

NEWSPAPER REPORTAGE OF THE 1999 HAUSA-YORUBA INTER-ETHNIC CONFLICT IN SAGAMU, NIGERIA

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Abstract

The mass media have become central to how citizens define issues and events that happen around them. We live in a highly mediatised society and as such, journalism occupies a prime place as the main popular convenor and conveyor of information and images that nurture the “picture in our heads.” Research also indicates that people's understanding of public issues, including but not limited to, politics, wars, conflicts, famines and the environment should rather be regarded as entirely dependent on layers of media representations and framings through newspapers, documentaries, films, magazines, television series or websites (. Therefore, in this study, the authors examined how four Nigerian national newspapers responded to and reported the inter-ethnic conflict that occurred between the Yoruba and Hausa ethnic groups in Sagamu, South-Western Nigeria, which incidentally was recorded as the first inter-ethnic conflict in Nigeria after the enthronement of democracy in 1999. Anchored on social construction of news and with a quantitative content, the study found a low coverage of the 1999 inter-ethnic conflict. While the study found that the conflict was constructed around mistrust, economic loss and loss of lives, it was further found that government officials, community leaders and the elite class contributed to the early and timely resolution of the 1999 Yoruba-Hausa conflict. Given the potential of newspapers in mitigating conflicts, this study recommends that Nigerian newspapers, like other mass media in Nigeria, should play the role of harbinger of peace and reconciliation during any conflict.

Key words: Newspaper, conflict, conflict reporting, news construction, ethnicity

Introduction

The mass media have become central to how citizens define issues and events that happen around them. We live in a highly mediatised society. In this process, journalism occupies a prime place as the main popular convenor and conveyor of information and images (Cottle, 2006) that nurture the “picture in our heads” (Lippman, 1922), The media are not only capable of affecting us through the information they disseminate, they sometimes determine our worldview in general, therefore, contends that in society, the media are central to our existence and they have, over the years, saturated our lives with barrage of messages. According to this makes the media to have an overwhelming cumulative impact in our everyday life, which defines and dominates our broader cultural relations, experiences, values and understanding of the world. Through frequent reportage of issues, the media have also been identified as a major vehicle through which people understand public issues such as conflict, famines and politics (Hodkinson,

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2010). This assertion is also reflected in the submission of Bratic and Schirch (2007) that the media have the potential to mitigate wars and conflicts and at the same time, can instigate conflicts. The media also have the feature of becoming the source of peace and violence in society (Tahir, 2009).

Conflict is inevitable in human society. No wonder, holds that “conflict is a central part of living with one another because people will always have different values and beliefs thereby, making them to always see things differently” (p. 29). Therefore, it is logical to argue that managing conflict in terms of prevention, mitigation and its representation by relevant social institutions with particular emphasis on the role of the media is also inevitable. Considering that conflict is regarded as “the clash of interests (personal differences) on national values of some duration and magnitude between at least two parties (organised groups, states, groups of states, organisations) that are determined to pursue their interest and win their cases” (Institute of International Conflict Research, 2005, p. 2), and a process rather than a static one-off event (Anstey, 1991), the media in particular, have an overriding role to play in defining its character, meaning, perception and the attitudes of the protagonists and antagonists, its cause and resolutions.

Newspaper as an enduring mass communication channel is important in conflict reporting given its archival nature and its attention to details in reporting issues. This informed the focus of this study to examine the newspaper coverage of the Yoruba-Hausa conflict which occurred on July 18, 1999 in Sagamu of Ogun State, South-Western Nigeria. The study focuses on the conflict because it (the conflict) occurred two months after the enthronement of the current democratic experience in Nigeria and the return of the military to the barracks. The return of the military to the barracks after successive 16 years of rulership in Nigeria (1983-1999) and the enthronement of the Fourth Republic and democratisation of the polity in 1999 also shaped the structure and the performance of the Nigerian media. The assumed liberalised and democratic media landscape ushered in by democracy in 1999 and the social responsibility canon of the media, especially in reporting conflict, gave the authors of this study the impetus to examine how the selected Nigerian national newspapers responded to and reported the first inter-ethnic conflict that greeted the Fourth Republic in Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

- i. To examine the extent of coverage of the 1999 conflict by the selected Nigerian newspapers
- ii. To discover the dominant news makers reported by the selected Nigerian newspapers during the conflict
- iii. To determine dominant issues reported by selected Nigerian newspapers during the conflict

Research Questions

The study sought to provide answers to the following questions:

- i. What is the extent of reportage of the 1999 Sagamu Yoruba-Hausa conflict in the

selected Nigerian national newspapers?

