Clash of Civilization or Clash of Newspaper Ideologies? An Analysis of the Ideological Split in British Newspaper Commentaries on the 2002 Miss World Riots in Nigeria

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Abstract

Riots that erupted in the northern Nigerian city of Kaduna over a newspaper article that some Muslims interpreted as blaspheming the Prophet Muhammad on account of Nigeria's decision to host the 2002 edition of the Miss World beauty pageant captured the attention of the world's media. This article investigates how the British press framed the riots in their opinion columns and editorials. Through an interpretive textual analysis of the opinion pages, the study shows that while the ideological persuasions of left-leaning British press predisposed them to express opinions on the Miss World riots that resonated with what might loosely be characterized as the 'Islamic perspective', those of the conservative British press shared ideological similarities with the standpoints of the 'liberal', predominantly Christian, southern Nigerian newspapers. This highlights the limited utility of such facile labels as 'liberal' and 'conservative' in describing the ideological temperaments of the press. It also problematizes notions of media imperialism and exposes the theoretical and empirical inadequacy of gazing at local religious conflicts from the perspectives of international religious contexts.

Keywords

Miss World 2002 riots, Nigeria, British press, religion, media

The global news media were riveted by the deadly riots that burst forth
in the northern Nigerian city of Kaduna over a newspaper article that
some Muslims construed as profaning the Prophet Muhammad on
account of Nigeria's decision to host the 2002 Miss World beauty
pageant. Coming a year after the 11 September attacks—and amid
growing concerns over the resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism
worldwide, especially in Nigeria whose extreme northern states declared
Islamic laws (or Sharia) as the official laws of the land—the riots were
quickly absorbed into, and became associated with, larger debates about
what has often been labelled the emergence of Al-Qaeda-inspired
'militant' Islam in the world. Researchers like Ousman (2004), for
instance, hinted at 'the potential of Islamic terrorism in sub-Saharan
Africa'. Lyman and Morrison (2004, p. 75), writing in *Foreign Affairs*
magazine, talked about the 'terrorist threat in Africa', and pointed out
that the Bush administration had, in fact, 'singled out Nigeria as a country
with significant impact and deserving of "focused attention" in its
2002 National Security Strategy'. In his article, 'Africa in the War on
Terrorism', Glickman (2003, p. 168) also writes: 'Northern Nigeria is
honeycombed with ideologically extreme groups, providing raw
materials for Al Qaida-like associations. There are now 12 "Islamic"
states…in Nigeria'.

    The apprehension that northern Nigeria was transforming into a new
training ground for terrorism in Africa gained an even more urgent
materiality when the late Osama bin Laden allegedly declared in a
February 2003 audio tape (about two months after the Miss World riots)
that Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, which has almost
90 million Muslims (that is, more Muslims than Afghanistan, Iraq, Sudan
and the whole of the Gulf states combined), was ripe for 'liberation' from
the tyranny of the West and from the apostasy of its rulers (Idowu-
Fearon, 2004).

    While the controversies generated by the Sharia laws in northern
Nigeria attracted fairly robust scholarly attention, especially from
religious scholars and political scientists (see Abrahamsen, 2004;
Glickman, 2003; Lyman & Morrison, 2004; Ousman, 2004), most of the

scholarship has been concerned with exploring the implications of Islamic revivalism in northern Nigeria in the context of the global 'war on terror'. Almost no attempt has been made to interrogate how the mass media became the sites for the enactment of the Sharia controversy. Nevertheless, although a study that explores the way in which the mass media functioned to either exacerbate or attenuate the Sharia crisis would be worthwhile, in this article, I am concerned with examining how the British print media interpreted the Miss World riots and thus show how a Western news media had framed the religious riot in a developing country that was sparked by the Miss World beauty pageant.

There are important aspects in which popular and scholarly perceptions of the riots were shaped by the way international media commentators had framed it. For instance, the promoter and organizer of the beauty pageant, Julia Morley, implicated the 'international media' for the riots. She said that the Western press 'deliberately tried to tear Nigeria to pieces' in the run-up to the beauty contest (McBeth, 2002). She pointed out that 'Miss World cannot be held responsible for the riots. They were down to one journalist who wrote something which inflamed the local people' (Jeffery, 2002). Interestingly, Olusegun Obasanjo, the President of Nigeria at the time of the riots, also said that 'irresponsible journalism' about the Miss World contest was the cause of the mass communal bloodshed (BBC News, 2002; *Daily Mail*, 2002).

