

CONCEIVING NEIGHBOURHOOD IN NORTHERN NIGERIAN FICTION

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Abstract

*Representations of neighbourhood in contemporary Northern Nigerian fiction are a departure point for scholars exploring the structures and sources of ethnic and religious violence. Using Edify Yakusak's *After They Left* and Elnathan John's *Born on a Tuesday*, Slavoj Zizek's analysis of the concept of neighbour is applied here, to engage theoretically with Northern Nigerian social conditions. This framework illuminates the links existing between the everyday experience of neighbourhoods in real life, and their imaginative representations in the literary arts.*

Keywords: *Edify Yakusak, Elnathan John, ethnic conflict, neighbourhood gangs, Nigerian fiction, religious violence*

Introduction

In recent decades, Nigeria has consistently experienced incidents of inter-ethnic hostilities and religious violence particularly in the northern part of the country. Although the combatants in Northern Nigeria frequently divide along Hausa/Fulani Muslims and largely Christian ethnic minorities, sometimes, the genesis of the crisis has little if anything to do with religion. This is evident in studies that analyse such conflict from sociological perspectives (Dan Fulani and Fatatshak 2002, Egwu 2004, Best 2007, Ostien 2009, Vinso 2017). However, there is nearly a total absence of such analysis in the prolific literature of social commentary expressed through Nigerian fiction, until the intervention of these four widely acclaimed novels: Edify Yakusak's *After They Left* (2015) and Elnathan John's *Born on a Tuesday* (2016), *Season of the Crimson Blossoms* (2015) by Abubakar Ibrahim and Richard Ali's *City of Memories* (2012). The authors of these popular books belong to a new generation of Nigerian writers demonstrating thematic versatility in their work.

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In spite of its plurality in language and ethnicity, Northern Nigeria was remarkably homogeneous until its *civis*⁶⁸ was ruptured through the rhetoric of ethnic chauvinists and religious fundamentalists. According to N’Allah (2017: viii), “much of the early politicians from the North, such as Sir Ahmadu Bello and Sir Tafawa Balewa promoted and encouraged commonality among the diverse groups.” There was a strong commitment of these leaders to the advancement of integration (one north), social harmony and unity among the people irrespective of culture or religion. This deliberate effort encouraged an ethos of accommodation on the part of the people such that Nigerians outside Northern Nigeria were attracted to it. Unfortunately, Northern Nigeria today is largely divided ostensibly by ethnicity and religion on the one hand, and the colonially sourced native/settler dichotomy, on the other. This development has led to disruption of unity and purposeful integration – core values of Nigeria’s founding fathers.

Defining ‘neighbourhood’

According to Swisher (2017), a neighbourhood is “an immediate geographical area surrounding a family’s place of residence, bounded by physical features of the environment.” As a spatial unit, a neighbourhood is characterised by what Simandan (2016: 249) calls “considerable face-to-face interaction among members.” Such members are commonly regarded as neighbours. The boundary of social interactions among neighbours, however, is contested and dynamic. As James Merrill (2014: 1) observes, “neighbourhoods are always poised in a state of transition; they seem to dwell in impermanence.” This impermanency is reflected in how individuals constantly review connections and relationships with their neighbours, subject to the utility and relevance of those relationships to everyday concerns. This probably explains Zizek’s (2008: 48) argument that “the very same people who can display warm humanity and gentle care for members of a neighbourhood could commit terrible acts of violence to the same people.” Yet given the fact that the people in Northern Nigeria have harmoniously lived together over time for so long, one is provoked to wonder: what has changed?

Sociologists addressing crisis in Northern Nigeria

Several existing efforts to study the mystery of intractable ethno-religious violence in the Northern Nigeria region have emerged largely from sociological research, with little attention at all given to it in literary studies. Studies such as Osaghae and Suberu (2005) and Bunte and Vinson (2016)

⁶⁸ [Latin, meaning citizen, connoting here an urban dweller or citizen-resident of the autonomous region of the Federation of Nigeria – Ed.]

attribute the violence in the once peaceful region and elsewhere in Nigeria to the intersection of factors that reveal politics as essentially being a series of struggles between individuals and groups over economic advantage. Attention has also been given to the manipulative and mobilising role played by religion in the context of Nigeria's hyper-religiosity (see Vinson 2017). But a distinct under-representation of any complex social Nigerian problems prevailed in the published work of creative writers throughout the twentieth century.

