

## Islam in the Nigerian Media Discourse: A Linguistic Analysis

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### Abstract

The power of language in setting and framing perceptions cannot be overstated. Scholars and experts have highlighted how the use or misuse of language could be either constructive or destructive, depending on the approach and intent of the communicator and how he/she uses the dynamics of language. Islamic terminologies such as *Jihad*, *Islamization*, and *Almajiri* have often been misrepresented within the Nigerian media discourse. This study examined some of these terminologies and labels; linguistically analyzed some of their root causes in the Nigerian media discourse by focusing on the salient linguistic features. Through lexical and morphological analyses, the study uncovered and found nuanced variations of those terminologies that might be difficult to perceive and often overlooked. Specifically, the analysis encompassed etymological discussion, literal and contextual meanings, various usages in the media, the actual meaning within Islamic literature and practices, perception of these terms among the public and the implications of their usages on the Nigerian Muslims. Imperatively, standardizations and recommendations for using these terminologies were provided respectively.

**Key Words:** Islam, Media, Language, Terminologies, Misrepresentation, Critical Analysis, Standardization.

### Introduction

There is extensive research on the portrayal of Islam and Muslims by the media, particularly the Western media. Many researchers explored arguments and counter-arguments on how this portrayal tends to be either positive or negative. A great deal of academic research has revealed how Islam is negatively framed by the mainstream media in Nigeria. It is an undeniable fact that the projected role of the media is to report news, validate facts and share the positions of all concerned by adhering to high ethical standards of truth, fairness and objectivity. However, the

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Nigerian media, comprising both print and broadcast forms, has been sharply polarized along religious, ethnic and geographical lines (Musa, 1). The traditional print media have been in sharp decline in recent years but there are still around several publications in Southern Nigeria whose population is overwhelmingly Christian. They include dailies, tabloids and publications which champion southern ethnic, religious and regional interests.

Okwilagwe and Gwandu pointed out that Nigeria's media originated with strong Christian influences and was heavily shaped by missionary journalism, and this played a dominant role during the early days of newspaper publishing in the country (Okwilagwe 3; Gwandu 3). This asserts that the initial foundations of the Nigerian press were closely tied to Christian missions. Consequently, it paved a way for the proselytizing journalism that deeply influenced the tone and direction of the country's media landscape from its inception to this day.

The attendant effect of Nigeria's media polarization is proliferation of stereotypes, misconceptions and labels directed towards Islam and Muslims. Today, these labels, such as *Islamist*, *Al-majiri*, *Jihad*, *Hisba*, *Sharia*, *Hijab* and *Salafi*, etc., ideologically used to frame Islam, and to assign them negative connotations in the Nigerian Media discourse (Ette and Joe 9).

This study will explore some of these terminologies and labels, conducting a linguistic analysis to identify some of their root causes within the Nigerian media discourse. It will focus on the salient linguistic features and employ lexical and morphological analyses to uncover nuanced variations that are often subtle and overlooked. Specifically, the analysis will encompass etymological discussions, literal and contextual meanings, various usages in the media, the actual meanings within Islamic literature and practices, public perceptions of these terms, and the implications of their usage for Nigerian Muslims.

## **Religion, Language and Media**

To fully understand a religion, it is essential to master the language in which it was revealed. Islam has the Glorious Quran that was revealed in Arabic. Therefore, mastering Arabic is a prerequisite for understanding Islam. Religions often have a strong connection with written languages because writing is a powerful way of preserving and sharing sacred knowledge of scriptures. In the past, literacy was limited to a group of people, often including priests who played an important role in passing on religious knowledge (Dazdarevic 4).

At the heart of all major religions is a collection of sacred writings that believers deeply respect. Literacy has often spread within communities through religious teachings, including the translation and publication of holy texts. For example, as Christianity expanded, Latin translations of the Bible were used in the Western part of the former Roman Empire, and was brought to England where it became the language of the Church and education. Having knowledge of Latin was required in traditional Roman Catholic practice; a restricted Latin vocabulary was once prerequisite for doctors in the writing out of prescriptions; this introduced many Latin words into English, enriching its vocabulary (Dazdarevic 4).

Similarly, Arabic holds a special place as the language of worship in all Muslim-majority countries. Devout Muslims and religious leaders are expected to learn and recite the Qur'an in its original Arabic. Regardless of their native languages, all Muslims are required to use Arabic in their prayers, making it a unifying language for Muslims around the world. Arabic is endowed with extensive vocabulary where many terms/names are ascribed to a single entity. For instance, a classical linguist, Ahmad Bin Bundar, noted that he compiled 500 Arabic names for "lion", and 200 names for "snake" (Ibn Faris in *Assahibiy*, p.44, edited by M. A. Baydoun, 1997). Although these terms refer to the same entity, they carry subtle differences in meaning and associated qualities based on different contexts they are used.