- ii. Who are the dominant news makers (voices) reported in the selected Nigerian national newspapers during the 1999 Yoruba-Hausa conflict in Sagamu?
- iii. What issues dominate the newspaper reports during the 1999 Yoruba-Hausa conflict in Sagamu?

The conflict: From the eyewitness perspective

This study adopted the eyewitness approach to dig deeper into the causes and the dimension of the inter-ethnic conflict that occurred in Sagamu on 18th July, 1999 between the Yoruba and Hausa ethnic groups. This approach is based on the in-depth interviews conducted with Hausa leaders and Yoruba leaders who witnessed the conflict from the beginning to the end. In this regard, the researchers interviewed four people, two from each ethnic groups. Each of the interviewees was carefully selected in order to present a clear and true picture of the conflict. The eyewitness account approach was premised on the need to achieve a fair representation of the conflict in this study. More so, there appears to be paucity of literature on the conflict.

According to the interviewees, the immediate cause of the conflict was connected to the killing of a prostitute during Oro festival in 1999. According to the narration of Oyenuga (personal communication, June 9, 2016), the conflict was connected to Oro Festival in 1999. "I was aware that a Hausa prostitute lady came out in the midnight to sight the Oro masquerade, which is an abomination in Yoruba-land. The Hausa prostitute was killed by the Oro faithful and celebrants. Then the Hausa retaliated, which led to the conflict on July 18, 1999, the last day of Oro festival. This same version was also expressed by Oyewunmi (personal communication, June 9, 2016) "I live at Sabo and what the majority of us believed to have caused the conflict is the killing of a Hausa prostitute lady by the Oro believers, claiming that the prostitute lady came out in the midnight to sight Oro, which is an abomination in Yoruba-land." The two Hausas interviewed shared the same view that the killing of the prostitute actually led to the conflict between the two ethnic groups. According to Garba (personal communication, June 6, 2016)

In that year, it was narrated that a Hausa prostitute lady was outside while the Oro people were already out in the mid-night, they beat her and she fell in the cause of being beaten, which led to her death. So in the following morning, the 17th July, 1999, the Hausa gathered and started to protest around the Sabo community to express their grievances on the death of the lady. I remember they started shouting "No more Oro and we no go gree and so on.

The historical narrative is very important in understanding the remote and the immediate cause of the conflict and the information provided in the media coverage of the event. From the accounts of the interviewees, it is clear that the conflict arose from a clash of cultural/religious values. We must, of course, understand that the breach of the agreement stipulating that worshipers of the traditional religions must not cross the boundary separating Sabo from the main town must be due to the exponential expansion

of Sabo. Sabo is no more a stranger quarter of the 1930s. Many Sagamu indigenes, among whom are adherents of traditional religions, have built houses and now live in Sabo. In another dimension, the conflict may be interpreted as a political reaction to the 1999 Presidential election which saw the emergence of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo as the President in preference to Chief Olu Falae who was supported by the Yoruba. The general perception then was that Chief Obasanjo was a candidate of the Hausa/Fulani establishment. It seems to be plausible to argue that the Sagamu youth regarded the prostitute's action and the protest of the Hausa that followed as part of the Northern agenda to mock them on their own soil. In addition to their political defeat and humiliation in the presidential election.