The novels *After They Left* and *Born on a Tuesday* have enjoyed the attention of many non-professional reviewers in blogs and online magazines over the last few years since their release, but apart from the popular comments about *After They Left*, there is as yet no published scholarly discussion of the novel. From the date of their publication, there were very few if any efforts to address these works as the subject of serious literary criticism or scholarly attention. *Born on a Tuesday*, however, is now enjoying a measure of literary attention, subsequent to its being shortlisted for the acclaimed Nigeria Liquefied Natural Gas (NLNG) Prize for Literature. To date, existing studies of *Born on a Tuesday* have focused on its obvious theme of religious fundamentalism (Salihu 2017, Ile 2018). James Ile's essay, an explorative article posted on the internet in 2018, articulates the consequences of the Almajiri phenomenon in relation to the problem of religious fundamentalism.⁶⁹ He recommends rejuvenating the Almajiri education in Nigeria so that the system does not remain a breeding ground for terrorists.

In her exploration of *Born on a Tuesday*, Sarat Salihu (2017) compares it with Abubakar Gimba's *Sacred Apples*, as both stories engage with the problem of misinterpretation of religious texts as a major factor in religious fundamentalism. She examines the Almajiri from both positive and negative perspectives, and concludes that conflicts are not the result of religious obligations. Rather, she argues that selfish aims and ambitions are the basic determinants of social unrest in Northern Nigeria. However, her essay suffers from religious partisanship because of the uncritical perspective presented about the Almajiri phenomenon in *Born on a Tuesday*, which she never challenges. In addition, the comparison between Abubakar Gimba and Elnathan John and Marxist writing appears too farfetched.

⁶⁹ ['Almajiri' is popularly regarded as a derivative from the Arabic *Al-Muhajirun* and refers to a student or wanderer, like a pilgrim, seeking to deepen his knowledge of Islam. In this context it refers to the school systems that are associated by some with teaching forms of fundamentalism popularly assumed to breed extremist fundamentalism.—Ed.]

Analysis of ‘neighbourhood’ in *After They Left* and *Born on a Tuesday*

In *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, Slavoj Žižek (2008) articulates how the assumption of an attitude of liberal tolerance – a respect for Otherness – in late-capitalist societies engenders an uneasy relationship between a host society and what he calls the ‘neighbour.’ According to him, “the position of the neighbour is tolerated at best, for it could potentially turn into hostility at any time” (Žižek, 2008:55). He wonders if there is violence in the simple idea of a ‘neighbour.’ Although at normal times, a neighbour ordinarily may not kill, as social conventions encourage one to love one’s neighbour and maintain good neighbourliness. As Žižek (2008:59) observes, “a neighbour could pose a threat to the internal psyche and the very core of personhood of another because of the proximity.” Precisely because a neighbour could be a “traumatic intruder,” Žižek argues that one should fear the neighbour.

Although Žižek’s postulation is based on the European cultural context, the potential threat of a neighbour can be applied to the present discussion because the violence reconstructed in *After They Left* and *Born on a Tuesday* bear the hallmarks of the contexts he presupposes in his argument. The picture of Northern Nigeria as a hotbed of sectarian violence depicted in the novels is contrary to what it used to be; where people from different ethnic groups and religions did dwell in harmony. Although in the day to day inter personal relationships, the evidence of fear may not seem realistic, that tension is palpable from the level of violence in the two novels.

Neighbourhood setting in the novels

The neighbourhood setting contributes to highlighting the travails of the characters as they struggle to survive in the midst of overwhelming odds. The interaction of the flora and fauna – falling rocks, the forest, kuka trees and the extreme weather conditions of drought, dust, flood, heat, harsh winds, complement the characters’ experiences and contribute centrally to shaping the tensions and violence depicted in the novels.

Both texts portray the nature of social relationships within neighbourhood interactions in the rural and urban areas in the Northern Nigeria. Jos and Sokoto are the main urban settings in the novels. Being state capitals of their respective political jurisdictions, these are the epicentres of political administration and economic activities. Although these cities are largely ethnically and religiously heterogeneous, each of them has its unique characteristics. Jos, for instance, is distinct for its flourishing mining industry, railway terminus and tourism. Situated on a plateau in North-central Nigeria, Jos is dominated chiefly by Christians, with a temperate climate, attracting lots of foreign tourists, it is largely populated by ‘strangers’ (settlers), who are

attracted to the mining industry. In contrast, Sokoto is located in northwestern Nigeria and is predominantly a Muslim city. It is the bastion of Islamic learning in Nigeria and the headquarters of the Sokoto caliphate, which was established during the Uthman Dan Fodio jihad of the nineteenth century. The Sultan, who heads the caliphate, is the spiritual leader of Nigerian Muslims.

Nigeria is highly diversified with hundreds of ethnic groups. While diversity and pluralism are known as the basis of cosmopolitan societies, the Nigerian constitution emphasizes ethnic identity as the basis for citizenship. This ethnic based construction of citizenship largely breeds ethnic consciousness and partly accounts for the growing ethnic conflicts in Nigeria.

