

## Newspaper Content Analysis of 2012-2015 Ombaste Ethnic Conflict in Nasarawa State: A Framing Theory Perspective

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### Abstract

*This study examined the newspaper coverage of the Ombatse crisis that hit Nasarawa State from 2012-2015. The Ombatse was a movement that wanted to resurrect the Eggon culture in a kind of renaissance and ensure a culture of high morality and chastity; laudable as these objectives were, the group suddenly turned dreadful, assuming a more militant posture; attacking and killing enemies real or perceived including security forces in their hundred. The study employed content analysis, which is a quantitative method of data generation. It applied four predetermined frames: actor frame, action frame, reaction frame, and consequence frame. 2112 dailies were censured for the period of four years. Study applied purposive sampling technique in the selection of the Daily Trust and Leadership newspapers where 180 copies of the papers were examined. The found that reaction frame was the predominant slant of the Nigerian newspapers with 61.1% of the news stories as reactions to the Ombatse activities. By implication, the findings revealed vacuity of the Nigerian media in handling a core national issue to which the media itself is a stakeholder. The study recommended that the media must be active participant in addressing, shaping public understanding of social upheaval-because the role of the media during conflict cannot be underestimated. The media should be able to analyse consequences, the possibility of collateral damage on the parties involved, the shadow parties and the by-standers. Nigerian journalists should also be trained and retrained on guide to sensitive-conflict reporting.*

### Keywords

Content analysis;  
Ethnic conflict;  
Framing theory;  
Newspapers;  
Ombaste.



### I. Introduction

People today live in a world ridden with conflicts of all shapes and colouration: ranging from the war on terror and militia groups to forced migration, ethno-religious crises, gross child abuse and other conflicts of smaller dimensions. As Nigeria's democracy advances in age, conflicts occasionally erupt tilting the nation towards an active volcano. Such conflicts lead to considerable loss of lives and properties, mass suffering, state collapse and societal fragmentation (David, 2012; Kate, 2013).

However, society's collective understanding, interpretation and reaction to these reported crises largely count on the framing or construction of the news stories by the media (Kate, 2013). Rabi (2013, p.109) contends that "when people have little direct knowledge of an event, they become increasingly reliant on the media for information, but also an understanding or interpretation of those events." The success or failure of any conflict resolution is sometimes determined by the angle the media chooses to report from. The media, according to Lekan (2013, p.2) "can decide to take a side in a conflict and make it impossible to be easily resolved."

The news slant or perspective of the media report is what is called news framing. The Framing Theory (Deidre, 2013, p.7) “explains the media’s influence on society.” During conflict, people heavily rely on the media as their sole information provider (Salma, 2009). Building the story at this moment is critical to the end or continuation of the conflict. Equally, the report determines the possibility for eventual resolution and peace reconstruction processes.

The role of the media during conflict cannot, therefore, be understated because the news it projects may either inflame or deflate passion toward a peaceful resolution of the conflict (MacBride, 1980). Since the media remains the primary source of information particularly during conflict, it is imperative to also understand how the news is built to shape new knowledge and extract audience reaction (Aondover, 2021).

The Ombatse phenomenon enjoyed particular importance, especially in northern newspapers. However, the perspective of newspapers has not been clearly defined- whether it focused on the parties to the conflict, consequences, or audience reactions. Therefore, the study aims to examine the media slant on the Ombatse phenomenon with focus on the frames employed in the coverage. It is within this context that the study finds strong root. The study is limited within the 2012-2015 periods. The period marked the peak of the confrontation characterized by the use of heavy weapons, search for allies, large population displacement and unprecedented loss of lives and properties in the record of Nasarawa State (Ayuba, 2014).

### **1.1 Research Question**

Based the knowledge gap, the following research question serves as the basic tool of scientific inquiry in the study:

RQ.1: What were the dominant thematic frames employed in the news stories on the Ombatse conflicts in Daily Trust and Leadership newspapers?

