

OFFENSIVE PUBLICATIONS ON RELIGION, REACTIONS AND  
OUTCOMES: A CASE FOR STRUCTURAL-FUNCTIONAL  
REPOSITIONING OF THE SYSTEM OF GATEKEEPING IN THE  
NIGERIAN PRINT MEDIA

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1.0 ABSTRACT

144 years after journalism started in Nigeria, the profession is yet to mature, going the quality of some published stories causing ripples or engendering violence in the country.

Statutorily, traditionally and ethically, mass media are regarded globally as entertaining, educative, informative and enlightening organizations. However, occasionally in Nigeria, the operations of the mass media have been a source of worry due to publication of offensive religious stories; the most recent being that of *ThisDay* newspaper of last year, which sparked off violent protests in parts of Nigeria.

This paper, therefore, has the objective of advocating a restructuring and redefining the process of gatekeeping in the Nigerian print media to stem the tide. It is written through content analysis.

CONFERENCE PAPER

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# OFFENSIVE PUBLICATIONS ON RELIGIOIN, REACTIONS AND OUTCOMES: A CASE FOR STRUCTURAL – FUNCTIONAL REPOSITIONING OF THE SYSTEM OF GATE KEEPING IN THE NIGERIAN PRINT MEDIA

## CONFERENCE PAPER

### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades, thousands of innocent souls in Nigeria had been sent to their early graves due to wide spread religious disturbances, especially in Kaduna (1987, 1998, & 2000); Kafanchan (1987), Katsina (1991), Kano (1980, 1982, 1984, 1991 & 2000), Yola (1984, & 1987), Bauchi (1999 & 2000) among others. Many of these crises have been traced to intolerance and provocative utterances of Nigerian religious leaders (see Anyanwu 2002: 72 – 73).

While concerted efforts are being made by the Obasanjo led administration to woo foreign investors to Nigeria, the fact remains that the more of conflicts, be it religious or political the nation experiences, the more foreign investors are scared away because nobody would like to invest in an unsafe environment.

To stem the tide of social conflicts and through that ensures peace and development, structural-functional repositioning of the system of gate keeping in the Nigerian print media is one of the best options. This, invariably, is the objective of this paper.

### 1.2 STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

In spite of the over a century history of the existence of print journalism in Nigeria, the profession is yet to mature. Day by day, and from one

episode to another, the Nigerian print media have continued to publish offensive and embarrassing stories. It is therefore a big puzzle why in spite of the statutory laws regulating the profession of journalism in Nigeria, in addition to ethics of the profession, why the Nigerian print media should be operating as if in a fool's paradise. The various stories published by the Nigerian print media which had either engendered violence or currently causing ripples are reference points. The pertinent question then is: why is this so? What could be done to arrest the ugly trend? This is the mission of this paper.

### 1.3 **LIMITATION**

This study is limited to Content Analysis method of conducting research in the Social Sciences. The choice of the methodology is however deliberate as it offers the best approach to carry out the study.

### 1.4 **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

- i. **OFFENSIVE PUBLICATION:** In the context of the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of current English (fifty edition), 'offensive' could be defined as statement(s), utterance(s), or remarks which could make somebody feel upset, insulted or annoyed. "Publication" on the other hand according to Osibajo & Fogam (1991: 172) can be defined as "communication of statement" adding that "this does not necessarily carry the implication of publicity i.e. making the statement public. A private and confidential communication to a single individual is sufficient". Implicit from the two definitions is the fact that offensive publication could be



described as a conscious behavioural or attitudinal act whose goal could either be commercial or deliberate act to rock the boat in a political community. All the processes leading to the publication of newspapers and magazines i.e. news gathering, news writing, editing, deciding what page a story and photograph will feature, including the headline are all deliberate professional acts. In some of the publications whose contents were analyzed in this paper, it can easily be deduced that the motive behind their publications could be seen within the context of the statutory role of the media, especially that of educating, informing and enlightening their audience. Of course, behind these roles, the commercial angle can equally not be ruled out. However, the point is also succinctly made that for selfish reasons, an offensive religious publication can equally be authorized by a particular religious sect. A case in point is Nasfat publication of January 1<sup>st</sup> 2003, details of which are available in another section of this paper. It is also instructive to note that most offensive publications are defamatory in nature. In other words, they are targeted at injuring individual's reputation.