This study does not interrogate these claims. What it does is conduct an interpretive textual analysis of the opinion pages of the ideologically polarized British press to examine how the riots were framed. Interpretive textual analysis, in general, 'involves a complex, iterative process which relies on researchers' interpretations, induction and conceptual creativity' (Gephart, 1997, p. 584). The textual analysis was conducted between November 2002 and December 2002 and included two liberal, left-of-centre newspapers and two conservative, right-of-centre newspapers. The liberal newspapers chosen for this study were *The Guardian* and *The Independent*; and the conservative newspapers were *The Time* and *The Daily Telegraph*. The papers were chosen because of the national spread of their circulation, their impact and cultural prestige in the British public sphere and because they represent the dominant ideological orientations in Britain (Hampton, 2008; Triandafyllidou, 2009). The study's units of analysis—opinion columns and editorials—were reviewed electronically through a careful search of the online archives of

the above-mentioned newspapers. Up to 24 opinion articles and editorials were reviewed. Of the 24 articles reviewed, four prototypic and paradigmatic examples were chosen for analysis through a theoretical rather than statistical sampling method (Flyvbjerg, 2006). The four articles were isolated because they were exemplars of the kinds of opinions expressed on the Miss World riots in these papers.

The purpose of the study is to lay bare the ways in which a Western media organization editorialized a religious conflict in a Third World country and, in the process, expand the conversation about media imperialism in international news flows. The research questions are: how has the ideological split in the media of the British press influenced the gamut of discursive topoi deployed to appropriate the Miss World religious riots in Nigeria, and how can this complicate notions of a monolithic national press? How can ideological differences in national media formations construct strange cross-cultural discursive bedfellows across cultures in the reporting of international conflicts?

A brief review of the history of Sharia in Nigeria provides a context for the hostility towards the Miss World event by northern Nigerian Muslims. As Amir Ali (2002) pointed out, media reports, comments and analyses of the Miss World riots often either miss or ignore the historical, social and legal intricacies of northern Nigeria and therefore, end up presenting a deceptively simple picture of the conflict. The Miss World organizers were victims of this shortcoming. As an illustration of what little cultural background preparation went into the planning of the Miss World contest, Julia Morley, the English pageant organizer, confessed: 'To tell you the truth, before I left [England] I thought Sharia was a girl's name' (Sanneh, 2002, p. 60).

Sharia in Northern Nigeria

The former Governor of Nigeria's north-western state of Zamfara, Ahmed Sani, taking advantage of the restoration of constitutional rule after 15 years of military dictatorship, proclaimed, on 27 October 1999, the 're-introduction'[1] of the Islamic legal system, also called Sharia.[2] The Zamfara state government's declaration appealed to the collective historical memory of northern Nigerian Muslims who pride themselves on being heirs to centuries of Islamic-based statecraft and scholarship

before the British colonial occupation of what is now Nigeria. The governor became an instant iconic figure among a broad section of northern Nigerian masses who not only wanted to recapture and relive the putative glories of their past but were also disillusioned by what some scholars have called 'the criminalization of the African state' (see Bayart et al., 1999). Zamfara's declaration, however, ignored the fact that the Nigerian Constitution forbids the declaration of a state religion in any part of the country.

The Nigerian central government initially discounted the Zamfara state government's declaration of Sharia as the state law for two reasons. First, religion is such an emotive issue in the country, and especially in the religiously hypersensitive north of Nigeria, that an unguarded statement from Nigeria's then President Obasanjo, who never failed to display his born-again Christianity in public, could spark off deadly riots and endanger the lives of Christian minorities in the north. Second, the government thought it would be a mere flash in the pan that would dissipate with the passage of time. Former President Obasanjo, whose ascent to power was a consequence of the political compromise between the elites of the Christian south and the elites of the Muslim north (which had dominated political power for much of Nigeria's history), was quoted on many occasions as saying that 'political Sharia' would soon 'fizzle out' (Oguine, 2003, p. 5).

Instead of fizzling out, however, the Sharia movement spread to all the predominantly Muslim states in the far north. Legislative assemblies in 12 northern states, out of Nigeria's 36 states, amended their laws to expand the application of Sharia to include criminal matters. Before the formal declaration and codification of Sharia, the Nigerian Constitution allowed, and still allows, only the limited application of Muslim laws on civil matters such as marriage, divorce, inheritance and conflict resolution (Thagirisa, 2003). Muslim personal laws in northern Nigeria are enshrined in what is called the Penal Code, a mishmash of neo-Islamic laws, the native customs of non-Muslim northern Nigerians and British common law.[3] This meant that non-Muslim northern Nigerians found accommodation in the Penal Code because they could choose to be judged by 'customary courts', which are based on the age-old, pre-colonial practices of their forebears, or choose to go to 'high courts', which are modelled after the British judicial system. The declaration of Sharia as the state laws in the 12 northern states represented a repudiation of this time-honoured cultural compromise. Although governors of the