The centralization of ethnic group identities in formal civic administrative affairs is aggravated by conflicting religious identities between Christians and Muslims. It is common in some parts of Nigeria to find Christians and Muslims in the same family, and both religionists living in shared apartments as neighbours, harmonious in many social affairs. But in recent decades, conviviality and tolerance in Christian-Muslim relations are being undermined by explicitly religious tension. There is a perceived pronounced marginalisation of the Other in places where one of these religions commands a marked majority. The widely publicised activities of religious fundamental extremists, e.g. terrorist bombings, have further contorted interfaith interactions. During ethno-religious riots, the mutual suspicion and mistrust between Christians and Muslims is reinforced and frequently exploited as a rationale for inflicting violence on the Other.

After They Left and the violence of the neighbour

After They Left portrays the experiences of residents of a city in Northern Nigeria at a time of violent crisis. In recreating the ambience of ethno-religious trauma, the writer utilises the personal experiences of a family to highlight the tensions, the devastation and the horror that the victims of violence experienced, and its social impact on the neighbourhood. The novel is set in the Anang neighbourhood in the city of Jos. But the recreated neighbourhood is portrayed contrary to its popular image, as remarkably integrated and as a home of serene peace and attractive for tourism. Although the neighbourhood of Jos is ethnically and religiously heterogenous, Christians are in the majority.

The writer reveals a city on edge that is constantly in anticipation of crisis. Although the everyday experiences of the city dwellers are characterised by fear and apprehension in the novel, the author does not provide any background for such tension. This neglect notwithstanding, the writer has hinted in her foreword that her social experiences have shaped her

writing. Speaking about her motivations for writing the book, Yakusak says that she is hunted by the gripping images of the casualties and the need to draw attention to the dangers of ethnic violence. She alludes to her mother's personal experience of an incident when the majority of her co-villagers were killed in the dead of night. The story, therefore, recreates the actual catastrophic sectarian violence between Christians and Muslims which occurred in Jos on September 14, 2001, an episode that left several people killed.

However, despite this horrific background of real life, the narrator in *After They Left* downplays the ethnically and religiously coded bias to reflect the tragedy of humanity that lacks tolerance and respect for sanctity of human lives, quite independently of social or religious differences.

Mafeng, the protagonist, is forced by her mother into an arranged marriage to a politician; and the marriage yields her first two children before the man's death. She later remarries her first love, Samuel. But their world is shattered when her neighbourhood is invaded by a killer mob, making her a widow for the second time. The novelist deliberately weaves ethno-religious violence in the garb of marital life, to reveal the overwhelming consequences of the political crisis for the protagonist, Mafeng.

This rendering of the intimacy of the trauma of violence due to group animosity is elaborated further in the personal tales of the victims at a psychiatric hospital, and the depiction of a significant number of children that are resident at a camp for internally displaced people. The perennial issues of corruption and the crisis of values in postcolonial Africa also emerge in the text, as the character in charge of the camp for the internally displaced exploits the vulnerability of the children at the camp by trafficking them.

After They Left begins in fear and apprehension of a looming danger, through detailing the sound of a mob action: "the sound of terror" is chanted around the neighbourhood. Mafeng and her family are unexpectedly confronted with the blood-chilling sound of a rampaging mob moving swiftly in the direction of their house. As the characters remember their experiences of past riots, they associate automatically such chanting as the overture to the onset of deadly trouble and precedes widespread killing of innocent people:

They were coming. That was one of the things about Jos—the tension. Living in Jos can be described as living by the foot of an active volcano that could blow up at any minute. The result – catastrophic (Yakusak 2015: 14).

The family of four quickly rehearses the drills for such anticipation of communal violence. These drills enact the fear that is part of ordinary life in

the neighbourhood, where the constant anticipation of disaster haunts their everyday lives.

Here the picture of a neighbourhood is that of a ticking time-bomb. ‘They were coming,’ indicates looming danger. The two children are quickly thrown into the water tank, while the husband and wife find solace underneath the bed. They locked their door, but the door was useless against the wrath of the mob; “two gunshots wrecked the lock and they poured in, thirsty for blood” (16). Apparently, the mob knew that the family was inside. At the end, the mob killed Samuel, the husband; and his wife, Mafeng, was raped until she was unconscious. As the writer graphically describes Samuel’s corpse, no one is in doubt that the killers are propelled by absolute hatred:

He had been stabbed several times in various places, including his heart. Trickle of blood were still seeping through his flaccid body (63).

The reader soon discovers that the violence is widespread in the neighbourhood of Anang as one follows the protagonist in her journey after regaining her consciousness. Her first place of call is her neighbour’s apartment:

She remembered Mama Nankwat screaming voice. Shivers and pain interchanged movement through her spine in seconds. Something lay on the floor, just inside the kitchen, beside the doorway. The sight held her gaze. it was Mama Nankwat! Her head had been bashed in and her left arm removed. Her body was lying on the floor, mangled and out of shape (65).