- II. **RELIGION:** One concept which has variously been defined by scholars in various publications is that of religion. The myriad of existing definitions of the concept is a testimony. Anyanwu (2002:71) defines it in terms of "beliefs, creed, tenets, and dogma, backed up by faith and explained from supernatural point of view". Durkheim (1965: 47) on his part says "it is a united system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is, to say things set apart and forbidden beliefs and practices which unite into



one simple moral community called a church and all others adhere to them".

In a way, religion could be seen as a way through which human beings regularly interact and fellowship with their creator - God. The holy Bible says in the book of Mathew 7:7 that "ask, it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find, knock, and it shall be opened unto you" (KJV). To receive, find and getting the door opened, Christians are expected to be people of faith. Religion is therefore an avenue of spiritual enthronement for human beings.

- iii. **GATEKEEPING:** Leading experts and renowned scholars in the field of Mass Communication had at different times or the other conceptualized the concept of gate keeping. .

Bittner, (1989: 12) defines it as:

***Any person or formally organized group directly involved in relaying or transferring information from one individual to another through the mass media.***

McQuail, (1990: 156) on his part argued that the concept

***Describe the activity of the wire editor in a newspaper engaged in choosing a small number of news items from a large inflow of agency telegrams.***

Blake & Haroldsen, (1975: 109) while contributing said

***A gate keeping is a person who whether interacting within the formal or the informal channels of communication, can determine if and how a message will be transmitted.***

A deduce-able fact from the above as pointed out by Bittner is the fact that the process of Mass Communication requires additional persons, most often, complex social organizations and institutions, to carry messages from the speaker to the audience. Thus, the gatekeepers according to Blake & Haroldsen are reporters, news editors, wire editors and the like in the mass media.

- iv. **PRINT MEDIA:** Of the various professions of Mass Communication, the print media is the oldest. Pelton (1981: 24) argues that "it was Gutenberg's invention that began much of what is good and much of what is bad of our modern world: modern mass education, mass media, modern scholarship and international scientific research, intellectual and religions ferment. Ekwelie (1985: 6) reveals that Julius Caesar introduced the first newspaper, the *Acta Diurna* a little over 2000 years ago. He further stresses that Nigeria posted her first newspaper, *Iwe Irohin* in 1859. Thus, Akinfeleye (1989: 89) describes print media as newspapers, magazines, news letters among others.

## 2.0 GATEKEEPING: A THEORTICAL ANALYSIS

A number of great communication scholars locally and internationally had written on the genesis of gate keeping in mass media operations. Such efforts could be found in McQuail, (1990: 156 & 162 – 7), Bittner, (1989: 11 – 13), Blake & Haroldsen, (1975: 109 – 110), Folarin, (1998: 88 – 89), Schramm (1960: 170) among others. They all agreed that it was the brainwork of a social scientist, Kurt Lewin.

*The first studies of gate-keeping were restricted in scope to the activity within newsrooms of choosing from among the large number of incoming wire telegrams and pictures from news agencies for the content which makes up or governs the bulk of news in a typical paper. The main purposes of such research have been either to assess the degree of subjective personal and arbitrary judgment involved or to learn about the nature of news values as applied in the news media.*

The gatekeepers, according to Schramm (1960: 170) "are reporters, news editors, wire editors... department heads, division heads, chairmen etc who are at the same time making more decisions and more important decisions concerning the flow of news.

On the imperativeness of gatekeeping, Folarin (1998: 88) says

*No media establishment can transmit all the messages it receives in the course of a day's routine. Some individuals have to decide which information to transmit, which to defer, which to modify and which to delete entirely. Such individuals as it were, open and close the "gate" that stands between the information source and the recipient.*



Quoting the General Manager of Delta State printing and newspaper publishing corporation, Mr. Ekeli, Folarin further says



***Gatekeeping is nothing but voluntary self-censorship performed by the media themselves. Gatekeeping emanates from the understanding by journalists that apart from legal restrictions on what is to be published, including photographs, journalists have a moral right to be socially responsible to their readers in whatever materials they package for them.***

In its intent and purposes therefore, gatekeeping could be perceived as editorial screening of every news item that is meant for dissemination. In the words of Folarin, it therefore "means communicating some themes and suppressing others".