## **II. Review of Literature**

### **2.1 The Ombatse, the Myth and the Fairy**

The term, ‘Ombatse’, is an Eggon word meaning, ‘The time has come’ (Hir, 2013). At the beginning, it was an ethno-political movement; “a form of pressure group with ethnic agenda designed to influence the structure of power in the state” (Ayuba, 2014, p .4). After receiving ancestral revelation through a dream to cleanse the Eggon nation of societal ills, Alaku Ehe, Zabura Musa Akwashiki, Shuaibu Alkali, Hassan Musa Zico Kigbu, Iliyasu Hassan Gambo and Usman Abdullahi formed the group in 2007 in preparation for the 2015 gubernatorial election of Nasarawa State . Membership of the group was restricted to the bona fide Eggons. Those who took the oath were assured of invincibility to weapons, Ayuba (2014) added. It suddenly turned dreadful, “assuming a more militant posture”, attacking and killing enemies- real or perceived; including security operatives, in response to what appeared to be ‘political suffering or marginalisation’, the Emir of Lafia, Alhaji Isa Mustapha Agwai II remarked during a presentation of a memorandum to the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into the killings of security operatives at Alakyo on May 7, 2013 (Ayuba, 2014). It became a kind of liberation movement of the Eggons.

Sometime in September 2013 the group invaded Obi and Assakio, and Agyaragu (November 2012) Local Government Areas of Nasarawa State and killed over 30 people. An inscription on a collapsed wall in Assakio reads, “Kill man, no case” (Hir, 2013; Donatus,

2013). After the Eggon and Migili clashed at Assakio in 2012, the Nasarawa State Government, given the complex nature of the group, summoned an emergency security meeting in an attempt to find a solution to the mayhem. It, therefore, came out with a gazette (Nasarawa State Government: Legal Notice No. 4 of 2012) that proscribed the Ombaste group and any other ethnic militia in the state. The group defied this order and continued to carry out its operations. The group then attacked Bassa/Yelwa (February 2013), Igga/ Burum-Burum (March 2013) and Kwandare (February/March 2014). On 5th October 2013 the heavily armed Ombaste, confident of their sense of immunity to bullets, attacked the military checkpoint along Akwanga–Abuja highway where 12 members of the group including their field commander were killed (Aondover, 2022).

Sometime in 2013, Nigerian Military raided the Alakyo shrine, a tiny village, the ancestral home of the chief priest, Baba Alakyo, forcing him together with some members to migrate to Assakio. While at Assakio, they had a difficult relationship with their host resulting to more destruction. The news media are important tools in conflict management and resolution. This is because of the people’s frequent dependence on the news media to source information on public and private events. In a situation of conflict, however, the people’s reliance on the media becomes even more. The media has been indispensable in society for the role it plays. People come to rely on the media for information outside their immediate environment. In a time of conflict, this unquenchable desire for information often multiplies (Otite, & Albert, 1999).

## **2.2 Review of Related Studies**

Themes in various studies have been identified as the central organizing idea in media content. Some of these focal components principally in crisis are the actors, reactions, consequences, perpetrators and the general reactions trailed. For example, in his analysis of the 9/11 U.S attack, Butler (2015), using the New York Times found out that reactions of the media, the government, and policy makers and commentaries constituted major parts of the media themes. Before the 9/11 attack, terrorism was viewed as the real threat, but not immediate, believing that the U.S. unlike other places was immune to terror attacks. After the 9/11 attack, the focus on Al-Qaeda and Osama Bin Laden expanded to other smaller terror groups, real or perceived.

Experts and citizens commentaries in the aftermath of the attack, trends, scope, nature and its potential threat to world peace became a global concern. The then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General John Shalikashvili remarks that, “We will continue to be victims of terrorism, and that it will hit us again” (Butler, 2015, p. 14). One of the themes, terrorism was largely tied to Islam. Consequences, commonness in the occurrence of suicide bombings and shootings, the drastic increase in the use of sophisticated weapons by terrorists, frequency of terror attacks, emphasis on Islam and more focus on the middle east, particularly Iran was viewed as a grave threat to regional security constituted other themes. The media constructed the 9/11 attack as the fatal turning point in the history of the U.S. creating more interest in global security particularly weapon manufacturing and handling. In the framing of international news media on Islam and Terrorism, Sofia, Fauziah, Salledh and Nazim (2013), discovered that 83.48% of the themes were centred on perpetrators.