Another contributing factor to Arabic's lexical richness is its derivative nature, where new words or meanings can be generated through affixation. Therefore, a deeper understanding of any Arabic or Islamic term requires a grasp of its morphological and semantic complexities. This study will delve into these dimensions to clarify the subtle meanings of various Islamic terms and labels that are frequently used in the Nigerian media.

Responsible journalism ought to possess professionalism and foundational knowledge across a range of disciplines. Even a minimal understanding of various fields is essential to accurately and effectively report complex topics. For example, covering space exploration requires a degree of familiarity with astronomical science; reporting on warfare demands an understanding of weaponry, the geographic landscape of conflict zones, and the social and historical context of the parties involved. Similarly, reporting on religious events or issues necessitates knowledge of jargons and concepts within the religion concerned. Such interdisciplinary knowledge is critical for journalists to convey nuanced, informed perspectives in their reporting.

Distortions, misconceptions and stereotypes often arise due to linguistic inaccuracies and misnomers committed in translating concepts and terms from Arabic to English by media practitioners. Even Arab Muslims need to study and master the linguistic features of the original standard Arabic of the Quran, as they use vernacular Arabic for everyday communication.

### **Research Methodology**

The researcher employed a qualitative approach to analyze the representation of Islam through its terminologies in the Nigerian media discourse. The methodology combines content analysis and critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine the patterns, language, and narratives surrounding Islamic terminologies in various Nigerian newspapers and media platforms. The study adopted an analysis of article headlines and leads of selected Nigerian newspapers. In most cases, readers' attention is drawn by a choice to read a particular paper. The choice of analyzing

headlines and lead is made on the basis of their power in summarizing news stories and using terminologies to denote specific meanings in order to hook-wind readers and draw their attention (Miladi 120).

### 1. Content Analysis

Content analysis was used to identify recurring themes, keywords, and patterns in media coverage of Islam. The study sampled articles, editorials, and opinion pieces from prominent Nigerian newspapers, including *The Guardian*, *The Punch*, *Daily Trust*, *The Sun*, *Leadership*, *Thisday*, *Vanguard*, and *Independent*. The focus was on headlines, subheadings, and body texts that mentioned terms such as "Islam," "Shari'a," "Jihad," "Almajiri," and related concepts.

- **Sampling Method:** Articles from 2015 to 2024 were purposively selected to ensure coverage of both contemporary and historical trends. This timeframe included major national and international events with Islamic relevance, such as jurisdiction, security challenges, and popular culture.
- **Selection Criteria:** Articles that explicitly mentioned Islamic terminologies in their discourse or framed narratives around Islamic practices, culture, or groups were included.

### 2. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

CDA was applied to understand the underlying ideologies, biases, and sociopolitical influences shaping the media discourse. It focused on how Islam is portrayed, including the use of language, tone, and framing.

### 3. Data Collection

Data was collected through online archives of Nigerian newspapers, leveraging keyword searches to compile a database of articles. Media monitoring platforms and digital libraries were also utilized to supplement data collection. Additionally, scholarly articles and secondary sources were consulted to provide a theoretical foundation for the study.

#### **4. Ethical Considerations**

The research maintained ethical rigor by ensuring that all sources were appropriately cited, and no content was misrepresented. The study refrained from reinforcing stereotypes or misinterpreting data to align with preconceived notions.

By combining content analysis with critical discourse analysis, the study aimed to provide a nuanced understanding of the representation of Islam in the Nigerian media discourses.

#### **Analyses and Discussions of Key Terminologies**

The following section presents findings from an analysis of newspaper headlines and leads using discourse analysis methods. A particular discourse weaves together words, symbols, and signs to create a specific perspective and convey a deliberate form of representation. Consequently, distorted language shapes how people think, categorize, and interpret certain ideas and terminologies in society (Miladi 122-123).

To examine the influence of language in reinforcing values and connotations, this section deconstructs the evolving meanings of terminologies that have come to symbolize Islam or Islamic culture. It compares their original definitions as outlined in classical Islamic literature by Arabic scholars with their evolving connotations in modern media usage.

The findings are drawn from the content analysis of random Nigerian online newspapers and are organized according to the sequence of keywords mentioned above. This approach aims to highlight how these terms have been framed and the implications of such framing in shaping public perceptions of Islam and Muslims.

