors.

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