

Language Functions & Conflict Management in Nigeria: A Functional Linguistic
Approach

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18. Language Functions & Conflict Management in Nigeria: A Functional Linguistic Approach

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Abstract

The subject of language has justifiably constituted an object of fascination and a concept of serious enquiry among scholars and researchers for over two thousand years because of its functional dynamics, being the pivot around which all human activities are based (Crystal, 1997). The functions of language appertain to the ultimate development of man and his society without the activation, exploration actualization of which no progress can be made.

Thus, against the background of the persistent implosion of conflicts in Nigeria and the debilitating consequences of such on virtually all strata of national development, this paper addresses language functions from *formative* perspectives. The study advances the thesis that language essentially performs four functions: to form, to inform, to reform and to transform man and his society (Adedimeji, 2004a). It relates how such functions, based on the systemic functional linguistic construct of unit, structure, class and system (Osisanwo, 1999) can be applied to the resolution of all sorts of conflicts ensnaring Nigeria. The thrust of the study lies in the provision of a linguistic paradigm through which "the personal and psychological ills of man can be cured by a language therapy" for Nigerians (Birk and Birk, 1959).

1.0 Introduction

Despite the tremendous advance mankind has made in the quest of making life much easier, humanity is still enmeshed in the whirlpool of greed, conflict, fear and spiritual despair. Crises, altercations, insecurity and wars have become more frequent and prevalent in the contemporary world (and Nigeria is a case study) more than any period in modern history. It appears increasingly more evident that the beastiality, ruthlessness and sheer cussedness of human beings are even more than those of the animals, despite the platitudes of, and sloganeering about the vague, elusive and amoebic concepts of civilization, modernity, development and techno-scientific advancement. Against the option that mankind has to give itself a lease of humanity, a privilege it exclusively enjoys and on the basis of which it is different from the animals, human beings have often failed to justify the unique difference, the faculty of language, in properly addressing issues and functionally redressing conflicts.

Language constitutes that quality of human peculiarity, that unique attribute of man's distinctiveness and that priceless mandate of superiority over the entire creation. It is "the major distinguishing phenomenon between man and other creatures" (Babajide, 2000:1). Man is the only creature that uses words intentionally and habitually. He is essentially 'a talking being'. Though, as Boulton (1960:3) observes, a parrot or a mynah may talk in a fashion but it would be impossible to discuss any subject with a talking bird. As such, language is so pervasive that "our humanity thus depends and our capacity" for its use (Lawal, 2004:25) and it so

resembles us in our biological essence – in terms of birth, death shift, change, growth, decay, family, social and sociological relationships (Lawal, 2004:26). Mere words, that language produces, can make and prevent wars, create understanding or inflame prejudice, form constitutions or destroy them, sell shoddy or superior ideas, justify man's worst actions or express his highest ideals (Birk and Birk, 1959:3, Adedimeji, 2004b:2).

The significance of language as the bedrock of all human activities therefore engenders its relevance in forging better individuals of mankind and harmonious societies of nations. The aim of this paper is to elicit how the 'powers of language' (Ajiboye, 2002:9) and the 'magic of language' (Brooks, 1964:22) are capable of managing and resolving the persistent conflicts and their underlining contradictions estranging the heterogeneous Nigeria of mutually hostile and suspicious ethnolinguistic/religious groups. While doing this, it is presupposed that the assumptions about communication, which is the most important function of language, are incontrovertibly upheld as part of the existing world knowledge. Some of these are that all of the problems of this world are communication/language problems; all the problems of this world can be solved by more and better communication; and the study of communication/language is about producing more effective messages (Oyewo, 2000:152 – 153).

2.0 Language as a Functional System

The notion of system with its derivatives has often underlined attempts at defining language. This is due to the fact that the abiding feature of language is its systemacity. Trager conceives language as a *system* of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which the members of a society interact in terms of their total culture (cited in Crystal, 1997:400) and the authors of *Websters' Third New International Dictionary* (1961) define it as "a *systematic* means of communicating ideas or feelings by the use of conventionalized signs, sounds, gestures, or marks having understood meanings".