#### **Islam/Islamist/Islamism/Islamization**

These terms are often misrepresented with attached spurious connotations against their original meanings, they symbolize negative qualities that are alien to Islam. Usually, the Nigeria media associates some minority groups that describe

themselves as Islamists with these terms and labels. Consequently, violent groups, such as Boko Haram, ISWAP, etc. are labelled as Islamists (Ette and Joe 8).

Islam- as well as its derivatives: Islamist, Islamization- is a term that has been used in academia with accurate meaning, and then adopted in media discourse, but sometimes adapted to mean extremism or terrorism. According to Cox and Marks, the terms 'Islamism' and 'Islamist' are widely used terms that refer to "radical, militantly ideological versions of Islam" (Cox and Marks 8)

In a study titled "The Representation of Islamism in the UK Press", Gavin Brookes, Tony McEnery and Isobelle Clarke adopt a corpus linguistic methodology in their examination of British newspaper coverage of Islam between 1998 and 2019. They look at the representation of Islamism, and its associated words, like Islamists and political Islam applying the corpus linguistic technique of collocation analysis, investigating how language is used in British national newspapers to represent these terms. They question why the news coverage of these terms mainly relates them to violence and totalitarianism and why Islamic values are portrayed to be incompatible with mainstream British values.

### **Linguistic Analysis of the Term "Islam"**

Let's delve into the fabric of the term Islam and what it truly entails. A cursory look at the root of the Arabic word "Islam" reveals several literal meanings. Ibn Faris elaborated on this and highlighted the general meaning of the root "*Sīn-Lām-Mīm*" (سلم), from which Islam is derived. He explains that the root "*Salima*" primarily signifies health and well-being, free from any inward or outward deficiency. While the derivations from this root are many, one derivation is *Salaama* (safety), which implies being free from harm or defect. Scholars note that God, exalted be His praise, is "*Al-Salam*" (The Source of Peace) because He is free from the flaws and limitations that affect created beings, such as imperfection or mortality. God Almighty says, "And Allah invites to the Home of Peace" (Qur'an 10:25), where "*Al-Salam*" refers to God and His "home" to Paradise. From this root also comes "Islam," meaning submission and absolute obedience to God, as it implies freedom

from resistance or refusal to worship God. Additionally, *Al-Salam* encompasses meanings of peace and reconciliation (Ibn Faris 3:90).

Below are excerpts of articles obtained through a computer-based search in selected Nigerian newspapers that repeatedly featured the terms "Islam", "Islamic" or "Islamization" in their headlines. The online sources of these excerpts are listed in the endnotes.

"Lawmaker's Islamic Bill Divides Southern, Northern Reps"<sup>2</sup>

"Fighting Islamization of Nigeria"<sup>3</sup>

"France fighting Islamist extremism, not Islam- Macron"<sup>4</sup>

"Untold stories of Islamization in Nigeria – Part 2"<sup>5</sup>

"Reps reject bill seeking Islamic law expansion"<sup>6</sup>

### **Standardization and Recommendation for Usage**

The collocation of 'Islam' and 'extremism' is common in the Nigerian media, which in effect, brings the word 'Islam' into disrepute as it often suggests that extremism is a core element of Islam. Using the term "Islamist" to describe violent and terrorist groups, such as Boko Haram, ISWAP etc., is a misrepresentation of what Islam truly entails, it might be argued that such groups used these descriptors themselves, and therefore journalists called a spade a spade. But it can also be argued that using "Islamist" can be misleading to the reader and ultimately shape or change their perception of Islam in a negative manner. It is essential at the very least to ensure clarity and consistency in the use of this term across news and opinion pieces. This will prevent ordinary readers from being misled into exclusively associating the term with extremism or terrorism.

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1. <https://punchng.com/lawmakers-islamic-bill-divides-southern-northern-reps/>
  2. <https://punchng.com/fighting-islamisation-of-nigeria/>
  3. <https://dailytrust.com/france-fighting-islamist-extremism-not-islam-macron/>
  4. <https://guardian.ng/untold-stories-of-islamization-in-nigeria-part-2/>
  5. <https://punchng.com/rep-reject-bill-seeking-islamic-law-expansion/>
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It is true that some Muslims have extremist views, and some do go on to become terrorists. However, when overwhelming majority of Muslims around the world practice Islam peacefully, using "Islamic" as an adjective to describe an extremist ideology distorts its reality.