Sharia states insisted that the new punitive laws would not be applied on non-Muslim residents of their states, Christian minorities indigenous to the states in which Sharia laws were declared felt threatened and demanded a reversion to the status quo ante. The fierce opposition to the Sharia laws by non-Muslims, however, only strengthened Muslims' insistence on their right to religious self-determination in the spirit of the emergent democratic era. These maximalist positions led to fratricidal communal upheavals between Muslims and Christians in the states of Kaduna and Plateau in 2000 and 2001 respectively.[4]

The most controversial of the new criminal aspects of the Sharia laws that attracted national and international outrage are the punishments for theft and adultery. While theft is punished with the amputation of the right hand, adultery is punished with death by stoning. In 2000, a man by the name of Buba Jangebe made history as the first person in Nigeria to have his right hand amputated after being found guilty of stealing a cow (Sam, 2002). A year later, another man's hand was amputated for stealing three bicycles. In February 2000, an 18-year-old man was publicly whipped 100 times for fornication. In September of the same year, a 17-year-old woman was sentenced to 100 whiplashes for having sex outside marriage. Unable to produce enough witnesses to substantiate her allegation that she had been coerced into having sex with three men, one of whom had made her pregnant, she was sentenced to an additional 80 lashes for false accusations (Amnesty International Report, 2001).

By far, the most sensational cases were the sentencing of two women, Amina Lawal and Safiya Hussaini, to death by stoning for getting pregnant outside wedlock.[5] The two women were divorcees at the time they were found guilty of extramarital pregnancy. In Islamic jurisprudence, married or previously married women receive different punishments from single women for illicit sexual liaisons. Because Sharia law requires the testimonies of four trustworthy witnesses who have witnessed the commission of adultery, it is often impossible to convict men of adultery or fornication. For women, however, pregnancy outside wedlock is usually taken as a prima facie evidence of adultery or fornication. The Western media, in general, expressed outrage over the death sentences imposed on these women, which only strengthened Nigerian Muslim suspicion of a coordinated Western conspiracy against Islam. The Miss World event became a victim of this pent-up anger against perceived Western design to subvert Islam, as the next section shows.

Miss World and Nigeria's Local Politics

The Miss World event was, in many ways, the victim of local politics. The initial resistance to the event was predicated on the inappropriateness of its timing. The 30 November 2002 date that the event was initially scheduled to be held coincided with the Muslim month of Ramadan. According to the late Dr Lateef Adegbite, who was at the time the General Secretary of the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA), Muslims 'felt that the timing was very wrong in the month of Ramadan. And it was the last 10 days of Ramadan which is the holiest period for the Muslims in any year' (Adegbite, 2002). The organizers of the event, however, quickly resolved this scheduling conflict. The date of the event was shifted to 7 December 2002. But other problems came up. The excessive financial, and even symbolic, investment of Nigeria's in-your-face born-again Christian president at the time, who hoped to use the event to attract tourism and foreign investment, generated a lot of concern among Muslims. The president not only invited the beauty queens to his office and had tea with them, a chaplain also conducted prayer meeting for the beauty queens at the president's office. These facts, especially the Christian prayer with the beauty queens at the president's office, inflamed passions among Muslims. In symbolic terms, it was the starkest affront to Muslim sensibilities.

Muslim anger was exacerbated by news reports that nine national beauty queens,[6] including two from Africa, decided to boycott the pageant to protest the death sentence imposed on Amina Lawal by a Sharia court for adultery in the far northern state of Katsina. The Nigerian government invoked its close economic and diplomatic ties with Spain to pressure the Spanish government to prevail on its candidate to rescind her boycott.[7] Miss France, Sylvie Teller, was quoted in the southern, Christian Nigerian media to have said, 'When a woman faces the most agonizing death, there are more important things in life than winning a crown for being beautiful' (Daniel, 2002). Many Muslims interpreted the action and comments of the beauty queens as gratuitous interference in Nigeria's domestic affair. Others gave a religious interpretation to the intervention of the beauty queens: that they opposed the death sentence on Amina Lawal because they were Christians who not only had disrespect for Islam's moral codes but also sought to ridicule and undermine these codes. What was worse, Amina Lawal, the condemned woman the beauty queens were pleading for, expressed her full support

for the Miss World pageant and pleaded with the beauty queens not to boycott the event on account of her tribulations. This further deepened Muslim contempt and anger for the beauty contest (Obadare, 2004).