The important point to note was the rupture in the inter-ethnic relationship that has been built for many years. According to one of the interviewees, the 1999 inter-ethnic conflict between the Yoruba and Hausa in Sagamu recorded social-cultural setback, huge economic loss and devastation, health challenges, and loss of lives.” (Garba, personal communication, June 6, 2016) In regards to its social-cultural effect, Oyenuga (personal communication, June 9, 2016), states that “the age-long socio-cultural relationship that existed between the two tribes was shattered as mistrust set in after the conflict, especially in the area of inter-ethnic marriage. The inter-ethnic marriage as a practice between the Yoruba and the Hausa has since reduced drastically.” Economically, “the loss was huge as many properties: houses, cars, stores and malls filled with goods were burnt to ashes. The Hausa were more hit than the Yoruba as they immediately ran away to the north in their thousands, selling their houses and other properties at a giveaway price.” (Oyenuga, personal communication, June 9, 2016)

In relation to the leadership and the general administration of Sabo market, the Hausa lost their leadership and age long control of Sabo community to the hand of the Yoruba in Sagamu. As revealed by Oyenuga (personal communication, June 9, 2016), “before the conflict, the Hausa were absolutely in control of the administration and management of Sabo market. The Yoruba were treated like strangers or visitors and yet, there were no problems or agitations from the Yoruba. This is because the understanding then was that Sabo community actually belonged to the Hausa and the Yoruba had to comply with their rulership in Sabo community.” This same interviewer states further that, “but now, the system has changed because immediately after the crisis, the Akarigbo of Remo Kingdom, Oba Michael Adeniyi Sonariwo set up the Akarigbo-in-Council Committee of which I am the Chairman since 1999 to oversee the administration of Sabo market. The committee comprises twenty members including two Hausa representatives.”

As stated by all the interviewees in this study, the conflict was quickly settled by the leaders of both ethnic groups, government officials and other important individuals. “We have to give credit to the Akarigbo of Remoland, Oba Adeniyi Sonariwo for his timely intervention, the immediate past Seriki of Hausa community, the state government and the federal government.” (Oyenuga, personal communication, June 9, 2016) It was reported that in less than few hours of the conflict, “the policemen were mobilised and made a good intervention effort as they stationed an armoured tank at Sabo for several days in order to douse the tension and forced people to withdraw from fighting, which

quelled the bloodshed.” (Oyenuga, personal communication, June 9, 2016).

Review of empirical studies

In general, empirical studies have underscored the importance of media in conflict coverage. The study of Forge (1999) found that in Rwanda, radio was used to lay the groundwork for genocide. In Serbia, television was manipulated to whip up ethnic tensions prior to civil war. In the former Soviet Republic of Georgia, territorial disputes were aggravated by the media while in Thailand, media were identified as the main energiser for the Red shirt demonstrators in a three month conflict that ended violently in 2011. Adisa (2012), for instance examined the extent of newspaper coverage of the Jos conflict in Nigeria, the author found the media to have played a significant role in exacerbating the conflict. The author contended that “the power of journalists is clearly apparent during the conflict because as much as they can start conflict, they can also play an important role in defusing tension, reducing and containing conflicts.” (Adisa, 2012, p. 12) Adisa (2012) however, concludes that Nigerian journalists have not adequately used the legal instrument of Freedom of Information that will empower and enable them to have access to official information during crisis situations and in the coverage of conflicts (Adisa, 2012).

Similarly, Rafeeq (2005) studied the coverage of the second Iraq War by three New Zealand daily newspapers and found that New Zealand print media were very powerful in giving the second Iraqi War a high news value, by introducing new sections and more space for the coverage of the war, thereby setting agenda for public discussion and debate for local audiences. The study found that of all the sections of the newspapers studied, news stories were devoted to the coverage of the war with 55 percent more than other sections like news analysis, features, opinions, editorials and letters to the editor. Another study conducted by Seow and Crispin (2005), examined the extent to which five Asian regional conflicts involving India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and the Philippines were framed as war journalism or peace journalism. Using a content analysis method, Seow and Crispin (2005), found that 10 newspapers studied suggested that, overall, the news coverage of these conflicts was dominated by a war journalism frame. The war journalism frame is, according to Seow and Crispin (2005), supported by a focus on the here and now, an elite orientation, and a dichotomy of good and bad. In this study, news stories also dominated the coverage in the 10 selected newspapers with 76.1 percent over other sections of the newspapers such as features, editorials, opinions and letters to the editor.