On the other hand, terminologies, such as "Islamization", "Northernization", "Arewanistan" and Fulanization have been used by Islamophobic media practitioners from predominantly non-Muslim geographical zones of Southern Nigeria to propose a conspiracy theory suggesting that Muslims are attempting to take over the country. It frequently serves as a dog-whistle to criticize genuine and constitutional Islamic causes, such as peaceful conversion of non-Muslims to Islam, multiculturalism, jurisdictions of Sharia courts, etc. This, implicitly, conveys the idea that Islam is a foreign, invasive force seeking to undermine or subvert Nigerian values.

### ***Shari'ah/Islamic Law***

The term *Shariah* has been portrayed as an issue of great concern to Nigerian society. It was in 1999 when many Muslim-majority states decided to adopt *Shariah* Law that the Southern media spuriously alleged as an agenda to Islamize Nigeria. While *Shariah* law is exclusively applicable to Muslims in the Muslim-northern States, the media and some politicians with divisive tendencies portrayed it as an encroachment on Christians' human rights and freedom. It was depicted as an anathema to Nigeria's secular system. Although the agitation for the *Shariah* law suffered misrepresentation in the Nigerian media, it proved its innocence from what it's labelled over the years.

In non-Muslim public discourse and some media commentaries, *Shari'ah* is frequently used in ways that emphasize particular aspects of Islamic law. One common reference is harsh punishments in the penal code, such as those prescribed for adultery or theft, including stoning or cutting off arms. These discussions often highlight punitive measures without providing the broader context of their conditions and their application in different Islamic schools of thought.

*Shari'ah* is also associated with distinct practices observed by Muslims, such as marriage and divorce procedures, dietary regulations, or financial transactions that adhere to Islamic principles like interest-free banking. Additionally, it is often linked to prohibitions specific to Muslim communities, such as bans on alcohol or gambling, which shape personal and communal behavior.

Another frequent association is with *Shari'ah* commissions which serve as advisory or arbitration bodies within some Muslim communities, addressing issues like family disputes or inheritance. These commissions are sometimes portrayed as operating outside or in parallel to mainstream legal systems, raising debates about their legitimacy and role in broader societal contexts. Such uses of the term *Shari'ah* often reduce its meaning to legalistic or cultural practices, overlooking its comprehensive spiritual, ethical, and social dimensions.

### **Linguistic Analysis of the Term *Shari'ah*.**

The root letters *shīn* (ش), *rā* (ر), and *ayn* (ع) signify a core meaning that encompasses a pathway or something extended or opened. The term *Shari'ah* is derived from this and refers to a watering place where drinkers gather for water. From this root, the term *Shar'ah* and *Shari'ah* in religion are also derived (Ibn Faris 3:262). God Almighty says: "To each of you We have prescribed a law (*Shir'ah*) and a method" (Qur'an 5:48) and He says "Then We put you on a *Shariah* concerning the matter" (Qur'an 45:18).

This demonstrates that the root word implies both the literal meaning of a water source and, by extension, the spiritual guidance provided by divine law, leading one towards sustenance and purification. *Shariah* also means a clear and straight path among doctrines, similar to *Shari'ah*, both in its primary and metaphorical senses.

The following excerpts are examples of headlines obtained through a computer-based search in selected Nigerian newspapers that featured the term "*Shari'ah* or *Shari'ah* law" on their online platforms:

"Kano: TikTok stars sentenced to 20 strokes of cane under Shariah law"<sup>7</sup>

"Debates About Personal Freedom and the Enforcement of Shariah Laws in Bauchi State"<sup>8</sup>

"Man Rejects Shariah Court Ruling in Illicit Affair Case"<sup>9</sup>

"Bishops insist on removal of Shariah law from constitution"<sup>10</sup>

"Islamisation: Shariah Council tackles CAN over El-Rufai's comment"<sup>11</sup>

### **Standardization and Recommendation for Usage**

The term *Shari'ah* should be used thoughtfully and only when genuinely relevant. When used, it should reflect its broadest meaning—representing the aspiration of Muslims to live in alignment with God's will in all aspects of their lives. It is inconsistent and misleading to associate *Shari'ah* exclusively with harsh penal codes while neglecting its application to other fundamental aspects, such as acts of charity, kindness to neighbors, or spiritual practices like fasting. Such selective usage risks distorting its comprehensive and holistic nature.

When employing phrases like "according to Sharia law," it is crucial to include context and nuance to acknowledge the diversity of Muslim interpretations and practices. Careful consideration ensures a more accurate and balanced representation of this deeply rooted and multifaceted concept.

