

## **Child Soldiers in Armed Conflict in Northern Nigeria: Analysis of Visual Representations in *Beast of no Nation***

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### **Abstract**

The resultant effect of violent conflict is the conscription of children from 7 to 17 years of age as soldiers. An estimated 300,000 children across the globe serve as members of armed groups or state military, these children are often required to carry weapons and act to protect the ideology for which they were conscripted. Africa has about 40% of the global number of child soldiers; this phenomenon has created a disturbing image of conflicts in Africa. This paper analyses the place of visual filmic representations in explaining the effects of war on children especially those forced to carry arms. The paper submits that violent conflicts can erode the future aspirations of these children, distort their education and intensify human rights abuse. The paper, therefore, proposes an international unified policy that will ensure the rights of every child is protected in a conflict.

**Key Words:** Child Soldier, Violence, Conflict, Conscription, Resultant.

### **Introduction**

Violent conflicts have characterized much of humanities history, from medieval ages, the First World War, the second World War and Post-Cold War, man has been in conflict with himself, with others and with his environment. Disagreements between one party and another, one country and another usually inform these conflicts. At the receiving end of every conflict however, are women and children who are the most affected, there is also great humanitarian needs and disasters.

In war torn regions, girls are exploited as sex slaves, or used as suicide bomb carriers. The boy child on the other hand, is trained as a soldier, forced to carry weapons and kill “ the enemy”. Child soldiers are a common feature of wars in Africa, from Uganda, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Sudan and many more, the consistent use of child soldiers in violent conflicts have been the image of the African child and a source of great concern to humanitarian organizations and the international community. Temitayo Oyewole, examines the disturbing figures of child soldiers, she states that:

Statistics show a steep increase in the active participation of child soldiers in contemporary armed conflicts. With recent Academic literature to be as high as 300,000 and rising. Africa is estimated to account for about 40% of this number with about 120,000 or more children involved in armed conflicts as both active combatants and support staff, aged between 7 and 17 years of age. (8)

In Nigeria, recent activities of terrorist particularly Boko Haram has seen significant rise in the kidnap of school children, who are either married off to terrorist, used as human bomb carriers or conscripted into fighting. These children are either forced or indoctrinated into an ideology that supports and legitimizes violent conflicts. These children either become figures on television or film or statistics in the aftermath of these conflicts, their names, and identities swallowed up by a war of which they a victims.

Film has over the years reflected our society, with its unique abilities of combining visual and audio, film has the capacity to transmit cultures and history, create change and project

identities. This paper intends to analyze the child soldier in Nigeria through the images of Cari Joji Fukunaga's *Beast of no Nation*, with the intention of bringing to bare the images that reflect the reality of the child soldier and the urgency of a unified policy to protect children in conflict areas.

### **Synopsis of *Beast of no Nation***

The film *Beast of no Nation* is about a boy named Agu who possesses immense talent but is later forced to become a child soldier. It opens with Agu telling the audience about the situation in the buffer zone where he and his family live, and his ingenuity as a child to create something with his "imaginary TV" which he finally sold to a soldier. Agu's childhood and innocence is shattered when the war eventually comes to his family's small village, Agu's mother and sister are able to leave with the UN Peace keepers but Agu is rejected by the taxi driver who said he cannot carry him, but charges a huge amount of 70,000 to carry the mother, his little brother and a sister. Agu is forced to stay behind and "protect the land" with his father and other men in the village. When soldiers attack the village, Agu's father and other men in the village are shot and killed, Agu and his brother attempt to escape but his brother is shot and killed, leaving Agu who helplessly runs into a nearby bush.

Agu attempts to hide but is soon discovered by soldiers who force him to join their rebel force, As part of his initiation, Agu is forced to kill a man with a machet with the commander consistently reminding him that men like the victim are responsible for his father's death, and Agu must avenge his family by killing these men. Agu befriends a mute boy named Strika, together they face the challenges of the war. The commandant

rapes Agu and the other boys, but Agu says nothing for fear of being killed by the commandant. The flood of war ravaging their country erodes his childhood and innocence.