Social construction of news

The social construction of news or sociology of news is a popular model in journalism where social scientists speak of “constructing the news,” of “making news,” of the “social constructing of reality.” (Schudson, 1997, p. 7) This argument seems to have been built on the postulations of Gieber (1964) that “news is what newspaper men make it” (p. 173), and that news is “manufactured by journalists.” (p. 97) The view of Fishman

(1980) also resonates with the postulation of and Cohen and Young (1973). According to , news is the result of the methods newspaper workers employ.” (p. 14) This, however, does not, as espoused by , imply that journalists fake the news but the contention is that journalists make the news. In view of this, Tuchman (1976) had clarified the contention in her analysis. In her words, “to say that news report is a story, no more but no less, is not to demean the news, not to accuse it of being fictitious. Rather it alerts us that news, like all public documents, is a constructed reality possessing its own internal validity.” (p. 97) According to social construction theorists and proponents, news is a media genre that constructs the building blocks for social and political realities (Baran, 2009). In general, social construction theory has been widely applied when researchers are examining how the news as a media construct has shaped the social and political realities of events such as crisis or conflicts, corruption, politics, financials and economy, and others.

It is very easy to see the news of the conflict as just the rendering of the event as it occurred. But as Berkowitz has advised, we must discard the idea that the news is just “something tangible out there that good journalists know when they see it.” (Berkowitz, 1997, p. xi) Berkowitz further argues that “news is a human construction... the product of the practicalities and constraints of the process by which it is created.” (Berkowitz, 1997, p. xii) In a brief critique of the gatekeeper metaphor, the American Sociologist, Michael Schudson has remarked that “news items are not simply selected but constructed.” (Schudson, 1991, p. 142) The social construction perspective of news explores the nature of news and the process that produce it and the social forces that influence and constraint how journalists gather and assemble news from raw materials into a journalistic product (Berkowitz, 1997). News is a creation of social values which journalists subconsciously draw from to make their decisions. These values have become “taken-for-granted assumptions” which enable the journalists to routinize events. As Tuchman has shown through the process of routinisation and typification, journalists are able to control their work and define events as news (Tuchman, 1979). According to Tuchman,

newsmen typify events as news to transform the problematic events of the everyday world into raw materials which can be subjected to routine processing and dissemination. (Typifications) impose order upon events as the raw materials of news and thus reduce the variability of events as the raw materials of news. (Tuchman, 1997, p.185)

News is produced according to certain professional formats and conventions which journalists imbibe through the process. One major factor is the operation of the news values. These values “are human constructions that have evolved through an informed consensus among journalists and others over time.” (Berkowitz, 1997, p. xi) In the opinion of Golding and Elliot (1979), news values are “working rules, comprising a corpus of occupational lore which implicitly and often expressly explains and guides newsroom practice... far more, they are terse shorthand references to shared understandings about the nature and purpose of bulletins and news programmes” (p.

114). In the analysis of Golding and Elliot (1979), news values come from certain assumptions- the audience appeal, accessibility (i.e., how easy is the event for coverage and how familiar to the news organisation) and thirdly fit; is the item consonant with the pragmatics of production routine. Some of these news values are prominence, timeliness/immediacy, oddity/negativity, personalisation, simplification, novelty, sensationalism/titillation/dramatization; structured access.

One main effect of the operation of these values is the privilege of access enjoyed by the elite in society. Along with objectivity, the values of prominence, personalisation and structured access tend to accord habitual access to the experts, official figures and the powerful thus positioning the privileged as the primary definers of news (Hall et al., 1978). In the press, the structure of access ensures that newspaper accounts for and representations are structured in dominance; that there is a systemic tendency to take up definitions of situations and events articulated by those in legitimate institutional positions, and to exclude definitions developed by those who lack formal qualification to comment.

In this study, the authors applied the social construction model to determine how journalists constructed the news around the 1999 inter-ethnic conflict that occurred between the Yoruba-Hausa ethnic groups in Sagamu, South-Western Nigeria. The sociological reality of the conflict is very important for a better understanding. Further, the role of newspapers and reporters in this realm cannot be overemphasised.