It was this simmering, pent-up anger that Isioma Daniel, a fashion writer for *ThisDay*, brought to the fore on Saturday, 16 November 2002. In a light-hearted article titled 'Miss World 2002: The World at Their Feet', Daniel wrote:

> As the idea [of Nigeria hosting the beauty contest] became a reality, it also aroused dissent from many groups of people. The Muslims thought it was immoral to bring ninety-two women to Nigeria and ask them to revel in vanity. What would Mohammed think? In all honesty, he would probably have chosen a wife from one of them. (Daniel, 2002)

She also called attention to the fact that Algeria, a Muslim country, was participating in the beauty pageant and wondered what justification Nigerian Muslims had for opposing the beauty contest. The article, especially the suggestion that the Prophet of Islam would pick one of the beauty queens as a wife, provoked raw rage among Muslims and led to the burning of *ThisDay* office in Kaduna (the erstwhile capital of northern Nigeria) and the killing of scores of people. This was in spite of the fact that *ThisDay*, upon realizing its error, issued a quick apology. Among other things, the newspaper had said:

> We are sorry that the portrayal of the Holy Prophet Mohammed in a commentary written by one of our staff was not only unjustified, but utterly provocative. The supervising editor made an attempt to remove the offensive portion during the editing process. But we must say that this time, technology failed us, and gravely too...Why would we do anything that would seem to denigrate any religion, when we believe in the peaceful co-existence of Nigeria? (Akhaine, 2002)

But the protesters were not impressed. They seized and burned all copies of the newspaper at its Circulation Annex in Kaduna, while the news organization itself was declared an 'enemy of Islam' (Akhaine, 2002). The protesters carried placards with the inscription, 'down with beauty'.

The response of the Muslim clergy was just as frenzied. The Kaduna state chapter of the Council of Imams and Ulama demanded that the federal government cancel the beauty contest forthwith to avoid further

carnage. In a statement signed by its Chairman, Sheikh Abubakar Abdulkareem, the Council said:

Ordinarily, the decision to host a beauty contest in an environment with a considerable Moslem population would insult the religion, moral sensibility of a typical Moslem, and of course, he/she would voice against it. That has been the case since the stage-managed victory of Nigeria's Agbani Darego at the last beauty contest which automatically gave Nigeria the hosting right of [*sic*] the next contest...Let it be unequivocally stated here that Prophet Mohammed forms the chunk of passion [*sic*] of a conscious Muslim that any insult on the Prophet's personality unleashes the rage in the Moslem. That is why a portion of the satanic article in *ThisDay* of November 16, 2002, has dared the guts [*sic*] of the Moslems. (Smith, 2002)

The President of the Supreme Council for Sharia in Nigeria, Dr Ibrahim Datti, argued that the riots were a perfectly legitimate response to *ThisDay*'s declaration of war against Islam in Nigeria. And on 18 November 2002, the Zamfara state government, acting through its then Deputy Governor, Mamuda Aliyu Shinkafi, declared a fatwa that urged Muslims to retaliate the blasphemy against the Prophet of Islam by killing Isioma Daniel. The news release said: 'Like Salman Rushdie, the blood of Isioma Daniel can be shed. It is abiding on all Muslims, wherever they are, to consider the killing of the writer as a religious duty' (Daniel, 2003). The Zamfara state government was later forced to withdraw the death sentence on Daniel after the federal government forcefully intervened. Having provided this context, it is important to briefly examine the broad corpus of research that has been done on the nexus between religion and the mass media, first, on a global scale and later, with particular reference to Nigeria.

Mass Media Research and Religion

Daniel Stout and Judith Buddenbaum (2002) instructively call attention to the paucity of research on the intersection between religion and the mass media in traditional communication research, even though we are increasingly witnessing what some scholars have termed the 'return of the sacred' (Almond & Appleby, 2003; Ebaugh, 2002) or the 'proliferation of the divine' (Mbembe, 1993) in contemporary public life. According to Ebaugh (2002), the resurgence of intellectual interest in religion in

mainstream social science scholarship is attributable to developments in four theoretical areas in the social sciences: globalization, social movements, civic culture and rational choice theory. She points out that:

> Interest in theories of globalization and transnational networks, which gained widespread recognition through the work of such people as Wallerstein (1983), Featherstone (1990), and Basch, Schiller, and Blanc (1994), raised issues regarding the role that religious systems play in both promoting and hampering global processes. (Ebaugh, 2002, p. 389)

However, while the rise of religious fundamentalism in the world, crystallized in the 11 September attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, catapulted religion to the center stage of social science research, it is still languishing on the fringes of mainstream mass communication scholarship. To a large degree, research on the media and religion has thrived more in sociological research than in mass communication scholarship. In sociological research, the convergence between media and religion has been captured, according to Hoover (2002), by three research trajectories. The first is founded on the assumption that the mass media either reproduces or replaces religious consciousness. The second research trajectory approaches the intersection between religion and the media in terms of how religious messages in the media might affect the audience and the public. Finally, the third area of research focuses on the 'effects or implications of religious media for the prospects and prerogatives of religious histories, values, doctrines or institutions' (Hoover, 2002, p. 27).