### ***Jihad/Jihadism***

One of the Islamic terms that has been heavily distorted and misrepresented by the media—especially after September 11—is the term "Jihad." Media practitioners have depicted Jihad as synonymous with terrorism, while others have equated it

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6. <https://thesun.ng/kanotiktok-stars-sentenced-to-20-strokes-of-cane-under-sharia-law/>

7. <https://guardian.ng/news/hisbah-arrests-bauchi-man-for-posting-ex-girlfriends-on-social-media/>

8. <https://leadership.ng/man-rejects-sharia-court-ruling-in-illicit-affair-case/>

9. <https://punchng.com/bishops-insist-on-removal-of-sharia-law-from-constitution/>

10. <https://punchng.com/islamisation-sharia-council-tackles-can-over-el-rufais-comment/>

with "holy war," a term reminiscent of the past and present Crusades. However, Islam does not recognize any so-called holy war, and Jihad in Islam has a particular meaning, ethics, and rules of conduct unparalleled in human history.

According to Ette and Joe, The Guardian and The Punch newspapers utilized the labels, "jihadists" and "Islamists" in reference to the Boko Haram sect, while Leadership newspapers employed the phrase "rampaging marauders" in their description of the group (Ette and Joe 8).

### **Linguistic Analysis of the Term *Jihad***

In Arabic, *Jihad* means to exert effort, to give one's utmost strength and energy, derived from *juhd*, meaning capacity, or *jahd*, meaning hardship, both of which align with Jihad. Ibn Faris stated that "the root word of *Jihad* has letters ج (jim), ه (ha), and د (dal) literally meaning hardship, and then extended to meanings that are closely related. It is said, 'I exerted myself (*jahadtu nafsi*)' and '*ajhadtu*,' while *juhd* also signifies strength or capacity" (Ibn Faris 1:486)

In the Islamic law, according to the Qur'an and Sunnah, *Jihad* has a broader meaning encompassing all aspects of life and religion, which includes what is called the "greater *Jihad*." More specifically, it also includes the aspect of fighting to elevate the word of Allah, referred to as the "lesser *Jihad*."

In its broadest sense, *Jihad* encompasses every aspect of an individual's and society's life, including intellectual, social, political, and economic dimensions. This struggle includes opposing various enemies, including one's own desires, the whispers of devils, whether they are human or jinn, and the temptations of lust. Combating the spread of doubts and immoral desires requires disseminating knowledge and sound belief and reinforcing virtues and good morals to strengthen people's faith. All of this is part of the "greater *Jihad*."

Looking at the vastness of this struggle, combating all of this intellectually, through media and education, entails a greater effort than military confrontation. Jihad through physical combat is the simplest but most dangerous form of *Jihad*.

Thus, calling the former the "greater *Jihad*" is valid in meaning, supported by texts from the Qur'an and Sunnah, although the specific hadith about it lacks strong authenticity. Therefore, restricting *Jihad* to fighting is a misinterpretation of the Quran and Sunnah. The Quran mentions Jihad in a broader sense beyond fighting, Allah says, "So do not obey the disbelievers, and strive against them with [the Qur'an] a great striving." (Qur'an 25: 52). Ibn Abbas interpreted *Jihad* here as striving with the Quran, meaning through persuasion, reason, and argument rather than combat (Ibn Kathir 6:116)

The Qur'an is the ultimate proof for humanity, along with its interpretation through the Sunnah. In the Sunnah, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) illustrated various types of Jihad in a comprehensive sense. An example of Jihad not limited to fighting is the Prophet's response to a man who asked about joining *Jihad*, "Do you have living parents?" He replied, "Yes." The Prophet said, "Then strive (*jahid*) in serving them," (Muslim, *Hadith* No. 4752). This shows that even caring for one's parents can be a form of *Jihad*, as in this situation, his parents needed him more than he needed to join in the battlefield.

Islamic *Jihad* encompasses life, not death, as Islam is a religion of life and peace. It offers a path to true life; if people adhered to it, they would live in security, peace, justice, and prosperity. Yet, some misunderstand it as a religion of violence, which is incorrect. Islam forbids bloodshed, as killing one soul unjustly is akin to killing all of humanity as Allah says, "If anyone killed a person not in retaliation of murder, or for spreading corruption in the land—it would be as if he killed all people. And whoever saves a life, it is as if he saved all of humanity." (Qur'an 5: 32)

Islam calls for kindness and justice toward those who do not fight Muslims, Allah says, "Allah does not forbid you to deal justly and kindly with those who have not fought against you on account of religion nor driven you out of your homes. Allah loves those who deal justly." (Qur'an 60: 8).