Mama Nankwat and the protagonist, Mafeng, are neighbours. As neighbours, they share the same social environment. Mama Nankwat epitomises the nature of social relationship of a typical neighbour in the African sense:

... always borrowing stuff like sugar, salt, spices, and even water. Nothing had escaped Mama Nankwat’s scrounging hands ever since Mafeng started living next to her, nine months ago (7).

Hospitality, living together, interdependence and the sense of communality are fundamental principles of African social life. Mafeng, therefore, cannot refuse Mama Nankwat’s constant requests because of the way she understands relationship within the neighbourhood. As neighbours, there is not supposed to be tension in their everyday interactions. Everyone is encouraged to have maintain neighbourliness, irrespective of individual

similarities or differences. This perception probably informs Mafeng's decision to tolerate her pestering neighbour, Mama Nankwat.

A similar act of neighbourliness is noticed in another character, Dauda, a survivor of the violence. He is a neighbour to the mentally ill man that Mafeng encounters at the psychiatric hospital. Dauda stays with the mentally ill man to give him emotional support, during his grief over the loss of his entire family to the violence. Dauda also provides material support to help the man handle his grief. He offers a place for the bereaved man to sleep in his uncle's house (37). The appreciative mentally ill man describes Dauda's role in this way:

Dauda was very supportive. He would come in the evenings and sit with me. Bring me food and we will sit in silence because there was nothing to say (139).

Dauda embodies the essential values of good neighbourliness: empathy, care and charity. These characteristics cannot be enjoyed in an atmosphere of fear and tension.

Turning to Zizek's claim about subjective terror, that a neighbour is potentially a threat, clear portrayals occur throughout the novel, revealing that some of the killers are neighbours. For example:

Samuel recognized the leader immediately. It was Askari, the Suya (barbecue) seller down at Anieke Central Market. "My friend, you no know me again?" Asked Samuel, trying to call him back from whatever hell he was in. Askari answered him with a broad swipe on his face with the flat side of the wicked-looking machete that he was armed with (18).

A customer may be regarded as a neighbour because of their proximity in the same neighbourhood. Samuel's question to Askari, "My friend, you no [don't] know me again?" indicates that indeed they have been relating without any fear of each other. Askari's action depicts precisely the violence performed by a clearly identified individual. Samuel wrongly assumes that the warm interactions he routinely enjoys with Askari at the market will speak for him. Askari's reaction shows that this assumption is fatally wrong, and that their relationship has radically and lethally transformed. The evidence of a changed relationship is graphically recorded in the narration:

Her body recoiled and she jerked with the sound of the pipes and sticks as they thudded into Samuel's body. She could no longer hold it. She crawled out from under the bed. A strange fire flickered in the eyes of Askari, when he saw her. His eyes

fixated on her breasts as they swung braless under her sweater. He grabbed her and a bleat of terror escaped from Mafeng's quivering lips (19).

Unable to bear the agony of helplessly watching her husband dying, Mafeng crawls out from her hiding place only to become a victim of rape and male brutality by the same neighbour, Askari.

Mafeng's loss of her husband, her being raped and her lack of information about the whereabouts of her children, build up a traumatic effect, whose multiple wounds result in her developing a psychosis; she becomes a psychiatric patient, diagnosed with schizophrenia. At the hospital, she discovers that she is not the only victim of the crisis. In the social space of her ward, she encounters other schizophrenic 'neighbours' in the ward – the woman at her right hand and the mentally ill man. Each of them has harrowing stories to tell regarding their experiences at the hands of killer-neighbours.

In another example, the woman at her right hand reveals how her husband was burnt to death in her house, as she helplessly watched in horror:

They attached a rag to the bottle and lit it. The woman paused to look at Mafeng . . . They threw three bottles into my house. It exploded with a loud blast that shattered my eardrums. I covered my ears and my eyes. When I opened my eyes, they have dispersed. I could hear my husband, Thomas, screaming and shouting for help. I came out to help him, but everywhere was burning. So, I knelt down in front of my house, looking at my burning house, hearing my husband's agonizing screams as he burnt to death (90-91).

The narrative describes the perpetrators of this heinous act as "young angry boys" (90) in the neighbourhood. The young angry boys represent a fringe group of the unemployed, the homeless, the wayward as well as members of street gangs and independent delinquents, who eke a living through crime in the neighbourhoods of postcolonial African society. Although the victim is a Christian, "I was on my way back from the fellowship, I attend ECWA" (90), the attackers – the young angry boys – have no religion. The young angry boys are like the kuka boys in Elnathan John's *Born on a Tuesday*, who will readily transfer their anger and frustration on any citizen as long as there is an inducement to do so.

Another victim of the violence perpetrated by the Other, the neighbor, is the mentally ill man who, despite his dislocation from reality, is still able to explain why he is in the psychiatric ward. According to him, the rampaging mob murdered his wife and children and burnt their corpses in his house.