**CONFERENCE PAPER**

..1

## **STRUCTURE OF GATE KEEPING IN THE NIGERIAN PRINT MEDIA**

The task of deciding what story to publish or drop revolves around the following people who constitute the structure of gate keeping in the Nigerian newspaper and magazine industry. In the newspaper, they are: The Reporters, Press Photographer, Deputy Photo Editor, Photo Editor, Assistant News Editor, News Editors, the line editors, Chief Sub-Editors, Deputy Editor and Editor. In the magazine, the structure is slightly different. It consists of the Reporter-Researchers, Photo journalists, Assistant Photo Editor, Deputy Photo Editor, Photo Editor, Staff Writer,

Assistant Editors, Associate Editors, Editor, Deputy Editor-in-Chief, and Editor-in-Chief. Their functions include that of deciding what story, picture or event to cover, what should be included while anchoring the story, what story should be listed on the news schedule, what page a story or picture should appear, including the prominence to be given to each story.

Newsgathering by mass media organisation is a complex process in any society. To have an overview of news worthy events on a daily basis requires deployment of reporters to various beats where news is gathered. Having gathered the stories from the beats, it is mandatory for reporters to file in their stories after it has been anchored on a daily basis. Submission of stories must also be done within the stipulated deadline. If the reporters are those in the out stations, they send their stories either through electronic mail or fax. All the stories are then put together by the news editor in a schedule from which those publishable are selected.

Those whose responsibility is to decide which story to publish and which one to drop are the gatekeepers. In many of the Nigerian newspapers, the News Editor wield enormous power in deciding the fate of almost 2/3<sup>rd</sup> of the stories to be published. At times, he delegates some of the powers to his deputy or assistant(s) and the line editors. Thus, in such a situation, the News Editor might not be privy to certain stories until they are published.

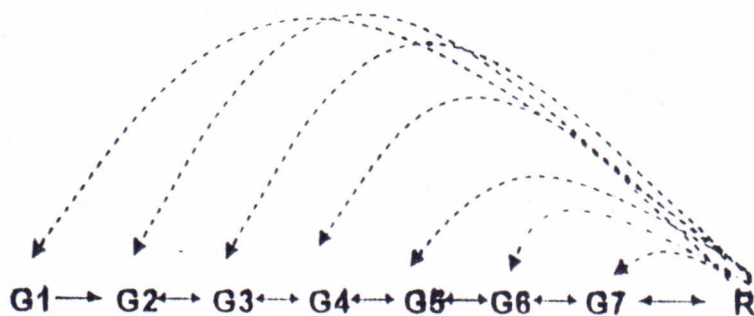
The photo editor in similar fashion also decides which photograph to be published. This is the danger in our mass media operations. The way the Nigerian print media is structured, for example, is that reporters are allocated to beats i.e. political, business, sports, aviation, maritime etc. Each of the beats/desks is headed by a senior journalist. The reporters by routine report to him on a daily basis. The head of the desk has the discretion to determine where reporters stories will be published i.e. He decides whether it is a page one material, news page material or material for the desk's pages. It is only in exceptional cases that the head of the desks have deputy or assistants. The daily editorial conference where the merits or demerits of stories are discussed is therefore usually restricted to that of the cover and back page stories. That is provided that the back page is open to news materials. Some of our newspapers: **Thisday**, **Punch**, **Tribune**, **New Age**, **The Sun** among others reserved their back pages for either opinionated write-ups or special features. In that case, it means only page one stories will be discussed at the conference. The belief is that these are the major stories of the day, based on their sense of news judgment, and that they must be properly scrutinized before publication to avoid litigation or publishing story which could cause problems in the society.

However, most of the stories causing problems in the society today are inside page materials. For example, the **Thisday** news story of November



16, 2002 which sparked off violent demonstrations against the final of year 2002 Miss World beauty pageant was an inside page stuff. Although it was given a promo on the cover, it was published on pages 50, 52 – 59. Considering the fact that other offensive religious stories treated in this paper were cover materials of Nigerian news magazines, the point should be made that the only way of avoiding regular publication of such stories is to restructure and reposition the system of gate keeping to include other personnel such as the legal adviser while refresher courses should be organized for other senior journalists to update their knowledge.