Increasingly, however, religion is making a steady, if slow, incursion into mass communication scholarship. Stout (2003, p. 69) aptly deployed the metaphor of 'plovering' (neologized from the Pacific Golden Plover, 'a bird that travels back and forth from Alaska to Hawaii spending considerable time in both habitats') to capture the erstwhile ceaseless disciplinary vacillation and ambivalence of mass communication researchers who study the intersections between religion and the media. This state of affairs was informed, he points out, by the reluctance of media scholars to come to terms with the potency of religion because of the positivistic epistemological foundations of mass communication scholarship, which regarded religion as too slippery to capture empirically and as too much of an evanescent remnant of pre-modernity to be the focus of research. That is changing now. Mainstream mass communication scholarship is moving, as

Carey (2002, p. 3) instructively observes, in the direction of 'return[ing] religion to a central place in the study of media and contemporary socie-ties'. This is not at all surprising. As Jenkins (2003, p. 54) notes:

> The twenty-first century will almost certainly be regarded by future historians as a century in which religion replaced ideology as the prime animating and destructive force in human affairs, guiding attitudes to political liberty and obligation, concepts of nationhood and, of course, conflicts and wars.

Nevertheless, in spite of the convergence of media and religion worldwide, studies of religion, media and culture in Africa are rare. Bourgault (1995) and Walsh (1996), for instance, call attention to the paucity of interest in religion in contemporary media studies on Africa. This is especially paradoxical for Nigeria where the first newspaper published was a religious publication by a British Christian evangelist, Henry Townsend (Akinfeleye, 1985) and where, as Nigerian Catholic priest–scholar Mathew Kukah (1996) points out, '[t]he media has helped in fanning and sustaining the embers of [religious] bigotry'. As an *Africa Confidential* (2001, p. 5) editorial notes, 'apparent media bias against Sharia has reinforced Muslim support for it'. Although these claims can be accused of undue media determinism, they provide a basis to interrogate the role of the media in religious expression.

A notable exception is Hackett's (2003) instructive study of the signifi-cance of media representations of religious identities and interests in Nigeria from the end of the 1970s to the late 1980s. This period, espe-cially the early 1980s, witnessed a plethora of violent religious conflicts in the extreme northern states of the country, similar to what has been happening since 1999. The period Hackett studied was characterized by episodic outbursts of upheavals in isolated areas of Nigeria's north. Some of the upheavals were among Muslims who disagreed on doctrinal issues. Others were economic-related crises that quickly took on a religious colouration. The importance of Hackett's study for this article is the way in which she showed how public discourse on religious conflict was ele-vated to a national level by the expanding mass media sector. She also examined how, in some cases, irresponsible and unbalanced mass media coverage of events served to exacerbate tensions at the local, national and international levels. The next section examines how the Miss World reli-gious crisis was framed by the opinion pages of the British press.

British Newspaper Coverage of
Nigerian Miss World Riots

The British media coverage of the riots tended to follow the pre-existing ideological fault lines of British newspapers. While the right-of-center newspapers like *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Time* seized on the riots to call attention to the tension between Islam and Western liberalism, feminist and liberal critics in left-of-center newspapers like *The Guardian* and *The Independent* used the occasion to belittle the idea of beauty contest and link the staging of Miss World contest in the developing world with cultural imperialism. In a strange confluence of viewpoints, British feminists and commentators agreed with Muslim opposition to the hosting of the beauty pageant in Nigeria, and their views found more coverage in *The Guardian* and other liberal British newspapers than they did in the more conservative British newspapers. Broadcaster Joan Bakewell, speaking with *The Guardian*, captured this irony when she said, 'What is interesting is how the feminist argument, the exploitation of the female body, is shared by the Muslim fundamentalists in Nigeria' (Freeman, 2002). In a dramatic characterization, feminist writer Muriel Gray told *The Guardian* newspaper that the Miss World beauty contestants would be wearing 'swimwear dripping with blood' (Freeman, 2002).

A *Guardian* columnist gave expression to this irony. She wrote:

> What an irony that fundamentalist Muslims managed to do what feminism ultimately failed to do: make Miss World a global political issue. As contestants flee to London, and Nigeria counts its dead, it is almost impossible to retain the idea that an annual parade of female flesh is just an innocent quest for universal beauty acceptable to all reasonable people. (Coward, 2002)

She questioned the wisdom in staging a beauty pageant in a place where the punishment for adultery is death by stoning, calling it cultural naivety:

> The Nigeria debacle shows how naive people are about this divide between cultures, especially in a post-September 11 world. A culture where a woman can be stoned to death for adultery clearly contains elements that will not be entranced by a parade of female flesh or the 'modernity' it promises. To hold the contest during Ramadan compounds the insult. (Coward, 2002)

This line of thinking recalls the main point of objection of Muslim leaders in Nigeria: that the beauty contest represented inattentiveness to

Muslim sensitivities, especially in the month of Ramadan when Muslims are required to practice continence. 'Those rioting on the streets of Kaduna,' she added, 'were not members of al-Qaida but they had no hesitation in attacking what they see as western values' (Coward, 2002). This argument about the rioters not being members of Al-Qaeda is significant because it exculpates the rioters of charges of religious extremism. It casts them as innocent victims of Western cultural imperialism who acted to preserve their culture from the incursions of a perverted, misguided alien culture. Although her analysis is couched in an 11 September-inspired 'clash of civilization' paradigm, its left-leaning persuasion makes its conclusions congruent with the mainstream Muslim perspective in Nigeria and even in the Arab world.