Recent definitions have not also overlooked the significance of system. For instance, Cruse (1990: 140) defines language as "a *system* of conventional signs all aspects of whose structure serve the sovereign function of meaning" and to Watson and Hill (1993:170), it is "a *system* of signs and representations, arranged by codes and articulated through various discourses". While Cook and Seidlhofer (1995:4) view language in systematized units as genetic inheritance, a mathematical system, a social fact, the expression of individual identity, the expression of cultural identity, the outcome of dialogic interaction, a social semiotic, the intuitions of native speakers, the sum of attested data, a collection of memorized chunks, a rule-governed discrete combinatory system or electrical activation in a distributed network, Tremholm (1995:82) contends that it is not less than "a rule-governed *system* of symbols that allows the users to generate meaning and in the process, to define reality".

This perspective of linguistic systemacity, involving the networking of related parts working together for a purpose, constitutes the background for systemic linguistics, from the aegis of which systemic grammar evolved. It is advanced that within the general system of language do the systems of sounds (phonology and phonetics) word formation (morphology) word combination (syntax) visible meaning (semantics) and invisible meaning (pragmatics) operate. Each of these branches of modern descriptive linguistics has its own peculiar sub-systems all of which galvanise to further characterize and conceptualize language. Language is

thereby hierarchical, "like an onion bulb with many layers", a perfect system. In other words, phonemes combine to form morphemes and words, and words combine to form sentences on which meanings are superimposed as constrained by the context (Adedimeji and Alabi, 2003:28 – 29).

Systemic linguistics emerged with a view to avoiding the pitfalls and imprecisions that characterize traditional and structural linguistics. Evolved by J.R. Firth and developed or espoused by his student, M.A.K. Halliday, its systemic functional dimensions for conceptual and pedagogical purposes are self-evident. General linguistics consists of substance, form and situation, among other levels of analysis, (Halliday, 1961; Alabi, 1997:48). Substance has phonic and graphic systems and form, which concerns the organization of substance into meaning-bearing recognizable patterns, consists of two levels of grammar and lexis. Situation has sub-systems or sub-divisions of thesis, immediate situation and wider situation (Berry, 1975: 40 – 50).

Systemic grammar has four theoretical postulates which account for the grammatical patterns of any human language (Alabi, 1997:49; Osisanwo, 1999:10). These are the categories of unit, structure, class and system. There are five units in grammar that are mutually interlocking: morpheme, word, group, clause and sentence. Structure, "the category set up to account for likeness between events in succession" (Halliday, 1961:59), is made up of six types of structures: main element (α) and subordinate element (β) structures, SPCA (Subject, Predicator, Complement, Adjunct) structure, mhq (modifier, head (word), qualifier) structure, bpc (before-preposition, preposition, completive) structure and pbisea (prefix, base, infix, suffix, ending, addition) structure. All of these operate for sentence, clause, group (nominal, adjectival, adverbial, prepositional and verbal) and word analyses. Class is "that grouping of members of a given unit which is defined by operation in the structure of the unit next above (Halliday, 1961:260). It consists of paradigms that can be substituted within the SPCA structures, members of which include nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc. Finally, systems "are lists of choices which are available in the grammar of language" (Berry, 1975:142). There are systems of polarity (which are positive and negative) tense (which are past, present and future) mood (which are declarative, interrogative and imperative) number (which are countable and uncountable) determiner (which are specific and non-specific), etc, all of which can still be further broken into their component delicacies (Alabi, 1997: 57 – 60; Osisanwo, 1999: 92 – 109).

3.0 Language Functions in Systemic Forms

The functions of language, like language itself, have also received scholarly attention in functional diachrony. According to Roman Jakobson as further developed by Hymes (1962), language functions include the emotive function (communicating the inner states and emotions of the addresser), the conative function (using vocatives and imperatives to call the attention of another or requiring them to carry out some action), the phatic function (opening the channel and checking that it is working for social reasons), the poetic function (choosing a particular form as the essence of message) and metalinguistic function (focusing attention on the code itself, to clarify it or negotiate it) all which are "micro-functions" developed from the elements of communication or "macrofunctions" (see Adegbite, 2000:67 – 69).

Halliday (1973) explores three functions of language, which are ideational (an expression of content or message), interpersonal (sharing of one's feelings, idea and emotions with others) and textual (creation of text, through which a link is made between language and situation). The genesis of the societal maladies afflicting Nigeria has been traced to the dearth of harnessing these aspects of human relations by Adegbija (quoted in Adedimeji, 1998:9).