### **SCHEMATIC REPRESENTATION OF THE GATEKEEPING CHAIN IN THE NIGERIAN PRINT MEDIA**



#### **KEYS:**

—————▶ Message flow

-----▶ Feed back

**Adapted from John R. Blittner:** *Mass Communication, An Introduction* (5<sup>th</sup> edition) pg. 246.<sup>23</sup>

The preceding structural-functional analysis of the system of gate-keeping in the Nigerian print media can further be illustrated through the above schematic representation.

The reporter or reporter-researcher or staff writer or press photographer who originate a story or photograph is denoted by letter G<sub>1</sub>, other gate keepers whose input are necessary before the story or photograph is given the final nod for publication are the Assistant News Editor or Assistant Editor or Deputy Editor denoted by letter G<sub>2</sub>, the News Editor or Photo Editor G<sub>3</sub>, The Chief Sub-Editor/Re-write men G<sub>4</sub>, The Deputy Editor or Associate Editor G<sub>5</sub>, Editor G<sub>6</sub>, and Editor-in-Chief G<sub>7</sub>.

It is therefore a big puzzle that in spite of the above extremely tight gate keeping chain in the Nigerian print media, why and how the various damaging, defamatory, libelous, and offensive religious stories secured approval for publication:

## 2.2 THE IMPERATIVENESS OF THE REPOSITIONING OF THE SYSTEM OF GATE KEEPING IN THE NIGERIAN PRINT MEDIA.

*You are the mechanism of reward and punishment, the arbiter of right and wrong, the roving eye of daily judgment. You are capricious and unpredictable. You are fearsome and you are feared because there is never any way to know whether this time, you will be fair and accurate or whether you will not. (Luedike, 1984: 190).*

The above were the words of an ex newsman, Kurt Luedike, in his indictment of the press after he had taken a cursory look at the role of mass media. There is perhaps no other better way of opening this critical segment of this paper other than commencing it with Luedike's quotation. The Nigerian media, especially the print unit is no doubt a mechanism for reward and sanction. They could praise sing you to any level when you are in their good book. Just as they could run you down when the reverse is the case. Trials are regularly conducted on the pages of newspapers and magazines under the guise of 'peoples court' while verdicts are passed based on their judgment. As it is, I have my worry and at times I feel ashamed of being a journalist whenever my colleagues close their eyes against legal and ethical factors while deciding stories meant for publication.

Writing on what it means to be a professional, Kessler & McDonald (1985: 302) say:

***Professionals know what they're doing. They carry out their business with assured competence. They have high personal standards of excellence for their own performance. They respect others without kowtowing to them.***

However, going by the under listed cases of media reports on offensive publications on religion, it is doubtful to assert that there is anything like professionalism in the Nigerian print media. They trample on other people's right with impunity. They invade their privacy and often times insensitive to their feelings. The following case studies illustrate further.



## CASE STUDY NO 1

### REV. OKOTIE VS THE PRESS

... the clash between public's right to know and privacy.

Quite a lot of the Nigerian soft sell magazines made fortunes from the 18 years marriage of Rev. Chris Okotie, founding Pastor and General Overseer of Household of God Church, whose marriage with his ex-wife, Teena, was unfruitful.

For instance, in its cover story entitled "Life After Divorce, Can Rev. Okotie Marry Again?" the ***Family Encounter Magazine*** in its Vol. 1 No. 14 edition of June 2003 went to town with an offensive story in which it portrayed the month of March as evil month for Okotie saying he and his former wife:

***Were joined as husband and wife on March 27, 1984. Teena packed out of their home on 1<sup>st</sup> March 1999 and filed for divorce 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2003***  
(Family Encounter: Magazine VOL. 1 No. 14, June 2003 p. 16)

The magazine further tried and convicted Okotie on the pages of the magazine saying "having divorced, Okotie as a pastor could not marry again except he reconcile with Teena". Whereas, Akinfeleye (2003:44) says "the press is and cannot be a court of law. Adjudication is not part of the constitutional role of the press". The magazine anchored its position on scriptural quotation from the book of I Corinthians 7: 15 which says that:

***If the one who is not a believer wishes to leave the Christian partner, let it be so. In such cases, the Christian partner, whether husband or wife, is free to act. (Good News Bible)***

According to the magazine, "Teena is a Christian and not somebody one would term an unbeliever. Therefore, Okotie should either reconcile with Teena or remain single for life". Thus, the packaging of the story is not only offensive but misleading. The magazine erred in that it failed to realize that being a Christian is one thing and being a believer is another thing. Through the conduct of Teena, she had portrayed herself through her attitude as an unbeliever. A believer must always believe God for solution to all problems. The bible says "with God all things are possible" (Mark 9: 23). The bible further says in Exodus 23: 26 that none of our women shall be barren. What all Christians need is to hold on to the assuring word of God, believing that He would do it. In Gen. 17: 17, the bible says Abraham was 100 years old while his wife was 90 when God confirmed to the couple to bless them with a child. Thus, Teena's conduct was reminiscent of that of an unbeliever and therefore if Okotie chooses to remarry, he is free to do so.

What is further intriguing about the ***Family Encounters Magazine*** publication is that throughout the four-page cover story, there was no sentence suggesting that the medium sought for the view of the cleric. The magazine was rather quoting flimsy and imaginary family sources under

the guise of publishing stories which are of public interest. Whereas attributing the story to Okotie, Teena as well as parents and relations of Rev. Okotie would have made the story very credible.

Kicking against publication of such offensive story, Luedike (1984: 190) says:

***There is no such thing as public's right to know. you made that up, taking care not to specify what it was that the public had a right to know. The public knows whatever you choose to tell it, no more, no less. If the public did have a right to know, it would then have something to say about what it is you choose to call news.***

A lot of Nigerian soft sell magazines derive pleasure in publishing stories which violate the privacy of individuals under the guise of public's right to know. Section 34 of the Nigerian 1979 second republic constitution states that the "privacy of citizens, their homes, correspondence, telephone conversations and telegraphic communications is hereby guaranteed and protected".

## CONFERENCE PAPER

The provision was retained in section 36 of the 1989 aborted third republic constitution. Thus, statutorily, matters of Okotie's marriage falls under the context of 'homes' constitutionally protected under the constitution which ought not to be unnecessarily exposed apart from reporting it as news when notice of divorce was filed as well as the final court verdict on the matter.



Berating publication of such humiliating stories, Osibajo & Fogam (1991:

9) quoting Justice Parker asked:

***Doesn't a man have the right to pass through this world, if he will without having his picture published; his business enterprises discussed or his eccentricities commented upon whether in hand bills, periodical newspapers or other media?***

To checkmate further publication of such embarrassing, humiliating and offensive stories under the guise as 'human interest', and public's right to know, only a repackaging and re-focusing of the structure and functions of gate keeping, coupled with rigorous orientation, training and re-training of media men could help stem the tide.

Therefore, according them "any words spoken or written that generate adverse, derogatory or unpleasant feeling against a person does injury to his reputation for which he is entitled to seek redress". Apart from violating the laws of the land, the medium is also ethically wrong to write about individuals without hearing their own side of the story. This is against the ethics of the profession.

## REV OKOTIE'S SEX TALE AND THE PRESS: The Legal and Ethical Dimension.

One other area where the embattled senior Pastor of Household of God Church, Rev. Chris Okotie who was the presidential candidate of the Justice Party at the 2003 General Elections in Nigeria has received a lot of media bashing concerned the issue of his alleged romance with some society ladies.

The *City People* weekly magazine published an interview with one of them, Roli Adeniyi, where she alleged that Rev. Okotie enjoyed a sizzling romance with her alongside *Vlen* Tetsola, a former Miss Nigeria, Udy Umondak among others.

Few weeks after the publication of the story, Roli denied ever granting any interview on sexual relationship with Okotie. That was after the cleric had petitioned the Lagos State Commissioner of Police, Mr. Young Arabamen, complaining about the offensive publication and urging the law enforcement agents to act according to the law.