Another writer from *The Guardian*, Rod Liddle, also expressed sympathy with the sentiments of the rioters, although he took issues with the senseless murders that accompanied Muslim resentment against the beauty contest:

> For the predominantly Muslim population of northern Nigeria, the whole thing was, clearly, an affront—and for reasons not a million miles removed from those that make most of us think it an affront, too. It would have appeared, to the imams and the fervently faithful, as a quintessential example of everything that is rancid and grotesque about the hated, godless western culture. And although we might draw the line at killing people over it all, it is hard, from a theoretical point of view, to disagree with them about this. (Liddle, 2002)

Here again, the writer defends the rioters against popular characterizations of them as the lunatic fringe of a violent religion. By drawing a link between their repulsion against a 'hated, godless, Western culture' and the time-honoured fulmination of Western liberals against beauty contest, he not only sanitizes the rioters, he also draws them into the mainstream and reverses their 'otherness'. In other words, the rioters were not mindless Islamic fundamentalists; they were clear-headed people who were merely rebelling against a 'rancid and grotesque' debasement of womanhood, which equally inspires the rebellion of people in the West.

Catherine Bennett (2002), even while defending the organizers of the pageant and the contestants against charges of complicity with the deaths and destruction in the wake of the attempt to host the Miss World competition in Nigeria, did not spare either the organizer or the contestants. She called the beauty pageant 'this abject event' which is

nothing more than a debauched 'parade of orange-faced dimwits', and derided the contestants as 'heedless hussies'. She said:

> But perhaps, given Morley's provocative behaviour, no one does think the murderers are to blame. Perhaps staging a parade of orange-faced dimwits is now considered such an inflammatory act that those responsible for any subsequent murders are, like so many lucky rapists in the British courts, absolved of responsibility for their actions. (Bennett, 2002)

By drawing parallels between 'lucky rapists in the British courts' and rioters who murdered scores of people in self-righteous rage over a beauty contest, we again see an effort to reverse, or at least attenuate, their alterity, although in less flattering terms than Liddle's.

In left-leaning *The Independent* newspaper, a self-described 'womanist' argued that while the actions of Nigerian Muslim rioters were condemnable, they were understandable and, in fact, resonate with the sentiments of many British people:

> But if they do have a Miss World contest here, I will be out there condemn-ing it. I am sure I have an old placard somewhere. It is what we once did with some success, which is why the Morleys took it to the developing world where so much more is possible without interfering debates. Witness the activities out there of tobacco giants and importers of prostitutes. I think it is still an obligation to remind people that these parades degrade both men and women who want a society where we are more than the flesh we inhabit and that such parades have deeply unpleasant antecedents, even though many of the contes-tants are powerful and successful women. (Alibhai-brown, 2002, p. 15)

Here, apart from normalizing the rioters—a theme shared by all the left-leaning articles—this woman adds another theme: rebellion against exploitation. By likening the Miss World contest with tobacco and prostitution, the writer justifies the action of the rioters as legitimate subversion against a pernicious and rapacious institution. In a leading article, *The Independent* also made the point that 'the contest is plainly offensive to many Muslims—a sentiment that ought to be understood even in the supposedly decadent West. The question is whether, in these circumstances, bigotry ought to be defied' (*The Independent*, 2002).

However, conservative British papers had a radically different take on the Miss World riots. Andrew Sullivan of the conservative *The Time*, for instance, argued that in aligning with Muslim fundamentalists over Miss

World, liberals and feminists imperiled the West's cherished freedoms (Sullivan, 2002). For him, the riots were one more demonstration of the perpetual, irreconcilable clash between Western civilizational ethos and 'radicalized Islam', and that the Nigerian incident was merely a symptom of this. He said,

> Radicalised Islam—on every continent—is stepping up its assault on western freedoms. The Miss World contest and *ThisDay* are just the latest targets. The act of putting on a beauty pageant or writing a column are [*sic*] now subject to the approval of radical religious fanatics. Anybody who displeases these fanatics will not be criticised or campaigned against or smeared or railed at. They will be killed. (Sullivan, 2002)

He pointed out that by singling out Ms Isioma Daniel as the trigger of the riots, the organizer of the pageant was conferring 'a patina of credibility to the disgusting fatwa that is now imposed on her' and that feminist and liberal commentators who inveighed against the Miss World failed to realize that a woman journalist's life was in danger for merely doing her job. He wrote:

> Do any of these female journalists worry in print about a fatwa being pronounced on another woman journalist, who has succeeded in her work despite living in a brutally misogynist culture? Not so far. Her right to write freely seems not as important as sensitivity to other cultures. (Sullivan, 2002)

He thus concluded: 'This is what cultural relativism, politically correct journalism and decadent feminism amount to: a failure to grasp that freedom is under attack' (Sullivan, 2002).