The commandant receives a call from the supreme commander of the army to travel to a certain city. While there, the commander orders the second in command, to take over as commandant of that battalion and orders the commandant to take over as his security chief. An argument breaks out between them. Meanwhile Agu and the other boys ravage the breakfast set before them, a sign of inadequate feeding and constant hunger. The commandant takes them to a hotel where a prostitute shoots the 2IC in a plan orchestrated by the commandant. The owner of the establishment and the prostitute are killed by the soldiers and the women taken as hostages.

The battalion now fights as rebels and soon their ranks dissipate. With hunger and frustration Agu admits that he thinks the war is far from over. Agu realizes that his friend Strika has been shot, and he is forced to carry him. He later covers Strika's dead body with leaves and mourns his friend. The battalion resorts to digging for gold. They are hungry and disease is ravaging their camp. Rambo revolts against the commandant and the boys follow him to surrender to the United Nations soldiers. There, Agu once again sees the soldier that he (Agu) sold his imaginary TV to for some plates of food. At that moment, the childhood he had lost flashes before his eyes and he realizes what the war had turned him into. Agu and other children were rehabilitated in a camp. Rambo tries to persuade them to go back to war, but he refuses. Agu finally opens up to his caregiver, symbolizing the beginning of a process of healing, the process of becoming a boy again.

### **The Child Soldier as Portrayed in *Beast of no Nation***

Terrorism and violent acts stem from years of discrimination, corruption, lack of good governance and eventually frustration. Conflicts tend to be sometimes based on ethnic differences and competition for access to resources and power. Some conflicts also have religious backing.

These conflicts have rocked nations in African, from the Rwandan Genocide of 1994, the Nigerian civil war of 1967 to 1970, the Sudanese civil war and crisis in South Sudan, the apartheid in South Africa, to Islamic extremism in Somalia, Kenya and Tanzania, Mali and Nigeria. The list is endless. Amid all these wars and conflicts are trapped innocent children and helpless women who are mostly consumed by violent acts, hunger, starvation, migration, and abuse. Cary Joji Fukunaga captures these situations in the film, *Beast of no Nation*. The film opens with a narration from the main character Agu. He reveals the situation of the conflict around him.

**Agu:** It is starting like this, our country is at war and we are having no more school, so we have to be finding ways to be keeping busy.

(Excerpts from *Beast of no Nation*. 2015)

Agu's narration above reveals a very important fact about the effects of war in a country: education is cut short. According to UNICEF, one in every five of the worlds out of school children is in Nigeria; about 10.5 million of the country's children aged 5- 14 years are not in school. Only 61 percent of 6-11-year-olds regularly attend primary school and only 35.6 percent of children aged 36-59 months receive early childhood education. In the northern part of the country, the picture is even bleaker with a net attendance rate of 53 percent. States in the North-East and

North–West have female primary net attendance rate of 47.7 percent and 47.3 percent, respectively, meaning that more than half of the girls are not in school.

The prevalence of illiteracy in Northern Nigeria is driven by various factors, including economic barriers and socio–cultural norms and practices that discourage formal education. “The impact of insurgency in the North-East presents significant challenges, 2.8 million children are in need of education–in-emergency support in three conflict-affected states (Borno, Adamawa, Yobe). In these states, at least 802 schools remain closed, and 497 classrooms are listed as destroyed with another 1,392 damaged but repairable” ([www.unicef.org](http://www.unicef.org)).