However, such embarrassment would have been avoided if the medium had exercised caution and sought for the view of the cleric so as to balance the story before publication. Whereas, ethically, if 20 people are involved in a story, all of them must be contacted by the medium before

going to press. As it is, what the magazine did was a direct violation of the laws of the land, especially with regard to publication of false news and defamation. According to section 59 of the Criminal Code Act, cap. 77 Laws of the Federation 1990.

***Any person who publishes or reproduces any statement, rumour or report which is likely to cause alarm to the public or to disturb the public peace, knowing or having reason to believe that such statement, rumour or report is false shall be guilty of a misdemeanor and liable, on conviction, to imprisonment for three years.***

***It shall be no defence to a charge under the last preceding subsection that he did not know or did not have reason to believe that the statement, rumour or report was false unless he did not know or did not have reason to believe that the statement proves that prior to publication he took reasonable measure to verify the accuracy of such statement, rumour or report.***

It is instructive to note that after Okotie had petitioned the police and urging the law enforcement agents to pick her up for interrogation, the lady denied ever granting the interview. The truth of the matter is that ***The City People Magazine*** rubbished the journalism profession with the way they went about the story. In the story headlined: "Roli Adeniyi opens up on Pastor Okotie" anchored by Charles Nwagbara, the magazine wrote that "most of the talking concerning what transpired between them was done by a third party". This is shameful and appalling. How could a reasonable medium publish such a trash? This is the height of series of



unprofessional conducts by Nigerian newsmen of which urgent solution must be found through training and retraining of media men.

Aside the fact that several issues of *The City People* magazine are actionable per se on the account that they were false, the stories also unleashed irreparable damage to the reputation of the cleric. Thus, the cleric could also sue them for defamation. Quoting Judge Sandborn in *Times publishing Co. v Carlisk, Osibajo and Fogam* (1991: 157) declared:

*A good name is said to be amongst a man's priceless possessions, it gives him the respect and love of his family, the honour, esteem and confidence of his community. It measures the respect and good will he has earned from his peers.*

### CASE STUDY NO 3

## CONFERENCE PAPER

### THISDAY NEWSPAPER VS NORTHERN NIGERIAN MOSLEMS

The third week of the month of November 2002 will no doubt go down in Nigeria's history as a week of Infamy. The week was one of the most distressing moments in Nigeria's fourth republic when the picture of the nation was globally painted in black. It was a period in which once again, the country was on 'fire' as over 200 Nigerians were sent to their early graves. The violence was allegedly triggered off by what was called an offensive publication in *Thisday* newspaper edition of Saturday,

November 16, 2002. The story which was written on the 2002 edition of Miss World Beauty Competition headlined "The World at their feet..." published on pages 50, 52 - 59 of the newspaper with a cover promo was generally perceived by a cross section of Nigerian Moslems, especially in the northern part of the country to be an insult to the personality of Prophet Mohammed.

The offensive segment of the story anchored by Isioma Daniel is found in the third paragraph of the opening page where in a veiled attempt at defending Nigeria's hosting of the competition, the lady wrote:

***As the idea 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. The irony is that Algeria, an Islamic country, is one of the countries participating in the context.***

A critical dissection of the story reveals ***Thisday*** newspaper as careless. The story further exposed the degree of weakness of the gate keeping system in the medium.

Ideally, at the summit of gate keepers otherwise known as editorial conference, all the stories in the news schedule should be read word for word and line by line. The essence is to elicit comments on the merits and demerits of every story. In the process, certain words, sentence or

paragraphs could be reworded or expunged. There are times when the re-write man would be asked to re-write the story.

If these measures had been taken, one of the gate keepers should have called the attention of his colleagues to certain flaws in the story. Such flaws include the following:

- i. That it is a sensitive story meant for publication at a tensed period, bearing in mind that the Muslim community in the north had earlier protested against the competition when it was initially scheduled for September 30, 2002.
- ii. That opponent of the competition holding in Nigeria were angry that the world community kicked against the death sentence passed on Amina Lawal by a Sharia Court over adultery and as such would like to vent their anger over any individuals or group who may wish to challenges them or call them to order including media organisations.
- iii. That the story as it is, gives the impression that northern Muslims' opposition to the competition was wrong.
- iv. That it is very Insultive to write the name of the leader of Islamic religion world-wide, without his title of prophet. Bearing in mind that Nigeria is a country where people are title crazy.



v. Furthermore, the fact that Algeria did not see anything wrong with the contest holding in Nigeria is not an excuse. Algerian Moslems may not necessarily share the same opinion with their Nigerian counterparts.