Narrating his ordeal, the deranged man says that “he lost everything dear to him in one night” and that “after they left, they took my joy, my peace and mind with them” (133). In his efforts to arrest the perpetrators of the abomination, he discovers that the killers are his own neighbours; but the law enforcement agents refuse to question the suspects. The refusal of the police to arrest the murderous neighbours compels him to seek redress himself through revenge killing. His desire for revenge tragically turns him into a psychopath, eventually killing thirty-three people before his arrest and confinement to the psychiatric hospital. The deliberate silence and refusal of the authorities to prosecute the perpetrators of violence reveals the collusion of the law enforcement agents. In the midst of such official denial, victims may seek for self-help because they have lost faith in the rule of law.

The question that readily comes to mind is: what has changed? Why do neighbours who have lived and shared together turn against each other? The writer reveals what has gone wrong in Northern Nigeria through the voice of the mentally deranged man in the following excerpt:

This is Nigeria, this is North. Do wicked and unreasonable men need any concrete reason to kill innocent people? All they need is a statement that is termed ‘blasphemous’, a preposterous squabble over a farmland, a gratuitous demonstration over government policy, a pithy enforcement of one’s religious beliefs and ideologies over a non-believer, a sudden guerilla attack by herdsmen or an act done in retaliation of any of these things. Anything can make the people attack especially if it is tainted with ethnic or religious colouration (134).

The cold-blooded killing of Mafeng’s husband by Askari and the killing of the husband by the angry young boys, the butchery of an entire family, do not portray these as the actions of neighbours in any ordinary sense. These actions reflect pathological hatred. They are clearly manifestations of ruptured neighbourliness and direct violence against the Other, vividly illustrating Zizek’s argument that “the neighbour is tolerated at best, for [the neighbourly relation] could potentially turn into hostility at any time” (2008: 45).

In contrast, the friendly nurse at the psychiatric hospital, just like Dauda, plays a positive role as a good neighbour, by providing emotional support for Mafeng and ensuring that she is discharged from the hospital despite the doctor’s directive. This support enables Mafeng to bury her husband and to search for her missing children.

On returning from the hospital, Mafeng is confronted with the decaying corpse of her husband and the blood-stained footsteps of her children, leading outside her apartment. Rather than giving in to despair, she braces herself, rekindles the hope that her children are alive somewhere, and single-handedly digs a shallow grave to bury her husband. Bereft of comfort, love and affection, she then begins the search for her missing children. Indeed, Mafeng's character demonstrates the resilience of a woman in the face of overwhelming tragedy.

Edify Yakusak's *After They Left* also explores the resilience of Mafeng's two children, Kim and Jugu, who are survivors of the orgy of violence. The children climb out of the water tank where they have been hiding from the mayhem, only to discover their parents in a pool of blood. The journey towards their grandmother's house reveals three other relatives murdered in another neighbourhood of Asan. The writer pictures the neighbourhood in this way:

Alice's house was not exempted from the madness. In the courtyard lay three bodies. Murna and Kato, the two children whom her grandmother had taken to live with her and help with the house chores and Simon, Jonah's younger brother. Simon lay three feet away from them—maimed, disfigured and bloody. The two children lay side by side with their hands intertwined. Their heads detached from their bodies, while Simon's chest was partially open and his mouth agape (66)

This extract is a graphic portraiture of a neighbourhood at war. The killers' viciousness is depicted in the description of the injuries inflicted on the casualties. Haunted by fear and pursued by an assailant, the children run towards the forest, far beyond farmlands into surrounding mountains until they discover a camp for the displaced people.

At the internal displacement camp, high-level corruption and human trafficking prevail. Madam Mati, the camp manageress, is represented as one who profiteers from crisis while pretending to provide a safe haven for the victims of violence. The two children, Kim and Jugu, find a supportive neighbour in Phili, a young inmate of the camp, whose support stabilizes them emotionally and leads them eventually to escape from the camp.

Religious violence in Elnathan John's *Born on a Tuesday*

Written in the tradition of *Bildungsroman*, Elnathan John's *Born on a Tuesday* explores the ways in which young men are seduced into religious fundamentalism and violence. The novel brings home the reality of religious intolerance, fundamentalist ideology in Islam and how Almajiri street

children are readily recruited into terrorism because of their ignorance. Although the author's narration is chiefly concerned with the event that defined the transition of an Almajiri to a respectable Mallam, the moving narrations could be read from the perspective of social relationships contoured by religious beliefs.