Brown and Yule (1983) contend that language performs two major functions: transactional and interactional. While transactional function appertains to passing information across, giving instructions, socialization etc, the interactional function helps in establishing and sustaining social relationships (Brown and Yule, 1983:4).

To Crystal (1997), language serves eight broad purposes. It is used for the communication of ideas, for emotional expression (as the case of expressing frustration), for social interaction (i.e. greeting others), for the sheer power of reality (as there is in magic and incantation), for recording facts, as the instrument of thought and for the expression of identity (i.e. the signaling of who we are and where we 'belong').

As systemic grammar advances four theoretical categories for describing all human languages, we believe that human language performs four systemic functions. Language forms, language informs, language reforms and language transforms (Adedimeji, 2004a).

At the level of formation, language is used to form ideas, to develop character and to make attitudes. Language is used to think positively or negatively. Language forms life; it forms man, underlining the difference between a new born baby referred to as a 'Kuntu', meaning a thing at the pre-speech stage, and 'Muntu', meaning 'a person' at speech stage, among the Malians of West Africa (Fromkin and Rodman, 1978:1; Lawal, 2004:25). Language is used in several ways to form relationships and behaviours, actions, reactions and inactions. Birk and Birk (1959:3) aptly capture the formative function of language when they say that the kind of language that man uses, hears or reads shapes, to a surprising extent, the world he lives. All the good, the bad and the ugly that stomp human societies are eliciting or practicalising traits and behaviours that language has formed them with. Most functions of language identified by Crystal fall into this category.

At information stage, made up of the components of edutainment and communication, language is used to transmit messages and knowledge. To be educated in something, to be entertained on an issue, is to be taught some knowledge. The contexts of the information function are the entire world, not just a newspaper/magazine, school or institution or dancing hall or musical concert. While the formative function of language gives life, the informative function of language keeps man alive. This function is partly evinced by Awoyinfa (1998:5) that "man needs news (information) always to survive, to function, to attain sanity" and the submission that education is life and life is education, entailing that an uneducated person is dead (Lawal, 2004:32).

At the level of reformation, language is used to cure, to heal and to motivate. As society develops and men grow, decay automatically sets in giving room for re-orientation. The reformatory function of language concerns using language to greet, to console, to condole, to sympathize with, to persuade, to correct wrong, to remediate, to advise. The reformation function is mediated by formation and information systems. The agents of reformation are the family, the school, the mosque, the church, the media and the government all of which are supposed to

have been adequately formed and informed by language. The reformatory function of language enables people to influence (positively) others people's behaviour in a way that makes cooperation possible and conflict difficult (Tinuoye, 2003:10).

At the transformation level of language functions, language is used to change and revolutionize. Language labours and works to bring about the new or the novel. Language is used to do things (Austin, 1962). That our world of today is significantly different from that of our forefathers is consequent upon language/communication. There is a lot of knowledge and information, transmitted through language, available to us through which the world has shrunk to a global family. Language has practically informed the changes in living, administration, science and technology, making the modern world possible. As noted in Adedimeji (2004a:2),

The only reason Pythagoras was able to tell us that $a^2 = b^2 + c^2$ is a right angle triangle; Newton, that acceleration is a function of force; Einstein, that $E = mc^2$; Charles Boyle, that volume is a function of temperature, and pressure, a function of volume was because they had the means, the medium of communicating these ideas – language.

4.0 Conflict Management in Nigeria

The forceful amalgamation of the divergent ethno linguistic groups under the political construct of Nigeria has been deemed as a costly mistake and monumental error (Oladesu 2002:14; Ali, 2004:39). The crises and conflicts that have often engulfed Nigeria, sometimes threatening her corporate existence, have been traced to this amalgamation of erstwhile strange bed-fellows. The conflagration engendered by these conflicts has resulted in the wastage of enormous and invaluable human and material resources. The situation of conflict in Nigeria has recently reached quite unprecedented heights that no day passes without gory pictures and heart-rending details of wanton destruction and senseless killings on the television screen, newspapers and magazines.