The position of this paper is that since northerners had voiced out against the competition holding in Nigeria, should have made **Thisday** to be more cautious. They ought to have taken cognizance of what happened to Gideon Akaluka who was beheaded in prison for allegedly castigating Islamic religion.

## CONFERENCE PAPER

**Thisday** gate keepers further failed to recognize the religious culture of the Nigerian northern Moslems. Here is a group of people who never allowed their women to vote until lately. They equally objected to the computerized voters' card and the National Identity Card Scheme as it will force their women to come out of their purdah. Thus, they perceived the 'show' holding in Abuja to be a potential threat to their gains so far from the Sharia legal system. It would be recalled that those countries which boycotted the event holding in Nigeria did so in protest against the dreaded Sharia law under which Amina Lawal was sentenced to death.

Thus, the widespread protest which greeted the story is another strong reason for the repositioning and strengthening of the gate keeping system in the Nigerian print media. The point should however be made that the Northern Muslims overreacted to the story.

## CASE STUDY NO 4

### NASFAT AND POLITICS OF RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE

A cankerworm that has refused to be tamed since Nigeria's Independence in 1960 remains the politics of intolerance. Sheikh Mohammed Gumi once charged Nigerian Moslems to reject Christian presidential candidates. That is in spite of the known fact that Nigeria is a secular state. Many of the cases of religious riots cited in the introductory section of this prayer were as a result of such utterances which promote religious intolerance in Nigeria.

Except urgent steps are taken by the Nigerian law enforcement agencies, the southern part of Nigeria may soon witness her biggest religious uprising. Prof. Yemi Osibajo and Kedigan Fogam, in their book: *Nigerian Media Law* defined a publication as "making a statement public". They stressed that "a private and confidential communication to a single individual, especially defamatory statement is sufficient". It is on this note that a handbill of 8-point programme of action of the NASFAT Youth Forum of Nigeria, dated January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2003 is being treated as one of the special offensive publications in this paper.

The programme of action signed by the General Secretary of the Movement, M. A. Salam harped on the resolve of the body to:

- "Bring back our Muslim brethren who decamped to Christianity in this year 2003".

- To organized "TAJUD" i.e. vigil in order to disorganize all programmes of the Nigerian Christians.
- To organize people who will go from church to church and even buses to disrupt the flow of the message of Christ.
- We are planning to fix programmes of NASFAT to coincide with programmes of MFM and Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) along Lagos – Ibadan expressway, so as to cause disruption of traffic and the subsequent total disruption for their programmed. Quran 5:9 says whoever refuses Islam shall be slaughtered and we stand on it.
- We have trained our people who will mix with food vendors during any organized programme of the two churches mentioned so as to introduce 'WONTUN', a charm into the foods to be sold so as to discourage consumers from such a gathering" among others.

The grouse of the group is that they claimed one of their secretaries attended the popular Mountain of Fire and Miracles (MFM) programme, "Power Must Change Hands" where one of the prayer points at the gathering was directed at all anti-Christ whom they prayed should fall down and die. The group claimed the prayer was directed at them. Publications of this nature pay no one any good. Nobody could say God will be happy when people He created in His image and likeness are brutally killed under the guise of religion.



The earlier Christian and Moslem leaders in Nigeria realize that both religions were imported into Nigeria and consequently desist from acts capable of violence and blood letting, the better for us all as a nation.