Methodological approach to this study

This study adopts a quantitative content analysis method because, “quantitative content analysis collects data about media content such as topics or issues, volume of mentions, 'messages' determined by key words in context (KWIC), circulation of the media (audience reach) and frequency.” (Macnamara, 2005, p. 4) Furthermore, this research method is important to this study given the volume of mentions which necessitate quantification by counting and frequency, and coding for statistical analysis to draw scientific conclusions (Macnamara, 2005). Using this method, the researchers studied four national newspapers from 18th July to 18th August, 1999, namely: The National Concord (Now defunct), The Guardian, The Punch and Nigerian Tribune. This timeline covered the period of occurrence of the conflict and a few weeks afterwards in order to determine how Nigerian newspapers responded to the coverage of the conflict. The selection of these four national newspapers was based on the fact that all of them, as of the time of the conflict, were popular national newspapers and they are still among the top ranked national newspapers in Nigeria except the defunct National Concord. For instance in 2012, The Punch was ranked 1st, Daily Trust 4th and Nigerian Tribune 6th. Before the extinction of the National Concord, these four newspapers enjoyed national coverage, reach and circulation, which made them popular across Nigeria. All of the newspapers have been in existence for several years in the country and have consistently published since their establishment and enjoyed readership across the length and breadth of Nigeria. Except the defunct National Concord, the other three selected newspapers still enjoy good status as national newspapers in Nigeria in terms of readership, coverage

and frequency.

The population of the newspapers studied is 31 editions from 18th July to 18th August 1999. Given the small number of these editions, the researchers adopted a consecutive sampling technique to content analyse all the editions. The units of analysis included: news story, editorial, feature article/ news analysis, column / commentary and letters to the editor. Within the units of analyses, content categories were coded, which included position of stories, voices mentioned in stories, gender of voices mentioned and themes reported in stories. These are highlighted in the table 1 below. In all, 67 stories were coded and the findings are as presented in table 2.

Table 1 : Content categories coded in the selected Nigerian newspapers in relation to the 1999 Yoruba-Hausa Sagamu Conflict

Position of story	Voices mentioned in the story	Themes reported	Gender of voices
Lead story	Federal Government officials	Death	Male
Other front page story	State Government official	Destruction	Female
Back page	Local Government official	Arrest	
Inside page	Hausa leaders	Community mistrust	
Centrespread	Yoruba leaders	Economy	
	Civil society		
Types of story	Religious leaders		
News story	Law enforcement agents		
Editorial	International community		
Feature/ Analysis	Ordinary people		
Commentary	Not indicated		

Findings and Interpretation

Table: 2 : Findings of the study

Coverage of Stories by Newspapers Studied	Frequency	Percent (%)
National concord	15	22.4
The Guardian	10	14.9
The Punch	22	32.8
National Tribune	20	29.9
Total (n)	67	100.0

Newspaper reportage of conflicts

Type of Stories	Frequency	Percent (%)
News Story	47	70.1
Editorial	3	4.5
Feature/News Analysis	7	10.4
Column/Commentary	10	14.9
Total (n)	67	100.0
Position of Story	Frequency	Percent (%)
Lead Story	1	1.5
Other front page story	21	31.3
Inside page story	45	67.2
Back page story	0	0
Total (n)	67	100.0
Voices mentioned in stories	Frequency	Percent (%)
Federal government	13	19.4
State government	17	25.4
Hausa leader	5	7.5
Yoruba leader	1	1.5
International community	1	1.5
General citizens	25	37.3
Not indicated	5	7.5
Total (n)	67	100.0
Gender of voices mentioned in stories	Frequency	Percent (%)
Female	10	15.0
Male	57	85.0
Total (n)	67	100.0
Issues/themes reported in stories	Frequency	Percent (%)
Death	43	64.2
Destruction	4	6.0
Arrest	2	3.0
Community mistrust	5	7.5
Economy	13	19.4
Total (n)	67	100.0