Thus, *Jihad* in Islam is a multidimensional struggle that transcends mere physical combat and encompasses striving toward peace, moral integrity, and justice across all areas of life.

Here are some articles obtained through a computer-based search that repeatedly featured the term "Jihad" or "Jihadism" in selected Nigerian newspapers headlines:

"Man protesting 'love jihad' kills, sets victim's body ablaze"<sup>12</sup>

"Bandits and Arewanistan Agenda- Bandits in Northern Nigeria and their Potential Links to Jihadist Ideologies".<sup>13</sup>

"Jihadists from Niger, Mali, Libya Have Taken Over Sokoto"<sup>14</sup>

"How Mauritania is fighting Sahel Jihadism... and winning"<sup>15</sup>

"The Nigerian Army (NA) has denied recruiting Islamic fundamentalists and Jihadists into the Service to protect Islam"<sup>16</sup>

"Islamisation: Nigeria on throes of Jihad, Christian elders insist"<sup>17</sup>

### **Standardization and Recommendation for Usage**

Journalists are urged to exercise caution when using the term *Jihad*, given its nuanced meanings and potential for misinterpretation. Among most Muslims, *Jihad* is commonly understood as a personal, non-violent struggle to improve oneself and adhere to Islamic principles as earlier discussed. Consequently, equating *Jihad* with violence without providing context is misleading and should be avoided. Terms

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11. <https://punchng.com/man-protesting-love-jihad-kills-sets-victims-body-ablaze/>

12. <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2024/07/bandits-and-arewanistan-agenda-by-ochereome-nnanna/>

13. <https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2023/07/13/jihadists-from-niger-mali-libya-have-taken-over-sokoto-house-member-cries-out/>

14. <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2020/02/how-mauritania-is-fighting-sahel-jihadism-and-winning/>

15. <https://leadership.ng/nigerian-army-denies-recruiting-jihadists/>

16. <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2017/09/islamisation-nigeria-throes-jihad-christian-elders-insist/>

such as "Jihadi terrorism," "Jihadists," "global Jihad," "worldwide Jihad," or labels like "Jihadi group" are problematic and risk perpetuating harmful stereotypes.

It is inaccurate and inappropriate to describe terror attacks as unqualified acts of "Jihad," as such actions violate the core principles of jihad in Islam. Referring to the actions of terrorist groups as "*Jihad*" inadvertently grants these groups a semblance of legitimacy, which the overwhelming majority of Muslims categorically deny. If necessary, a journalist might note that a terrorist claims his actions are jihad, while clarifying that this claim is widely rejected within the Muslim community. Providing reason and context is essential. For instance, Saudi Council of Senior Scholars publicly rejected ISIS and Al-Qaeda's claims to "*Jihad*," and declares joining the militant groups prohibited.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, Nigerian Islamic scholars repeatedly issued fatwas refuting the legitimacy of "*Jihad*" as waged by groups like ISWAP and Boko Haram.

In many cases, the term "*Jihad*" can simply be omitted—for example, "Jihadi terrorism" can be rephrased as "terrorism," or "Boko Haram-inspired terrorism." In other instances, alternative terms may be more appropriate; rather than calling Da'ish a "Jihad terror group," describing it as a "terrorist group" offers a clearer and more accurate portrayal than mentioning the term "Jihad." By choosing words carefully and providing appropriate context, journalists can ensure their reporting is both accurate and respectful, helping to avoid misrepresentation and unnecessary offense.

### *Almajiri*

*Almajiri* is one of the most misunderstood terms in Nigeria surrounded with a number of misconceptions. The media, with the support of so-called experts and policy makers, do no justice to the *Almajiri* phenomena by misrepresentation and wrong conceptualization.

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17. <https://www.france24.com/ar/20140917>).

The term is also attached with terrorism and the Boko Haram insurgency in Northern Nigeria by those attributing extremism to the *Almajiris*. Furthermore, many media outfits see *Almajiri* system as synonymous with begging, and instead of calling to abolish begging and reform the *Almajiri* system, they are calling for abolishment of an established system of spiritual education.

Another misconception about *Almajiri* in the media is attaching illiteracy connotation to the term, making any child that enrolls in the system illiterate that cannot read or write. They are regarded as out-of-school children out of misunderstanding or sheer ignorance.