The causes of conflicts in Nigeria are seven: these are ethnicity, religion, oil (resource control), politics, poverty, unemployment and, above all, poor leadership. As in a vicious cycle, these factors are in always in transition or movement, one always aiding the other. Poor leadership especially accounts for the persistence of these problems and as Ozekhome (2004:24) rightly observes, "Nigeria has three problems: leadership! Leadership!! Leadership!!!". Poor leadership is the father of all conflicts in Nigeria and good leadership is a potential remediating factor that can rectify all of them.

Usman (2003) discusses the violent conflicts, mainly of ethnic dimensions, ravaging Nigeria. He presents a comprehensive, yet not the total, list of thirty conflicts that have plagued Nigeria between 1980 and 2002. He contends that "violent communal conflicts in Nigeria are the outcome of psychological, ideological political and economic processes" (p. 24) all of which fall within the praxis of our given reasons. He concludes by saying that the ultimate solution lies in leadership and its political might:

It is only at the political level, through a carefully thought out strategy backed by a credible leadership and a meaningful political programme, that this problem of violent ethnic conflicts and the establishment of fruitful and forward-looking relations between security, citizenship and social and economic progress to overcome it, can be tackled (p. 25).

On his part, Ali (2004) circumspects the causes of ethnic crisis as well as the emergence of ethnic militias and discusses major crises or conflicts that have imperiled national progress since the "inception of the democratic dispensation in May, 1999" (p. 39). He espouses how ethnic, religious, political and economic (with attention on Niger Delta) or "oily" crises have been responsible for national retardation and social decadence. The way forward he charts is mainly addressed to the leaders as he presents twelve recommendations, with the call for sovereign national conference being the last, as the panacea to the various conflicts.

Ahmad (2004) presents the underlining factor for the prevalent degeneration of this generation. He cites the Commonwealth Secretary General, Don McNnon to illustrate the level of poverty in Nigeria, even from an outsider's perspective: "Cows in Europe have higher standard of living than Nigerians. On the average each cow lives on \$2.40 a day while 70 percent of Nigerians live on less than \$1(N130) a day". He further submits that many Nigerians are unemployed and even a good number of the so-called employed, are "disemployed and underemployed" leading to frustration, anger and vulnerability to violence. As a result of the contradictions and basic conflicts in the society, he laments painfully what Nigeria is:

Our values are thrown into the trash can. Bad models serve as role models for the young and the old. Morons are barons. Thieves are chiefs. Nonentities are personalities. Psychopaths are politicians. Things fall apart and we are no longer at ease. The arrow of God seems to have plunged fatally into the heart of our decadent society. Every charlatan is a man of the people. We gasp for breath: apologies to Chinua Achebe and 'apology' to our generation and its leaders (p. E6).

To manage and resolve the crises and conflicts in Nigeria, it is evident that Nigerian leaders have always been called to task. One sure way of practically addressing the onerous challenge is the application of the functional linguistic paradigm which chiefly involves 'manguage': using language, a field of humanities, to harmonize man.

5.0 *Manguage and the Functional Linguistic Approach to Conflict Management*

As Babatude (1998:1) observes, the re-establishment of humanistic values and reinstating humanity to the centre stage in the heart of man is the panacea for the tragic tale of humanity. He contends, citing Osofisan that the road towards 'civilisation' and 'development' takes us daily father and further away from our humanity, the problem of which accounts for the altercations in the society. Thus, given the symbiotic relationship between man and language, we are convinced that a blending of both, 'manguage', is the solution to the multifarious problems and the aggravating conflicts entangling man. Language, the overall function of which is to

communicate meaning, is the underlining factor for conflicts in any human society, and when man uses it functionally, the antidote to his problems is found. This is because, in the words of Simeon Peter (cited in Watson and Hill, 1993:169):

Men frequently find themselves at cross-purposes with one another because they persist in using words in different senses. Their long arguments emit more heat than light because their conceptions of the point of issue, whether Marxism, democracy, capitalism... or what not, are by no means identical. From heedless sloth, or sheer lack of intelligence, men do not trouble to clarify their conceptions.

Birk and Birk (1959:26) also share the belief that the solution to the conflicts of man is in language. Their words:

Wars and frictions between nations and groups are often caused by an ignorance of the true relationship between words and things. Individual misunderstandings are largely the result of similar ignorance and the consequent failure to interpret and communicate effectively, and even the personal and psychological ills of man can be cured by a language therapy which consists in part of putting freely into words one's deepest fears, desires and conflicts, and so being led to analyse them consciously and rationally and perceive their real meaning.