Tracing the protagonist's transformation from an Almajiri to a Muezzin, Elnathan John narrates how Dantala as a young boy struggles for his place in a society that is divided along religious ideological lines in northwestern Nigeria. Dantala is sent from his home town, Dogon Ice to Bayan Layi, in order to acquire Qur'an knowledge. Upon the completion of his Qur'anic education, Dantala cannot return home because he is unable to raise the return fare. Although his Mallam offers him seventy Naira, the money is insufficient for the trip. With his father dead and his mother living the life of a mendicant, Dantala realises that there is really no home for him to return to. He joins a gang of street children and this gang is later hired as tools of political thugs. He later flees to Sokoto, where he meets a benevolent Sheikh who transforms his identity. But before long, he is enmeshed in a sectarian crisis of Islamic identity between Sunnis and Shiites on one level, and an underlying struggle for power and patronage (so-called ideological differences) between Sheikh Jamal's *Jama'atul Ihyau Ismail Haqiqiy* and his former deputy, Abdul Nur's *Firqatul Mujahideen Li Ihyau Islam*. While Sheikh Jamal's group identifies with conservative Islam, Abdul Nur's group promotes fundamentalist ideology.

The dimension of violence in Elnathan John's *Born on a Tuesday* is slightly different from the one in *After They Left* because of the nature of the former story's setting in Northwestern Nigeria, dominated chiefly by a single cultural, ethnic and linguistic block. The problem of inter-ethnic violence is not acute here. Rather, the conflicts take the form of religious sectarian violence among Muslims. In the contrasting neighbourhood setting of Elnathan John's *Born on a Tuesday*, the narrative flows in two streams, rural and urban. The rustic rural neighbourhood comprises Bayan Layi, Dogon Ice, and Tahar Kanuri, while the urban neighbourhood is Sokoto, a city regarded as the centre of the Northern Caliphate. Bayan Layi is a small neighbourhood, where "it is easy to detect a stranger" (John 2016: 3). This is a locality of absolute poverty and no particular significance; it has no good roads and no hospital. Homeless street boys even occupy the village:

The boys slept on cartons under the kuka tree and when it rained, they moved to the cement floor in front of Alhaji Mohammed's rice store, which had an extended zinc roof (6).

One may wonder why are there homeless children in a rural area. Homelessness in a village may be partly due to the magnitude of extreme environmental disasters that have ravaged neighbourhoods like Dogon Ice. First, there was the drought. According to Dantala:

when the rain stopped falling and the millet dried up in the farm, my father sent them—Maccido, Hassan and Hussein—to become Almajiri (43).

Secondly, when the rain eventually came, the neighbourhood was flooded and there was nothing left to recognise as a home:

the only houses standing are the few made of concrete blocks. Many trees have fallen, some uprooted from the ground (43).

The environmental challenges of drought and flood negatively impart members of this neighbourhood. For instance, Dantala's father sends all his children out to become Almajiri because of the loss of his means of livelihood due to environmental devastation. The ravaging flood that later destroys all the mud houses, including Dantala's house, probably accounts for both the death of Dantala's father and his wife becoming a mendicant at the mosque. Prior to this time, Dantala's mother sold gruel. Indeed, living in a neighbourhood of extreme ecological devastation exacerbates the sense of listless helplessness that accompanies situational poverty.

The poverty depicted throughout this novel is configured in terms of the experiences of Dantala and his family, the experiences of kuka boys *qua* Almajiri vis-a-vis the neighbourhood of environmental deprivation in which they found themselves. Poverty is responsible for Dantala's decision to stay back and cohabit with street children for survival. It is also responsible for Dantala's father loss of his farm because of his inability to pay the rent on the land, due to the drought that ravaged his millet farm (48). This hopeless state of penury may either be fatal or may lead to the pursuit of survival through violence.

Although causes of violence may differ from one environment to another, living in a neighbourhood of extreme poverty is likely to be a constant factor that encourages persistent violence with its obvious consequences on the society. As Dantala suggests, the kuka boys inflict violence primarily for their survival:

We are not terrible people. When we fight, it is because we have to. When we break into small shops in Sabon Gari, it is because we are hungry, and when someone dies, well that is Allah's will (12).

It is a truism that the economic wellbeing of neighbourhoods shapes in large measure the outcome of the lives of the children who dwell in them. According to Dupéré et al. (2010: 1227):

living in an advantaged neighbourhood, where a sizeable proportion of residents are affluent and educated professionals, is associated with children's and adolescents' achievement, over and above other markers of family advantage.

Correlatively, poor neighbourhoods are associated with lowered expectations and a wide range of negative outcomes throughout a child's life. As Wilson (1987: 8) observes, neighbourhoods "shape individuals who are engaged in street crime and other forms of aberrant behavior." No wonder there are so many young kuka boys full of anger and hatred around the impoverished neighbourhoods depicted in this novel. According to these writers, anger and hatred constitute a core piece of the landscape of poverty.

The eponymous protagonist of the novel, Dantala (meaning born on a Tuesday), finds himself in this neighbourhood of "kuka tree boys" who "like to boast about the people they have killed" and who "smoke wee-wee" (1). Dantala is left with no choice as he gradually absorbs aggression, abuse of drugs and violence at a tender age. He is recruited along with fellow Almajiri to function as political thugs by politicians on the pretext of promising the boys shelter, a promise that is never fulfilled:

The small party has promised we may even get one thousand naira per head if they win the elections. They will build a shelter for us homeless boys and those who can't return home or don't have parents, where we can learn things like making chairs and sewing caftans and making caps (8).