### **Linguistic Analysis of the Term *Almajiri***

Although the term "*Almajiri*" is a Hausa word, it has its roots from the Arabic word *Almuhajir*, meaning a person who migrates from one place to another. The root letters *hā*, *jīm*, and *rā* (هجر) have two primary meanings: one signifies separation and cutting, while the other indicates binding and tying something tightly. The first meaning is *hajr* (abandonment), which is the opposite of connection, and similarly *hijran* (forsaking). For example, when people migrate (*hājara*) from one land to another, they leave the first in favor of the second, as was the case with the *Muhajirun* (the Emigrants) when they migrated from Mecca to Medina (Ibn Faris 6:34).

In Islamic history, the *Muhajirun* were the companions of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) who migrated with him from Mecca to Medina. They left Mecca to escape the persecution and hardships inflicted by the Meccan pagans. This migration also allowed them to stay close to the Prophet (peace be upon him) and receive spiritual guidance from him. The people of Medina who supported the *Muhajirun* are known as the *Ansar* (Helpers). They provided the *Muhajirun* with food, shelter, and even women to marry, showing great generosity and solidarity.

The below are some examples of headlines obtained through a computer-based search in selected Nigerian newspapers that featured the term "Almajiri " in their headlines:

"ALMAJIRI: The Story of Nigeria's Street Children Up [sic] North"<sup>19</sup>

"The Almajiri Catastrophe in Northern Nigeria"<sup>20</sup>

"Gombe mallams meet over Almajiri menace"<sup>21</sup>

"50m Almajiri, out-of-school children roaming Nigeria's streets – FG"<sup>22</sup>

"Criminals keeping weapons, drugs with Almajiri – TUC"<sup>23</sup>

### Standardization and Recommendation for Usage

The media ought to differentiate between *Almajiris* and street beggars on one hand, and between *Almajiris* and out-of-school children, on the other. *Almajiris* are students who enroll in traditional Qur'anic schools that existed for many centuries. Historically, the *Almajiri* system was a well-structured Islamic education model in pre-colonial Northern Nigeria. It is system of education that predated the Sokoto Caliphate, Qur'anic schools appeared in the medieval ages after the advent of Islam in the Nigerian society, specifically in the 11<sup>th</sup> century Born Empire (Muhammed 3).

The researcher encountered many articles that portray *Almajiris* as street beggars, criminals, and tools for terrorism. One of such articles directly links *Almajiris* to groups like Boko Haram, ISWAP and Area Boys, thus, "they often end up as street urchins (area boys), male prostitutes, petty and hard criminals, garage

18. <https://guardian.ng/sunday-magazine/almajiri-the-story-of-nigerias-street-children-up-north/>

19. <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2022/02/the-almajiri-catastrophe-in-northern-nigeria/>

20. <https://punchng.com/gombe-mallams-meet-over-almajiri-menace/>

21. <https://dailytrust.com/50m-almajiri-out-of-school-children-roaming-nigerias-streets-fg/>

22. <https://thesun.ng/criminals-keeping-weapons-drugs-with-almajiri-tuc/>

boys and most recently, Boko Haram, ISWAP and Bandits as well as dangerous tools for desperate politicians to get at one another's throats."<sup>24</sup>

While the *Almajiri* system faces legitimate challenges, the Nigerian media discourse often presents one-sided, oversimplified and misrepresented narratives. Most of the issues attributed to *Almajiri* education are rooted in systemic socio-economic and political neglect, such as poverty, lack of government investment in education, and unemployment, not the concept itself (Muhammed 9).

Many years ago, when most people in the North were farmers, *Almajiris* didn't need to beg or rely on neighbors for help. They worked with their teachers (Mallams) on farms, and in return, the Mallams provided them with food. However, as times changed and populations grew, the Mallams stopped farming. As a result, *Almajiris* now have to beg for food before attending their lessons. However, it is the responsibility of parents to provide food and shelter for their kids in *Almajiri* Quranic schools.

Constructive reforms, such as integrating Islamic education with formal curricula and providing adequate funding, can address these challenges. Many Northern Nigerians who have benefited from the *Almajiri* system now contribute positively to society as teachers, political leaders, religious scholars, and professionals.

### ***Hijab***

The media's portrayal of *Hijab* in Nigeria often frames it within problematic narratives. Muslim women's dress, particularly the veil or *Hijab*, is predominantly reported in connection with conflict or controversy. In many cases, veiled women are depicted as victimized, passive, or lacking agency, with their roles in society either trivialized or rendered invisible.

Research on the portrayal of Muslim women in Western media reveals that veiled Muslim women are frequently stereotyped as oppressed and subjugated. This

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23. Ibid

portrayal often reflects a caricature of women in Arab and Muslim societies, perpetuating a negative, stereotypical narrative that is rarely applied to women of other faiths in similar media outlets.