The foregoing submissions quite amplify our position for a linguistic approach to conflict management in Nigeria. This linguistic paradigm consists of maximizing the functions of language such that it brings about optimal benefit to man, who is the only creature endowed with it. The process of this linguistic maximization consists of the individual as a unit, family as a structure (family structure), society as a class (social class) and the nation at large a system. Within all these is 'manguage'.

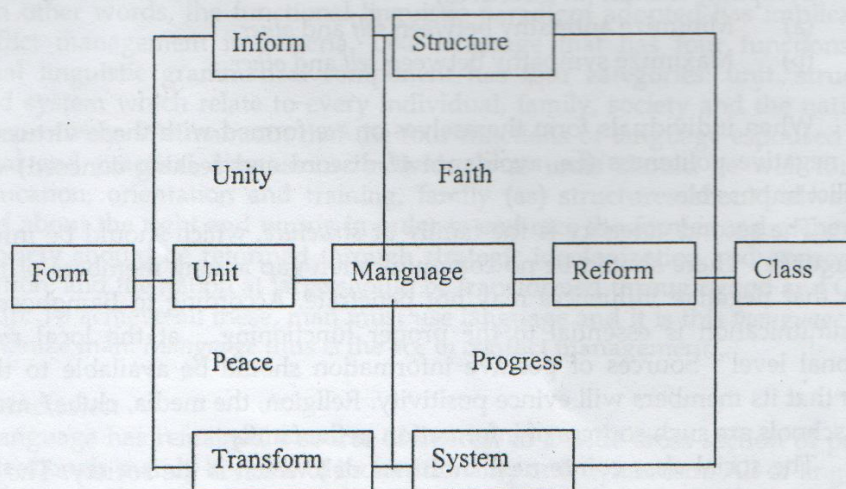


Fig. 1: A functional linguistic paradigm for conflict management

In our model, man is the centre of the universe and language "is fundamental to human existence and survival", (Lawal, 2004) being the basis for all his progress and development. Man is language and language is man – *manguage*; separating the two or disallowing their partnership results in trouble. *Manguage* or man's language (as opposed to sign language, 'animal language', etc) has four functions – to form, inform, reform and transform such as systemic functional grammar has four categories of unit, structure, class and system. There is a one-to-one relationship between each function and category.

For our purpose, the *units* of Nigeria are various individuals, who need to be well formed – in character, training and attitudes. Individuals being the components from which other categories are developed and forming being the most important language function for individuals, they deserve more than a passing elucidation. Individual Nigerians have to be well formed, (against being deformed) by internalizing and practicalising the Leechian maxims of politeness, all which are capable of halting conflicts, at all levels, in Nigeria. According to Leech (1982: 132), the maxims are six and they hold between *self* and *other*.

- i. Tact maxim (in impositives and commissives)
 - (a) Minimise cost to *other* (b) maximize benefit to *other*
- ii. Generosity maxim (in impositives and commissives)
 - (a) Minimize benefit to *self* (b) Maximize cost of *self*
- iii. Approbation maxim (in expressives and assertives)
 - (a) Minimize dispraise of *other* (b) maximize praise of *other*
- iv. Modesty maxim (in expressives and assertives)
 - (a) Minimize praise of *self* (b) Maximize dispraise of *self*
- v. Agreement maxim (in assertives)
 - (a) Minimize disagreement between *self* and *other*
 - (b) Maximize agreement between *self* and *other*
- vi. Sympathy maxim (in assertives)
 - (a) Minimize antipathy between *self* and *other*
 - (b) Maximize sympathy between *self* and *other*

When individuals form themselves or are formed with these virtues, positive and negative politeness (i.e. avoidance of discord and seeking concord) will make conflict impossible.

The second category is the family or *structure*, which should be informed by '*manguage*'. There should be no communication gap among members of the family such that negative influences may not penetrate. According to Bamgbose (1991:7), "communication is essential to the proper functioning... at the local regional or national level". Sources of positive information should be available to the family such that its members will evince positivity. Religion, the media, clubs/ asaociations and schools are such sources of information to the family.