It is significant that while liberal commentators drew parallels between Muslim disgust with the beauty and Western liberal protest against its putative dehumanization of womanhood, this writer gazed at the riots from the prism of a civilizational clash. The rioters were framed as murderous Islamic fanatics who were gripped by a deep-seated hatred for the West and its freedoms. The Miss World was merely a symbol of the West that Muslim fundamentalist wanted to attack, not because of their revulsion against the decadence of the parade of semi-nudity, but because of their inability to appreciate the freedoms of the West. Western defenders of the rioters were portrayed as naïve, ill-meaning and misguided libertines.

Michael Gove, writing in *The Time*, also located the Miss World riots in the context of the spread of radical Islam in northern Nigeria, which put it at odds with Western values (Gove, 2002). Another support for the Miss World came from *The Daily Telegraph*. In an editorial titled 'Nigeria Falls Apart', a play on the novel *Things Fall Apart*, Nigeria's first modern novel by the legendary Chinua Achebe, the paper argued: 'The organisers of Miss World should resist demands by Muslim radicals to cancel it, and President Obasanjo should offer the necessary security cover. The contest is being used by militant Muslims as yet another challenge to secular federal authority' (*The Daily Telegraph*, 2002). By framing the riots as a contest between Islam and 'secular authority', *The Daily Telegraph* also endorses the 'clash-of-civilization' thesis in explaining the riots, more so that the Nigerian president at the time of the riots was a Christian and also because secularism is a uniquely Western historical experience. Interestingly, secularism is a hotly contested term in Nigeria. While Muslims object to its usage to describe the Nigerian state, Christians embrace it. Sanneh (2003, p. 241) observes that southern Christian leaders defend secularism on 'pragmatic grounds of equality under the law, national stability and participation in public life, rather than for theological reasons', while Muslims see it a Christian worldview. Aliyu Dawuda, a scholar and Muslim activist, captured the Muslim view of secularism when he said:

> Any attempt to impose secularism on Nigeria or on any other country having a predominantly Muslim population is nothing short of injustice. This is because it is a Christian dogma, a Christian concept and a Christian worldview, which is parochial in nature, that is being superimposed on them. The principle of secularism, wherever it is practiced, is nothing short of the practicalisation of the Biblical statement which says: 'Give unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's.'…Therefore right from the onset, secularism is not religiously neutral, it is a Christian concept, a Biblical dogma, reflecting the parochial nature of the Christian worldview. The principle and practice of secularism, in other words, is Islamically obnoxious, seriously revolting, and totally unacceptable because it is fundamentally based on what our Creator and Lord, Allah (may he be glorified) considers as the greatest crime which He never forgives once a person dies committing it. (Quoted in Obadare, 2004, p. 184)

In light of this deep-seated resentment against secularism among Nigerian Muslims, it is interesting that *The Daily Telegraph* framed the

riots as a 'challenge to secular federal authority'. That phrase would be interpreted by Nigerian Muslims as 'a challenge to a Christian federal government' and could harden positions and inflame more passions. Curiously, southern Christian newspapers in Nigeria have been vociferous defenders of Nigeria's 'secularity', to the irritation of Nigerian Muslims. These kinds of coincidences—the congruence of viewpoints between a conservative European newspapers and liberal, Christian Nigerian newspapers—help feed the conspiracy theory among Nigerian Muslims that Nigerian Christians are instigated by Westerners to ridicule Islamic beliefs. This feeling deepens Muslim persecution complex, inspires a mentality of helplessness and an urge to commit violence as a last—and sometimes first—resort.

Conclusions

The analysis of the opinion pages of British newspapers showed that two dominant positions defined their attitude to the Miss World riots. The conservative position—represented in the opinions of such papers as *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Times*—is congruent with the 'clash-of-civilizations' perspective popularized by Huntington's essay on the looming collision between the West and the rest (see Huntington, 1993, 1996). It ignored the local dynamics in the explosion of the riots and framed it as a clash between the values of a 'backward' Islam and those of the 'progressive' West. Significantly, the conservative British press' opinions also dovetailed neatly with those of the southern, Christian Nigerian media, which have traditionally been labelled 'liberal' on account of their relatively open-minded editorial temperaments and their conscious mimicry and support of Western journalistic and secularist ethos and points of view. So, what is 'conservative' in Britain is 'liberal' in Nigeria.