Dantala's active participation in burning down an office complex of the victorious Big Party nearly destroys his whole future. He holds the matches, while another boy pours the gasoline. A fat man runs out of the building, and Dantala vividly narrates how he struck with a machete in this manner: "I strike behind his neck as he stumbles by me. He crashes to the ground. He groans. I strike again" (18).

The picture here depicts a hard-heated and vicious young man. But the violence inflicted in this scene by a young thug has been politically instigated by the grown men of the political class, who equip such young men and exploit their desperation to reach political goals by inflicting coercion and intimidation through violence in the neighbourhood. This dynamic reveals the nature of what has gone wrong with electoral politics in postcolonial African society.

Multi-party political competitions that is characterised by winning at all costs, in an impoverished atmosphere, ultimately creates political tension that leads readily to violence in the democratic electoral process. During the voting process, ‘voters are induced with salt and dry fish in little cellophane bags’ (10). After the voting, ‘two hundred Naira notes and fuel and matches and machete’ (13) are handed over to thugs to induce violence on the Other party. Here, we see the atrocities of the political elites in exploiting the innocence of the youth to undermine political opponents by inducing them to generate violence. The growing army of undernourished pupils of Quranic schools commonly referred to as Almajiri in Northern Nigeria are readily available for such purposes.

The Almajiri phenomenon has become an enduring feature of Northern Nigeria. James Ile’s internet article on Almajiri and religious fundamentalism has extensively discussed the impact of this social problem. Derived from the Arabic word, *al-Muhajir*, which means migrant. Almanjiranci or Almajiri refers to the practice of sending children to Mallams in the belief that Qur’an knowledge is mostly acquired by children when they are far from home (Zakari *et al.* 2014). These Mallams, in turn largely expose the children to hard labour, harsh environment hazards, hunger and deprivation that ultimately turn them to street begging for survival. In pursuit of survival, the Almajiri children employ various tactics and are easily lured into crime. Denied of love and care, an Almajiri lives under an illusion that providence has destined him to be poor and is enjoined to accept his miserable fate as the wishes of Allah.

The second stream of neighbourhood setting in the text is Sokoto, which is remarkable for its predominantly Muslim Hausa/ Fulani population, which ordinarily should promote harmony and unity of purpose. The picture of Sokoto neighbourhood in the text is that of latent hostility and violence. The hostility is not about Christian-Muslim conflict; it is rather a conflict within the same Muslim *Ummah*. It is about the struggle for power and materialism that is enshrouded with the garb of ideological differences between mainstream Sunni Muslims and the Shiites.

The Shiites and Sunnis relate in an atmosphere of suspicion. There is tension in their everyday interpersonal relationships. This tension is due to the inability to recognise and accommodate contrary views and opinions as reflected in the following stereotypes recorded in the novel:

No one likes Shiites in Sokoto. Everyone believes they are dangerous, especially those of them who go to Iran to study and the Shiite Mallams who take money from Hezbollah to fight Dariqas and Izalas. Even Sheikh preaches against the way

they pray only three times instead of five and how they act so uncivilized during the festival of Ahura, covering themselves with mud and dirt, flogging themselves to mourn the killing of Imam Hussein in the battle of Karbala (107).

They left the way they came, like spirits, like a breeze that vanished. This is what being Shiite has taught them. To disregard people (110).

There is nothing better than shirk, and in this matter some Christians are better than the Shiites... They just don't call him Allah. Surely then, the Shiites, who set up gods in opposition to Allah, are worse than Christians. Allah says in the last verse of Surah Al-Fath: Muhammed is the Messenger of Allah and those with him are severe against the disbelievers and merciful among themselves (127).

From the foregoing excerpts, it is clear that other Muslims in the Sokoto neighbourhood in the text have deep-seated hatred for the Shiites and perceive them as non-Muslims (disbelievers). At the individual and personal level, for instance, Dantala's brothers – who are Shiites, feel insecure even among family members when return home for the funeral of their mother. At the communal level, members of the two sects frequently engage in dreadful religious violence in the text, burning each other's mosques, offices, houses and killing and maiming one another, creating a war-zone neighbourhood for an invitation to the military to quell the crisis.

The excerpts are also manifestations of hate speech, which Zizek (2008) categorises as “subjective violence” that frequently brings catastrophic consequences on the neighbourhood. Hate speech, according to Zizek (2008: 1), “blurs our ability to see the Others.” This outlook may have informed the absolutist statement that “no one likes Shiites in Sokoto.” Sokoto as the bastion of orthodox Islam in Nigeria assumes a conservative Islam, constituting the “great tradition,” which is typically ascribed to Saudi Arabia and the ideology of the Wahhabis.