The social *class* comes next in the model, which is the society. The society is decadent and degenerate already. The task at this level is to reform the pervading decadence. All sorts of anti-social behaviours and social deviants that are now many in the society will have to be systematically tackled by '*manguage*' to achieve

humanity. In essence, deliberate efforts have to be made through enlightenment and entertainment programmes by which a systematized conscientization or reformation of the society can be achieved. Programmes like public lectures and symposia, need-oriented musical and film productions are crucial in reforming the society.

Lastly, the system of governance and government needs to be transformed. Against the backdrop of the conflicts that are entangling the nation, the political system needs to be overhauled such that its implementers will be of more benefit to the nation. Concerns have been expressed that Nigeria is a failed project and radical as well as transformational steps are needed to make it occupy a vantage position in the comity of nations – not to remain as just 'a nation on paper' This is because according to Wole Soyinka (cited in Adedimeji, 2004b: 73) Nigeria is (again):

A nation where its public sector is notorious and grossly ineptitude, inefficient, dogmatic, arrogant, unfecundious, unpatriotic, erratic, incorrigible, corrupt, abusive, lackadaisical, abrasive and irredeemably over-bureaucratic. A nation where the law enforcement system is actively obsolete, illiterate, myopic, robotic, bigotic, anachronistic, corrupt, suspicious, unprogressive, schizophrenic, prodigacious, psychologically inferior, unimaginative, intellectually porous, academically jealous and pessimistic. A nation where her leadership has mere glorification of the old order of carnivorous feudalism, god fatherism, mafiaism, cabal tribalism, traditional rulership of royal blood hegemony and patron of serfdom.

For the scenario painted above to be corrected, it is self-evident that both man and language must work on the leadership such that everything will be transformed and Nigeria will be great again. There is a relationship of interconnectivity among the four pairs in the model and the goal is the same: 'manguage' or man and language. The model rightly projects the slogan: 'one for all, all for one' ('manguage' functions in four ways, in four categories and all the functions and categories aim at developing 'manguage' to manage, control and forestall conflicts).

In other words, the functional linguistic paradigm adopted has implications for conflict management in Nigeria. Like language that has four functions, the functional linguistic grammatical component has four categories: unit, structure, class and system which relate to every individual, family, society and the nation at large, respectively. We maintain that the four functions of language espoused have functional and practical dimensions. Individuals as units should be well formed, with education, orientation and training, family (as) structures should always be informed about the right and wrong in order to embrace the former and eschew the latter; society should be reformed through strategic ideologization and appropriate socialization; and the nation at large should be transformed through good and Godly leadership. To achieve all these, man must use language and it is this *manguage* that will humanize man. *Manguage* thus is the ace in conflict management.

6.0 Conclusion

Language has remained a source of interest to a wide cross-section of people and professionals mainly because of its functionality and dynamism. All of linguists, philosophers, anthropologists, psychologists, ethnologists, logicians, sociologist, stylisticians, contrastive analysts, translators, etc. are keenly interested in language to negotiate meaning that it generates. An important criterion of humanity and the

instrument through which society is made or marred, language forms, informs, reforms and transforms individuals, families, societies and nations. When these functions are not allowed within these segments of humanity, humanity is deformed. Social deformity, a situation engendering conflicts and altercations, is a feature of the Nigerian nation. Language promises man to help him find and achieve his often missing humanity by positively forming his personality and society – at the micro and macro levels – if it is functionally utilized.

This paper argues that the ultimate solution to the ethnic, religious, political conflicts estranging Nigeria lies in the application of language functions to national development. Using the systemic functional grammatical categories of unit, representing individual; structure, representing family; class, representing society; and system, representing the nation; it submits that to achieve the much bandied but elusive unity and faith, peace and progress (which constitutes more or less the national motto) in Nigeria, the functional linguistic paradigm that centralizes 'manguage' must be deployed to the national system. As Halliday (1985:314) observes that "what we call 'nonsense' is something we disagree with; but it is perfectly adequate...", tolerating other people's views and opinions, effective language usage will make every Nigerian make 'sense' out of the other's supposed 'nonsense'. With this type of attitudinal patterning which itself involves functional formative processes, conflicts will be resolved, crises will be prevented, ethno-religious crises will be averted and socio-political violence will be kept at bay and Nigeria will be a haven of peace for all.

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