Discussing the gravity of the situation, Ekereke Aniefriok Silas states that:

More than 29 students and a teacher were killed after gunmen attacked a boarding school in Baga community of Borno as well as 42 students and other staff of Government secondary school in Mamudo, Yobe state leading to the closure of the schools. In October 2012, over 40 students were murdered in cold blood in Federal Polytechnic Adamawa state. In July 2013, a school dormitory was doused in petrol and set alight in North–Eastern Yobe...Those trying to flee the flames were shot...The attack left 46 dead, mostly students. Integrated Regional Information Network (IRIN) based in Kano, states that around 15,000 children in Borno state, North–East Nigeria have stopped attending classes since February 2013, most of the children are in primary schools while more than 50 of 175 state schools have been destroyed. (2)

Two incidents that shook the country and attracted international condemnation were the kidnap of schoolgirls in Chibok and later in Dapchi. Two hundred and seventy-six female students of Government secondary school Chibok, Borno state. This act by the terrorist group Boko Haram, generated an outcry and the birth of the “Bring Back Our Girls” group, which demanded a quick response from the government in rescuing the girls. The outcry prompted the leader of Boko Haram, Abubakar Shekau, to release a video on YouTube in which he claimed that girls are not supposed to go to school but should be married off instead. On February 19<sup>th</sup>, 2018, another one hundred and ten girls aged 11-19 were kidnapped by the Boko Haram terrorist group from Government Girls Science and Technical College Dapchi. Unlike the Chibok schoolgirls, the Dapchi students were released with the exception of Leah Sharibu whom the terrorist claim refused to denounce her religion and accept Islam.

Many schools have remained closed due to terrorist activities in the Northeast. Many children now live in IDP Camps where non-government Organization’s and the federal government try to provide schooling.

Psychologically, all displaced people are affected, but women and children are more at risk of being recruited by terrorists to join their ranks and serve as bomb carriers with the promise of better living conditions for a member of their family. In some quarters, it is the promise of reward for eternal life by carrying out Allah’s will. Cary Joji Fukunaga captures this situation in his film *Beast of no Nation*. After the war reaches Agu’s village, his father tries to get Agu, his mother, a brother and sister out of the village, but the driver refuses to take Agu with them. Agu’s father, brother and grandfather are killed, leaving Agu to run for

his life and hide in the forest. He is later discovered by a group of rebel fighters consisting of children between the ages of 7-16. This group recruits Agu and trains him to become a fighter.



Plate.4: Commander of a rebel group discovers Agu in the bush. *Credit. Beast of No Nation*



Plate.5: Young boys trained to shoot with a gun. *Credit. Beast of No Nation*

Nigeria is currently facing a challenge with its youthful population, Monica Akokunebe opines that:

Nigeria, Africa's most populous country with a current estimated population of about 187 million of 82.6%



youth dependency ratio within the age cohort of 0-14 years (42.79%) and 15-24 years (19.48%) has greatly outnumbered the working age adults, however the growing youth demographic is faced with limited educational opportunities, unemployment, the HIV/AIDS/Ebola Crisis, communicable and non-communicable diseases, war and other forms of violence, 'Youth bulge' in the Nigeria population pyramid has revealed that the large size of young persons who are dependent increases the likelihood of violent conflicts when being recruited as child soldiers.(303)

Child soldiers are usually children under the age of 18 who are conscripted or kidnapped or forced to become members of a rebel group, armed political groups, regular or irregular armed forces. They are used in combat where they serve as scouts, laying mines and explosives they also serve as domestic labour and are engaged in sexual slavery. Following Agu's story in the rebel camp, the audience is introduced to trainings, and initiations. During this initiation process, a grave is dug, and newly recruited members are asked to lie down in it symbolizing the death of a former self and resurrecting as a new person, a soldier, dedicated to a task. Theorist, Ferdinand de Saussure in his semiotic theory, exposes the connections between signifier and signified. The signifier is the image used to stand for something, while the signified is what it stands for, in the image below the empty graves; burial and resurrection are signifiers, signifying the death of an old self and the beginning of a new life.