In relation to the first research question, (What is the extent of reportage of the 1999 Sagamu Yoruba-Hausa conflict in Nigerian national newspapers?), the findings of this study showed that the total number of stories coded and analysed is 67. This is an indication that the extent of newspaper coverage of that conflict seems to be low. This argument is based on the fact that the period of 31 days (July 18-August 18, 1999) covered in this analysis, spreading across four major national newspapers should have expectedly given more volume of coverage than 67 stories. In term of specific coverage by newspapers, The Punch covered the 1999 Yoruba-Hausa Sagamu conflict more than other newspapers studied with 32 percent (n=22) and followed closely by Nigerian Tribune with 29.9 percent (n=20). The highest coverage recorded by The Punch may be related to its long time leadership status among other Nigerian newspapers in terms of coverage and readership. Further, it is not surprising that all the newspapers studied reported the conflict mostly through news stories (70.1 percent, n=47) more than other sections of newspaper. This further confirms the fact that newspapers are event-oriented in their coverage. However and interestingly, 14.9 percent (n=10) of all stories analysed in this study were devoted to opinions/column writing. This indicates that general citizens in the country, especially the elite class, fairly showed concerns about the conflict and ventilated their opinions through newspapers.

It is important to note that the newspapers studied did not give prominent attention to the conflict as reflected in their editorials. This is because editorial is generally regarded as the most important section of newspapers given that it carries the official position of newspaper organisations on issues of national interest. Therefore, in regards to the 1999 inter-ethnic conflict in Sagamu, the low attention of newspapers in the coverage of the conflict through editorial (4.5 percent, n=3) implies that the newspapers studied did not give prominent attention to the conflict. More so, it shows that the newspapers studied did not involve in much social, historical and interpretative perspectives and analyses of the 1999 conflict given the extent of coverage through editorial (4.5 percent, n=3) and feature/news analysis (10.4 percent, n=7). It must be noted that the historical and social context which is presented above did not find expression in the news of the conflict. Rather, attention was paid to the 'immediate cause', thus decontextualizing the issue at stake.

Within the position of stories, this study found that only 1.5 percent (n=1) of the entire 67 stories was devoted to the coverage of the conflict through lead stories. This finding shows that the four newspapers did not give prominence to the conflict in their coverage. This finding further implies with the fact that only 4.5 percent (n=3) of the 67 stories analysed was devoted to the reportage of the conflict through editorials. Despite this argument, it may, on the other hand, be interpreted that the newspapers studied may have exercised a sense of caution within the preview of the social responsibility theory of the press by not projecting the conflict as lead stories in their coverage. However, it is noteworthy that 31.3 percent (n=21) of the stories reported by the four newspapers account for other front page stories. This may mean that the conflict fairly attracted the attention of the newspapers studied but some other issues seemed to have been more

prominent and attracted the attention of the newspapers more than the 1999 conflict as reflected in lead stories and editorials.

Given that issue related to human conflict usually attracts the attention of government and important stakeholders, the voices of the government officials largely dominated the news during the conflict with 44.8 percent (n=30). This is closely followed by the voices of the members of the public, which accounts for 37.3 percent (n=25) especially the elite class, who could channel their opinions through national newspapers. While this finding answers the second research question, (Who are the dominant news makers (voices) reported in Nigerian national newspapers during the 1999 Yoruba-Hausa crisis in Sagamu?), it shows that the government at all levels place an appreciable value on human life and thus responded quickly to the conflict. Furthermore, the degree of the voices of members of the public, elite in particular, further relates to the column/commentary writing which came next after news stories under the type of stories with 14.9 percent (n=10). Commentaries are usually written by concerned citizens, especially the elite class, who have some degree of orientation to use the media as a public parliament to express their views on issues of national interest. The dominance of government officials and other elite voices is in agreement with other studies which have shown that the news media tend to privilege elite sources as primary definers of news (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clark & Roberts, 1978; Oso, 2014).

This study found that the male voice dominated the female voice with 85 percent (n=57) and 15 percent (n=10) respectively. Based on this finding, it may be argued that the gender distribution of the voices reported by newspapers studied during the conflict is a clear reflection of how men have often dominated major scheme of affairs in Nigeria despite the higher population of women and despite the fact that, women as traders in Sabo market, were more affected during the conflict. The symbolic annihilation of women in this study is consistent with previous study (see Tuchman, 1981).