There are several related empirical studies carried out, one of such is the work of Valkenburg, Semetko and De-Vreese (1999), who conducted an experimental study to investigate whether and how news frames affect readers’ thoughts. The study grouped the subjects into four and gave each participant two newspaper stories that have to do with socio-political issues in Europe: such as crime and the then introduction of the euro- the European currency. Each group had four frames to situate the news content: economic consequence,

conflict, human interest and attribution responsibility. The participants wrote their thoughts while they read the news stories. The experiment revealed that frames held a significant position in readers' thoughts.

In the aftermath of the 2005 London bombings, discrimination, Islamophobia and breaches of civil liberties of the Muslims was at their peak. Brinson and Stohl's (2011), experimental findings of the 2005 London bombings using 371 American citizens as subjects of the experiment shows that there was more increase in fear at home than in the international communities. The fear thrust more negative feelings toward the Muslims and leads to public support for restricting the civil liberties of the Muslims therein. By implication, Stohl's (2011) work defined the consequence of media frames.

Bohensky and Anne (2014), who were both the ecosystem and climate experts in their work on media framing of flood in Brisbane, note that Australian news media framing of the flood played a significant role in shaping public perception of risk, consequences and wider scale in both psychological and physical recovery process from the flood with a high concentration on the actors (the climate change and the flood), action and the victims.

Fahmy's (2010), comparative study of the Arabic and English newspapers coverage of the war and terrorism using Al-Hayat (Arabic newspaper) and the Herald Tribune (English newspaper) discovered striking differences in their portrayal of actors to the conflict and consequences involved. The Herald-Tribune emphasises civilian casualties and is morally guilty of using forces in Afghanistan. Al-Hayat focuses more on the material loss of September 11 and the humiliating war casualties in Afghanistan. In essence, while the Herald Tribune emphasized more on pro-war frames, the Al-Hayat focused more on the action frame in Afghanistan.

In his study of Ethnic and religious conflicts in Kaduna and plateau states: implication for development in Nigeria, Yahaya (2011), found out that inter-faith conflicts have grossly affected social interaction between Muslims and Christians. The crises in addition crippled Nigeria economy, especially in the crisis-ridden areas. The conflict further divided the country along religious and ethnic lines. Accordingly, one major suggestion the study offered was, media should focus more on conflicts management and prevention instead of conflict-oriented journalism. Yahaya's work reflect action, actors and consequence frames; and in direct relation with the work of Chioma and Ojor (2015). In their study of television webcast framing of the Nigerian government response to Boko Haram insurgency in Northeast Nigeria, findings revealed that more prominence was given to government reaction to the Boko Haram through its security agencies. In an analytical study of print media framing of Boko Haram in Nigeria, Nnayelugo and Chinedu, (2013), found out that reaction frames were predominantly in the Guardian, This Day, and Vanguard newspapers where this pattern was contrasted in Daily Sun newspaper with more emphasis on ethnic and religious frames. The action frame constitutes 40 (22.2%), followed by the actor frame with 18 (10%). Both Chioma and Ojor (2015), and Nnayelugo and Chinedu (2013), studies are similar to the current study in the use of frames. Though, the three works constitute a departure in the application of theories.

In a study by Jide (cited Udo, 2019), on conflict-sensitive journalism, sampling the Guardian, Punch, Daily Trust and National Standard newspapers revealed that 77% of the news stories were generated from statements, speeches, reports and press conferences. The actor frame accounted for 33%. According to him, so many reactions helped in the spread of more tension through sensational news stories. In comparison, both studies centred on conflicts, using newspaper content analysis. Findings of the two studies showed response frames were predominantly used, though with varying degrees- the previous study revealed

77%, while the present shows 61.1%. Accordingly, the findings of Udo (2019) revealed actor frame accounted for 33%, the present work discovered the actor frame with 10%.