Plate.6: Young recruits under go initiation process. *Credit. Beast of No Nation*



Plate.7: Recruits are shot at to complete the initiation process. *Credit. Beast of No Nation*

In Agu's case, the commandant uses deception to make him surrender to a cause. The commandant assures Agu that the group kills those who are responsible for his family's death. Joining them thus would mean exerting his revenge. The commandant's words to Agu clearly show the use of persuasion and deception by terrorists to recruit members:

**Commandant:** Agu, you are going to kill this man, you are going to kill him today. He is strong, you can do it, Agu come so when you are chopping wood lift it up high, high, up, high, then when you are ready, you come down slow, well, well into the flesh, you have chop melon before? But this is not a melon this is hard, so you must split am good. Agu these are the ones, the dogs that kill your father. (Excerpts from *Beast of no Nation*. 2015)



Plate.8: Commandant instructs Agu to kill a prisoner. *Credit. Beast of No Nation*



Plate.9: Agu's cutlass splits prisoner's head. *Credit. Beast of No Nation*

The images that follow show how Agu is finally conscripted into a life of bloodshed and murder. In VOA's documentary titled "*Boko Haram: A Journey from evil*" the processes of recruitment into the terrorist organization Boko Haram is similar to what is seen in *Beast of no Nation*. Young boys and girls are targeted, they are either kidnapped or conscripted and indoctrinated into fighting a noble cause for 'Allah' who is against any kind of Western influence, hence their targets are Western institutions and moderate Muslims, and these children are used as suicide bombers and combatants. The girls are used as sex slaves or married off to terrorists. Punishments for offenses are usually lashes with a cane or death. In her analysis of the situation, Monica Akokunebe notes that:

It has been estimated that 300,000 young soldiers between ages 10 and 24 are currently risking their lives in armed conflicts. Hundreds of thousands of children are conscripted, kidnapped or pressured into joining

armed groups...The proliferation of lightweight weapons has made it possible for children under the age of 10 years to become effective soldiers... about 40% or 120,000 child soldiers are girls, the demography of armed conflicts and child soldiers have been prevalent among the ethno-religious groups called Boko-Haram and Shittes who have been recently kidnapping and recruiting the boy and girl child for suicide bombing in the Northeast geo-political zone of Nigeria, Almajiris (Koranic School Pupils) are understood to be the biggest recruiting ground .(304)

The United Nations High commissioner for refugees, states that 278 children-143 boys and 135 girls, were recruited in the North-East; twenty-one girls were used in suicide attacks by Boko Haram. The United Nations verified the killing of 244 children-109 boys and 135 girls most in Borno, Adamawa and Yobe. Sixty-five of them were killed in 13 suicide attacks carried out by children. Since terrorism broke out in the North-East of Nigeria, civil normalcy has ceased, towns and cities have been characterized by intermittent suicide and car bombings, attacks on villages and towns, destruction of schools, banks and government institutions, abduction and kidnap of boys and girls, and killing of civilians in their homes as well as clashes with the military.

In videos posted by insurgents or captured by civilians, terrorists are usually seen in armed vehicles carrying semi-automatic rifles, shooting down through a village or City Street, in the midst of this chaos are children, shooting without a care who their bullets hit. As we progress into the film, we are confronted with images of rape, death and sickness. The young boys finally leave and surrender to the peacekeepers, but not without major consequences. The often psychological fallbacks of child soldiers

leads them back to the war they tried to run away from, this is coupled with the lack of available therapist that should offer psycho-social therapy to victims at IDP camps or healing centers. Many of these children are often shunned by society and treated as perpetrators rather than victims that they are.

### **Conclusion**

The effect of violent conflicts in African societies today has hampered development and stunted growth. The destruction of infrastructure, and disruptions to economic and educational activities abound. The most disturbing however is the conscription of children between the ages of 7 to 17 to serve as child soldiers in various rebel groups. This phenomenon does not only pose a threat to the immediate concern of security but a future concern about the ability of these children to cohabit with other members of society without relapsing to violence. Film helps us understand issues, it has ability to evoke emotions and speak directly to the viewer, the film *Beast of no Nation*, enables the viewer to participate in the struggles of the child victim, and his hopelessness in the face of terror, pushing forward a call to action to mitigate the occurrence.

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