Discussion and conclusion

In relation to the study of Adisa (2012), the findings of this study showed that, like other mass media, newspapers have consistently played an important role in conflict coverage; an extension of the social responsibility role of the media. The four newspapers studied in this research actually responded to the coverage of the 1999 conflict but the extent of coverage is significantly low considering the magnitude and the nature of the issue involved. This argument is more important because the volume of media reportage of an issue determines the extent of importance that media audiences place on such an issue and the level of understanding people will have about that issue (Hodkinson, 2010). The pattern of newspaper coverage of conflict revealed in this study seems to corroborate with the findings of previous studies whereby the highest volume or frequency of coverage was devoted to news stories in most newspapers more than other sections such as features, editorials, columns and letters to the editor (see Rafeeq, 2005; Seow & Crispin, 2005). In fact, this pattern of reportage is not completely out of place given that issues or events are predominantly reported in most newspapers through news stories, which further confirms the fact that, newspapers by nature and operation are

event-oriented. However, the concern in this study is that the coverage through lead stories and editorial, in particular, are extremely low and may question the level of prominence placed on the 1999 conflict by the newspapers studied. We may also explain the low coverage on the basis that the conflict was quickly brought under control through the intervention of government officials and community leaders. The reporters or journalists must have migrated to other topical issues like butterflies, always in search of juicy nectar to suck!

Further, in line with the news as a social construction of reality model postulated by (Schudson, 1997), the findings of this study suggest that, journalists constructed news around the conflict based on the themes such as death, destruction, arrest, community mistrust and economy. These themes, which formed the basis of news construction of the 1999 conflict, may be a reflection of the realities as far as the whole conflict was concerned from the perspectives of the journalists who covered the event. This resonates with the submission of Schudson (1991) on the social construction of news that “news is a human construction . . . the product of the practicalities and constraints of the process by which it is created.” (Schudson, 1997, p. 142) This finding furthers consonant with the fact that most of the themes within which the 1999 conflict was constructed by journalists are based on oddity/negativity. This, therefore, is a reflection of the influence of the news values in news reporting and construction. This is because “news items are not simply selected but are constructed.” (Schudson, 1991, p. 142)

In addition, the findings of this study suggest that there is an active citizenry in Nigerian society, especially the elite class. This is demonstrated in the degree at which the general public (the elite class) featured among the voices that made news during the conflict. This further relates to the fact that news construction is mainly defined by those in the official position of authority and those who possess formal qualification. This is related to the kind of active and vibrant Nigerian citizenry which contributed to the struggle that forced the military back to the barracks in 1999. This finding further reflects that the Nigerian society is characterised by active citizens who promptly learn their voices to the gamut of social and national issues within the polity.

The findings of this study, therefore, suggest a strong relationship with the views expressed by all the interviewees in this study, especially on the loss of lives and huge economic loss that characterised the conflict. This is related to the themes covered by Nigerian newspapers during the crisis. This study found loss of lives and economic loss dominating other themes accounting for 64.2 percent (n=43 out of the entire 67 stories analysed) and 19.4 percent (n=13) respectively. This finding resonates with the views of Garba (personal communication, June 6, 2016) who states that “the 1999 inter-ethnic conflict between the Yoruba and Hausa in Sagamu recorded social-cultural setback, huge economic loss and devastation, health challenges, and loss of lives.”

In conclusion, the findings of this study have clearly demonstrated that newspapers can be useful channel of mass communication in the coverage of various issues in society including conflict. Therefore, conflict as a sensitive event, needs to be strategically and prominently reported in newspapers within the spectrums of peace

journalism, development journalism and social responsibility theory of the press. Though elitist in orientation, newspapers are still capable of garnering public sentiments, government attention and concerns from other stakeholders to promptly respond to social and inter-ethnic conflicts in a pragmatic way.

Specifically, this current study concludes that the prompt response of Nigerian newspapers to the 1999 inter-ethnic conflict between the Yoruba and the Hausa in Sagamu may have been largely contributed to the early and timely resolution of the conflict. The conflict, according to our interviewees, did not last for more than one day, the 18th day of July, 1999. The reportage of this conflict and the depiction of issues such as killings/bloodshed, destruction, social disintegration, economic loss and mistrust by Nigerian newspapers, no doubt, must have attracted the attention of the government officials, traditional rulers, deployment of mobile policemen, religious leaders and other important stakeholders. The interviewees confirmed that the roles of these set of people actually led to the early resolution of the conflict. Therefore, Nigerian newspapers, like other mass media, are capable and have the potential to be harbinger of peace and reconciliation during any crisis.

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