In their examination of the Nigerian newspapers framing of the Chibok school girls' abduction, Ngwu, Ekwe and Chiaha (2015), discovered that the newspapers had more concentration on the government frustration in a bid to rescue the girls. Instead, in the face of terrorism, the media should be players in dousing tension. Relating the previous study to the present one; they both aim at determining the framing patterns of newspapers' reportage of conflicts in Nigeria, though different. Using content analysis both used framing theory.

However, despite the similarities, some noticeable differences occurred between the two studies. Both vary in their populations and sample sizes. The study revealed that the Guardian newspaper presented constructive criticism of the government handling of the Chibok girls' rescue, the present revealed negative newspaper framing of the Ombatse phenomena.

### **2.3 Theoretical Underpinning**

Framing Theory suggests the media introduces predetermined content to influence audience perception as aspect of reality. The media presents frames with narrow contextualisation to enhance particular understanding. Entman (1991, p.6) noted that, "unless narratives are compared, frames are difficult to detect fully and reliably, because many of the framing devices can appear as 'natural', unremarkably choices of words or images." This remark strengthens the choice of the study frames in a bid to situate the work within the framing theory. Sheufele and Tewskbury (2007, p. 12) explained that framing is constructed at two levels: macro-level and micro-level. At macro-level, "framing refers to modes of presentation that resonate with existing understanding among the audience." Frames help to reduce the complexity of news content (Sheufele and Tewksbury, 2007; Rabi, 2013). At micro-level, framing explains how audience uses available news content to express ideas.

## **III. Research Method**

This study employed quantitative analytical method of content study. The study examined *Daily Trust* and *Leadership* dailies for the period of four years; considering the specific focus of the work, it further adopts purposive sampling technique in the selection of the newspapers. It then used census sampling method in choosing the specific edition without regard for equal representation. The census technique requires thorough examination of each member of a group from which sample is drawn for representation. The study focused on only news stories on the *Ombatse* crisis. From the four year period, the study censuses 2112 editions of both *Daily Trust* and *Leadership* newspapers for examination. From the total dailies, 180 news contents were further screened and analysed. Coding sheets were used in the collection of data. The data was presented in form of table.

## **IV. Results and Discussion**

### **4.1 Inter-Coder Reliability**

Joseph, (nd) remarked, "an important measure for judging the quality of a content analysis is the extent to which the content can be reproduced" (p. 65). This indicates the coders have reached the same judgment.

The study employs Holsti's formula in the calculation of coder reliability,  $IR = \frac{2M}{N1 + N2}$ . M refers to the number of coding decisions among the coders; N1 shows the coding decision made by coder 1, while N2 shows the coding decision made by coder 2. The

researcher together with another trained coder each independently coded the variables to test if they have realized the same decision. There are several statistical formulas developed to measure intercoder reliability. According to him, Macnamara, (2005) suggests that, “researchers propose that coding between coder pairs and multiple coders should be compared at two levels: (a) agreement and (b) co-variation” (p.10). The agreement is a simple comparison in the level of agreement of the decisions made by coder A and coder B in their scores or rating. Co-variation on the other hand ensures whether there is consistency or a high level of variance in their scores. Frey, Botan and Kreps, (as cited in Jim, 2005), suggest that concerning specific status, 70% agreement (0.70) is required as reliable. In his view, Popping (1988) considers 0.80 and above as excellent measurement. The coders selected 10% of the sampled size not included in the overall sample which is often the guideline (Swert, 2012). Ideally, the coders have developed a checklist, indicating what to be included and what not to be included. Thereafter, the coders reconciled their findings. The findings revealed an excellent level of agreement between the coders as shown below:

$$\text{Reliability} = \frac{2M}{N1 + N2} = \frac{2(179)}{179 + 199} = 0.94$$

#### 4.2 Coding Guide/Definition of Variables

In seeking to understand the framing mechanisms employed in the coverage of *Ombatse* conflicts, the study explores the various frames.

Frequency of thematic frames: For this study, themes as frames include:

- (1) Action- this frame examined whether or not the media content focused more on the nature of the conflict, its scope and dimension.
- (2) Reaction of the audience on the development of the events.
- (3) Actor- this entails if the media had concentrated on the party to the conflict.
- (4) Consequences- this examined if the media had highlighted the effect of the conflict and provided preventive measures.