### **Linguistic Analysis of the Term *Hijab***

The term *Hijab* literally refers to a *covering* or *barrier*. To say that something is *hujiba*, denotes being concealed or hidden. The verb *hajaba* (past tense) and its derivatives like *yahjubu* (present tense), *hajban*, and *hijaban* convey the idea of *concealing or covering*. Similarly, *hajaba* can also mean to shield or block something. The forms *ihajaba* and *tahajjaba* are used to describe someone who has concealed themselves behind a veil or screen (Ibn Faris 2:143).

In the Islamic context, *Hijab* refers to a veil that covers a woman's head, shoulders and the lower part of her body. However, the term *Hijab* has a broader meaning, encompassing any barrier or curtain and representing the Islamic principle of modesty, including the distinction between public and private spaces. Most Islamic scholars regard wearing the scarf as mandatory for women.

The following are some excerpts obtained through a computer-based search in Nigerian newspapers that featured the term "Hijab" in their headlines:

"The Battle For The Hijab In Nigeria"<sup>25</sup>

"UN demands Iran drop 'demeaning' new hijab law"<sup>26</sup>

"Looming consequences of the hijab judgment"<sup>27</sup>

"Lagos hijab"<sup>28</sup>

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24. <https://independent.ng/battle-hijab-nigeria/>

25. [https://guardian.ng/tag/hijab-law/?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://guardian.ng/tag/hijab-law/?utm_source=chatgpt.com)

26. <https://guardian.ng/looming-consequences-of-the-hijab-judgment/>

27. [https://punchng.com/tags/lagos-hijab/?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://punchng.com/tags/lagos-hijab/?utm_source=chatgpt.com)

"Terrorists Dressed in Hijab, Attack Police Checkpoint, Kill Two Inspectors In Katsina"<sup>29</sup>

### Standardization and Recommendation for Usage

*Hijab* is closely related to some terms that bear connotations of covering, but they vary in cultural and regional usages, for instance, both “*Hijab*” and “headscarf” are widely understood and can be used interchangeably in ordinary speech despite their semantic differences, it is recommended to differentiate between *Hijab* and terminologies that are related to it. The following is the nuanced explanation of these terminologies, thus:

***Khimar***: A less commonly used term referring to a covering that drapes over the head, neck, and chest, leaving the face visible. The word "*khimar*" is mentioned in the Qur'an in the chapter of *Al-Nur* (The Light), that is Quran 24:31.

***Burqa***: A full-body garment that covers the wearer from head to toe, including a mesh screen over the face. It is traditionally worn in public by women in certain cultures, particularly in Afghanistan and northern Pakistan. A minority of Islamic scholars view wearing the *Burqa* as obligatory.

***Niqab***: A face veil that covers everything except the eyes, worn by some Muslim women. Some *Niqabs* include an additional sheer layer that can cover the eyes. While a minority of scholars consider the *Niqab* obligatory, others see it as recommended rather than required.

Therefore, the term *Burqa* (preferred spelling over *Burka*) should not be confused with the *Niqab*, a face veil that leaves the eyes uncovered, or the *Hijab*, which covers the hair, neck, and part of the bosom but does not cover the face. While it is accurate to note that most scholars consider *Hijab* religiously mandated, it is incorrect to suggest that all Muslim women wear it. Journalists are advised against describing the *Burqa* or *Niqab* as universally mandatory in Islam or

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28. <https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2024/01/27/terrorists-dressed-in-hijab-attack-police-checkpoint-kill-two-inspectors-in-katsina-2/>

suggesting that face covering represents a more “complete” form of Islamic dress code as Islamic scholars' fatwas differ in this regard.

### **Conclusion**

The research examined the portrayal of Islam in Nigerian media discourses. The focus of the study is the analysis of the linguistic complexities and nuances of the Nigerian media language on Islam and Muslims in relation to religious, social, and cultural dynamics in the country. Relying on the research findings, the researcher underscores the need for a critical examination of media practices and their role in shaping discourses around Islam in Nigeria, emphasizing the potential for the media to contribute positively to the country's socio-religious landscape.

Ultimately, it is imperative for media practitioners to adopt responsible reporting frameworks that respect the plurality of Nigerian society and emphasize well-understood narratives. By doing so, the media can serve as a bridge for promoting understanding, reducing stereotypes, and fostering national unity in a diverse and multifaceted nation. Furthermore, addressing the systemic issues in religious education and societal integration can help mitigate some of the negative portrayals associated with Islam in the media.

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