The Shiites as neighbours are constantly threatened, silenced and always in the defensive. In the above third excerpt, a character (Mallam Abdul-Nur) alludes to the Qur'an to justify an attitude of intolerance and violence against Shiites, claiming that Allah commands one to be severe against disbelievers. By regarding fellow Muslims as disbelievers, Abdul displays a tendency that excludes Shiites from “the very universality of humankind” (Zizek 2008: 54) in Islam.

Although conventional understanding of Islam among Muslims often invokes it as a timeless, unchanging and universal religion, scholars such as Asad (1986) and Loimeier (2013) have commented on the inadequacy of such views. These studies demonstrate that the assumption rooted in a uniform, and singularly orthodox form of Islam is incapable of accounting for a variety of conflicting cultural practices and viewpoints as a result of divergent exegeses or interpretations. Therefore, the unwillingness to tolerate diversity of opinion about Islam unnecessarily creates tension and fear between members of the two groups in the Sokoto neighbourhood. The Sheikh in the novel typifies the voice of reason, as he repeatedly solicits for an end to the violence between Sunnis and Shiites. A vivid example is during the groups' meeting with the deputy governor at the government house:

If we fight, it is Islam that suffers. Of course, I don't agree with you and the things you practice. But is judgment not for Allah?
(140)

The significance of this passage is that religious violence over ideological differences have the power to demonise a religion.

Although a casual reading of the text may see the violence primarily between the Sunnis and Shiites, much of the violence in the text is masterminded by the Sheikh Jamal's deputy, Mallam Abdul Nur, of the same Islamic movement. Abdul Nur merely exploits the love-hate relationship between the Sunni Muslims and the Shiites to fulfil his personal ambition for religious relevance. The writer presents Abdul Nur as a pathologically violent man, whose greed and over ambition have no bounds. As a man of violence, Abdul Nur sexually assaults his wife and his junior brother, Jibril. According to Dantala, "I don't like the way Jibril returns with a red eye or swollen lip many times after his brother has sent for him" (80). Jibril also declares:

He forces things into her... into her ... anus! Candles. Bottles.
He flogs her with the tyre whip when they are doing it. Some days she faints (149).

Abdul Nur hires gunmen to shoot his boss and accuses the Shiites for the action. He incites members of their sect to revenge the shooting of the Sheikh by burning Shiites' mosques. This action naturally provokes a retaliation by the Shiites neighbours, inflicting continuous violence on the Sokoto neighbourhood. Several religious clashes later emerge between the law enforcement agents and the two groups. As bloodshed engulfs the neighbourhood, the Sheikh himself is aware that Shiites are not responsible for his shooting:

I do not want to sin by assuming. But I am sure that the Shiites are not the ones who shot me. When I am sure of it, I will tell you (145).

This discovery probably informs Sheikh's offer to rebuild the Shiites' mosques that are burnt and refuses the Shiites' offer to repay him in return for his burnt office. Sheikh later sends his deputy, Abdul Nur, to Saudi Arabia to 'cool off'. But this decision turns out to be Sheikh's undoing, as Abdul Nur craftily turns the heart of Sheikh's sponsors in Saudi Arabia against him; and returns only to set up a parallel organisation in opposition to his boss. The real horror begins when the Abdul Nur's Islamic fundamentalist group takes to armed struggle and trains its followers with weapons deep in the bush. The overzealousness of Abdul Nur's fundamentalist group later results in violent confrontation against fellow Muslims and non-Muslims. The new group eventually attacks the Sheikh, slaughtering him like a ram and going away with the head. This action leads to a chain of retaliatory violence, creating a neighbourhood of enormously religious violence with dire consequences on good neighbourliness.

Conclusion

Literary texts provide a useful source of data that contribute to the discussion of neighbourhood in the Northern Nigeria. Building on Edify Yakusak's *After They Left* and Elnathan John's *Born on a Tuesday* as primary texts, we have explored how geography and conflict have become entangled, leading to the so-called ruptured *civis* in Northern Nigeria. These texts engage the contemporary problems of a growing culture of violence, destruction of lives and property witnessed in that region of Nigeria. The two novels reveal the divisive role of ethno-religious violence in Nigerian society. They narrate how hitherto friendly neighbours turn into deadly neighbours because of ethno-religious differences, answering the question that Zizek (2008) raises, whether there is violence inherent in the very idea of the neighbour. The writers attest that there are good neighbours of all seasons, and there are fair weather or superficially good neighbours.

An atmosphere of inciting ethnic or religious violence could task the loyalty of a neighbour. It is established in the novels that during such crises, neighbours may play ignoble roles, betraying one another, functioning as informants and being actively involved in killing their neighbours – their nearest Other. Inherent in the very idea of neighbour resides paradox.

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