**Table 1.** Reaction framing of the *Ombatse* phenomenon

Thematic frames	<i>Daily Trust</i>					<i>Leadership</i>					Total	%
	Frequency				Total	Frequency				Total		
	2012	2013	2014	2015		2012	2013	2014	2015			
Action	3	18	3	2	26	1	9	4	-	14	40	22.2%
Reaction	1	40	15	0	56	-	40	12	2	54	110	61.1%
Actors	0	10	1	0	11	-	6	1	-	7	18	10%
Consequences	0	2	3	0	5	-	5	1	1	7	12	6.7%
Total	4	70	22	2	98	1	60	18	3	82	180	100%

Source: coding sheets 2019

RQ.1: What were the dominant Thematic Frames Employed in the News Stories on the *Ombatse* Conflicts in *Daily Trust* and *Leadership* Newspapers?

While the conflict last, the government and people’s reaction to the conflicts revealed 110 (61.1%) news stories. The action frame covered 40 (22.2%), followed by the actor frame with 18 (10%) news stories: actors were parties to the conflicts. The consequence frame had 12 (6.7%) - this indicates that only 6.7% of the 180 news stories analyzed projected effects of the conflicts on the involved parties, the neighbouring communities and

the state. Looking at the data revealed in May 2013 when a major incident happened, the two newspapers focused more on public and government reactions to the massacre of over 100 security forces at a time. Presumably, such killings in large number were unprecedented in the history of Nigeria in decades.

#### 4.3 Discussion of findings

Regarding the dominant thematic frames of the news stories on *Ombatse*, data generated from the sampled newspapers revealed that out of the 180 news stories on *Ombatse*, the reaction frame accounted for 103 (61.1%). Jide (cited in Udo, 2019), in his study of conflict sensitivity journalism sampling the *Guardian*, *Punch*, *Daily Trust* and *National Standard* newspapers shows that reaction frames account for 77%. According to him, such frames help in spreading negative rumors and increasing tension. After the 2005 London bombings, Islamophobia and breach of the civil right of the Muslims increased. Brinson and Stohl's (2011) experimental survey of the 2005 London bombing find that reactions increase negative feelings toward Muslims.

Fahmy (2010) made a comparative analysis of the *Al-Hayat* and *Herald Tribune* newspapers. *Al-Hayat* is an Arabic newspaper while *Herald Tribune* is an English newspaper. In his study, Fahmy discovers that the two newspapers emphasised more on action and actor frames. The papers also focused on consequences on both parties, including civilian casualties. The study also treated pro-war frames. This is what Entman (1993), describes as the core framing elements. If the *Daily Trust* and the *Leadership* newspapers had treated the *Ombatse* phenomenon as described by Entman, the reports would have given the public and the government more informed decisions on conflict management, resolution and reconciliation processes and of course, added greatly to the body of knowledge.

### V. Conclusion

The research showed that framing has definitional and descriptive functions in the practice of journalism since newspapers among other media are the arena for battles of ideas in society. By framing, newspapers exclude and include details in reporting conflicts; they shrink and expand them. Accordingly, the concept cannot be ignored in newspaper reporting, since issues can be arranged and presented in multiple fashions to influence debate and ensuing issue consideration and level support.

Conclusively, the findings revealed Nigerian newspapers focus more on event reaction than conscientising the populace on the danger of an issue. This is even more evident in the works of: Butler, 2013; Chioma and Ojor, 2015; Nnanyelugo and Chinedu, 2013. Too many reactions from many angles often increase tension. This work is the replica of Brinson and Stohl's (2011) experimental survey of the 2005 London bombings. Its findings revealed reactions from the event threw more negative feelings toward the Muslims, leading to the restriction of their civic right.

However, on the strength of the findings, the media should focus more conflict sensitive reporting, conflict prevention and management. Yahaya (2011) in his study of ethnic and religious conflict in Kaduna and plateau states made similar recommendation.

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