On the other hand, the liberal British press—represented by *The Guardian* and *The Independent* —located the Miss World riots in the context of a legitimate resistance against decadent, hegemonic cultural imperialism, underscoring Appadurai's (1996) point about the inadmissibility of the thesis that Western hegemony is total, homogenizing and uncontested by people who have been pushed to the periphery of global domination. But more importantly, these 'liberal', self-critical positions were in consonance with the views of 'conservative' Muslims and their

news media in Nigeria, underlining the fragility and instability of facile ideological labels.

In his analysis of the British media coverage of the 11 September attacks, George Kennedy, a journalism professor at Missouri University, noticed a similar pattern that I noticed in British newspaper coverage of the Miss World religious conflict in Nigeria. After a short-lived unanimity of opinion in expressing horror and outrage over the attacks, the ideological rupture between the liberal press and the conservative press emerged. The liberal press, according to Kennedy (2002, p. 48), took a more critical stance on the war on terror, forcing Prime Minister Tony Blair's Director of Communications, Alastair Campbell, to bewail the '"corrosive negativism" in British liberal media'. Nevertheless, this observation is complicated by the fact that several studies have shown that both the liberal and the conservative press in Britain tend to portray the British Muslim communities in a negative light.[8] In other words, where the domestic manifestation of Islam is concerned, the ideological differences of the British press become indistinguishable; they manifest, it would seem, when the reference is to a far-flung country in the Third World.

What implication does this have for the way we theorize the media? They are many and varied. First, this study points to the rich diversity of viewpoints that can potentially coexist side by side in any given media system thereby complexifying time-honoured notions of monolithic national press traditions. Second, in theorizing media imperialism, it is customary to focus exclusive attention to the disproportionate flow of informational goods from the First World to the developing world, as if the flow were uniform. However, an examination of the opinions of the British press showed a vigorous miscellany of standpoints such that a northern Nigerian Muslim (who is traditionally marginalized in Nigeria's mainline media formation) would find comfort in the opinions and editorial dispositions of the left-leaning British press, while a southern Nigerian Christian would find comfort in the conservative British press. In other words, the differential ideological impulses of a Western media formation can attenuate the disproportionate flow of information from the West to the rest, especially on matters of religion and ideology.

Third, the study exposes the theoretical and empirical inadequacy of gazing at local religious conflicts from the perspectives of international religious contexts. While the British press was not uniform in its coverage of the Miss World riots in Nigeria, it missed an important element in its editorializing of the riots: the local component. Although international

Islam has traditionally had a conflictual relationship with the West, a fact that has created a tensile, civilizational stress between them, the Nigerian Miss World riots were actuated by local dynamics, particularly the exclusion of northern Nigerian Muslim elites from the orbit of the domestic power structure since 1999. These considerations call for a reconsideration of the ways we theorize and cover local religious conflicts in the developing world.

Notes

1. The use of the word 're-introduction' is a powerful rhetorical strategy. It was intended to show that northern Nigerian Muslims were merely reclaiming a time-honoured heritage that British colonizers had robbed them of. Until 1906 when the British conquered the Muslim caliphate in northern Nigeria, the region had been ruled by Sharia laws. Upon conquering the region, the British imposed their legal codes and inaugurated what they called the 'repugnancy test' system, which permitted the conquered people to punish civil law violations only as long as the punishments did not conflict with British notions of civility. This move was a vital step in consolidating imperial authority. For details, see Anyanwu (2006).
2. Sharia literally means 'the right path' in Arabic. In this article, I will interchange Sharia with 'Islamic law' because both terms are often used synonymously among Muslims. It is derived from the Qur'an (the Muslim holy book), Hadith (the recorded sayings and deeds of Prophet Muhammad) and the codified consensus of Muslim jurists over the years.
3. For a popular account of the history and evolution of the Penal Code and how it differs from Sharia law, see Kperogi (1999).
4. For an overview of the tension between Muslims and Christians in northern Nigeria over Sharia, see Harnischfeger (2004).
5. For an excellent account of the trials of these women and the international attention they attracted, see Diala (2004). Both women were later acquitted and discharged by an appeal court because the punishment the Sharia courts prescribed against them was in conflict with Nigerian federal laws.
6. Miss Denmark, Miss Kenya, Miss Costa Rica, Miss South Africa, Miss Switzerland, Miss Austria, Miss France, Miss Belgium and Miss Spain.
7. The then Nigerian Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Chief Dubem Onyia, summoned the Spanish Ambassador to Nigeria, Mr Alfonso Portabales Vazquez, to his office in Abuja to assure him that the Constitution of Nigeria would not allow the stoning of any Nigerian (*ThisDay* [Lagos, Nigeria], 7 November 2002).
8. For an example of a recent study of British media bias against British-born Muslims, see Richardson (2001). Richardson found that 'British Muslims

are predominantly excluded from British broadsheet coverage; when they are included, it is in predominantly negative contexts' (Richardson, 2001, p. 239).

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