## 2.3 REACTIONS AND OUTCOMES

As should be expected all the stories cited in the case studies including the NASFAT handbill were accompanied with lots of reactions some of which were not only controversial but worsens the already bad situation. For example, Evang. Sunny Okosun, a popular Nigerian gospel singer, while reacting to the sex story against Rev. Chris Okotie was quoted by *Encomlum magazine* as saying:

***There's nothing wrong if Pastor Okotie dates. You know he's a handsome boy and he's popular and whatever he's doing women are bound to run after him***

When asked if dating is not against Christian rules, Okosun fired back:

***I do not see anywhere in the Bible where it is written don't date anybody... It is not written there.***

And when reminded that dating is fornication, Okosun thundered:

***Ah, ahl Do you know the meaning of fornication? Fornication is man to man, woman to woman or woman to animals... people don't understand it... God is not mad to have created man and woman. David had five wives and yet, he was the apple of the God's eye. So if David with five women is so loved by God, the I am the orange of God's eye, it is not wrong. You know women moved around with Jesus Christ up to the extent that people at a time came up with***

*stories that Mary Magdalene was Jesus' girlfriend, which is not true... But it's only Jesus himself that can defend that. Sex scandal is no longer scandal* (Encomium magazine, June 24, 2003 page 7)

Okosun's reaction is very disturbing as it's capable of jeopardizing the on-going campaign against HIV/AIDS. Also, it portrays Jesus as a womanizer and that all the sermons against fornication by churches is a ruse. If not that Nigerian Christian attitude to issues is different from their Muslim counterparts, the **Encomium** story would have equally engendered rioting. The medium would have avoided the aftermath criticism if it had sought the view of some prominent Christian leaders such as the president of Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and that of the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN) before publication.

On the issue of whether or not Rev. Okotie should re-marry, the cleric himself berated the press saying: "The truth is that i'm not getting married now to anybody and even if I want to, I think that's my business. All these are mundane talk. What is happening in the country is much more serious than talking about one getting married (City People Magazine, Vol. 13 No. 14, June 11, 2003 pg 13)

## CONFERENCE PAPER

On his alleged sex tales, Rev. Okotie threatened legal action against **Encomium** and **City people** magazines. Apart from accusing them of publishing what he called false stories, Rev. Okotie also enjoined well-meaning Nigerians to disregard their stories.

On the NASRAT attack on MFM and Redeemed, the leadership of the two churches had warned their members, urging them to be at alert, while also avoiding eating in Muslims canteens located within the vicinity of the premises of the two churches.

Of the four case studies, the one whose reaction was very frightening was that of *Thisday* story which sparked off violent protests in some states in the north. At the last count, newspaper reports put casualties at 200 lives. The implication is that such violent reactions could discourage foreign investors in investing in Nigeria while also jeopardizing the chances of Nigeria hosting big international events in future including the current Nigeria's bidding for the hosting right of the 2010 World Cup.

The outcome of all the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> case studies portrays journalism in Nigeria as lacking professional touch while also driving home the urgent need for the strengthening of the system of gate keeping in order to arrest the ugly trend.

## CONFERENCE PAPER

### 2.4 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper has thoroughly dissected the current system of gate keeping in the Nigerian print media. It noted that all the offensive publications which engendered conflicts and violent protests in the society are pointers to terrible weaknesses in the current system of gate keeping. It consequently arrived at the following recommendations to remedy the situation.



- i. That considering the fact that three of the cases treated in this paper were cover stories reveals the degree of problem associated with the current system of gate keeping. As such, this calls for measures to strengthen the system of gate keeping via expansion of the scope to cover all stories meant for publication irrespective of beats. In other words, the editorial conference should be extended to cover all stories meant for publication and they must be read line by line, word for word.
- ii. Having extended editorial conference to all stories meant for publication, the Sub-Editors whose responsibility is to plan the pages must be made to sign the layout sheet so as to avoid smuggling of stories which have not gone through the gate keeping process for publication.
- iii. The offensive stories have also made it compelling to expand the membership of the daily editorial conference where merits of stories are discussed. Specifically, it is suggested that lawyers be included for legal guidance. Two of the case studies treated in this paper revealed publication of defamatory stories. The inclusion of lawyers therefore is one of the surest ways to reduce publications of stories which could attract litigation.
- iv. Refresher courses and seminars be regularly organized for newsmen to improve their professional skill as well as up date their knowledge.

- v. The Nigerian media council should also be alive to her responsibilities by rebuking media organizations whose stories are adjudged to be below standard. Ditto the Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ).
- vi. To avoid the publication of offensive handbills such as that of NASFAT, it is hereby suggested that Christians and Muslims organisations should set up an advisory media committee made up of tested professionals.

CONFERENCE PAPER

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