

Chapter 30

A Latter-Day Sodom and Babylon: Nigerian Citizen Journalists’ Representations of Obama’s “Gay America”

Floribert Patrick C. Endong

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1893-3653>

University of Calabar, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the manner in which Nigerian bloggers and web journalists interpreted, framed and represented Obama’s gay rights diplomacy in Nigeria. The chapter specifically explores the extent to which these web journalists’ interpretations of the American pro-gay movement generated new religion-inspired representations of the U.S. government and Americans on the social networks. The study is based on a quantitative and qualitative content analysis of over 162 online articles generated by Nigerian citizen journalists in reaction to Obama’s gay rights advocacy in Nigeria and Africa. It answers the following research questions: how did Nigerian web/citizen journalists frame Obama’s pro-gay move? What was their tone? How did they represent America and its people in their articles or posts? And how did religion and culture influence the latter’s representations of America and Americans?

INTRODUCTION¹

To many Nigerians, America is a very attractive country, an *el dorado* and a premier destination for academic tourism or asylum seeking. To such Nigerian nationals, the word “America” conjures up liberty, plenty (economic prosperity) and equality as well as a heaven for all those who feel politically, culturally, economically or religiously persecuted. Thus, America is seen by many Nigerians as a country where anyone can write his own destiny. The quotidian influences of pro-American myths and prominent global media such as Hollywood, CNN, VOA, *Ebony Magazine*, American pop music and other transnational cultures have, over the years, succeeded in Americanizing or winning the hearts and minds of many

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-3674-5.ch030

Nigerians for the U.S. (Alford, 2009; Endong, 2018; Ibbey, 2013; Idowu, 1999). This strong positive influence has caused both youth and old sub-cultures to view going to or emigrating into America as one of the most wonderful experiences one can have in life. As noted by Adaobi (2017) in a language punctuated with biblical allusions, most Nigerians see America as a promised land where all the imaginable miracles are worked. As she insightfully puts it, they (Nigerian communities) view America as “a land where clear waters gush and trees flourish with fresh dollar notes, where bees lose their sting and pigs fly; a land where lame feet are cured and blind eyes are opened” (p.3).

The veracity of the above-mentioned observation is somehow revealed by the fact that every year, tens of thousands of Nigerian nationals enter the US Diversity Visa Program with infinite hope of obtaining a permanent resident status so as to live the rest of their lives in America. Such veracity is further illustrated by the fact that every year, thousands of pregnant Nigerians seasonally travel to the U.S.A. in order to give birth to their babies, enabling their children born in America to have the American citizenship (by birth) and eventually enjoy “a better life” in the future. Furthermore, it is popularly believed among Nigerians that he who succeeds to emigrate to “Uncle Sam’s” country (among other western countries) is considered lucky even if nothing guarantees that such an emigrant will automatically achieve upward social and financial mobility over there. Nigerians are thus ready to do heavy and unimaginable sacrifices just to secure their immigration (legal or illegal) into America (Adaobi, 2017; Nfonobong, 2013).

In spite of this perceptible America mania, Nigerians have not remained indifferent to some of the postmodern paradigms and arguably/presumably “un-African” cultures America has over the years, advocated through its foreign policy. Indeed, concepts such as American expansionism, “forceful” promotion of human rights and US-styled democracy and radical feminism among others have not (always) been positively viewed or received by the Nigerian political and intelligentsia. The promotion of such values in the Nigerian socio-political sphere has often been aided by muscled rather than persuasive strategies deployed by America². These muscled strategies have, in many instances been decried by Nigerian communities (Comstock, 2016; Page, 2017).

One of such Americanisms - which have been subject to serious controversy in recent years - is Obama’s pro-gay advocacy (popularly known as gay right diplomacy) launched around 2011 in view of pressuring or spurring most anti-gay countries in the global south to reverse themselves on their anti gay policies/legislations. In effect, the American President (Obama) made gay proselytism a central component of its foreign policy in Africa and resorted to systematic threats of discontinuing U.S. aid to homophobic countries (including Nigeria) if the latter persist in passing laws that criminalize same sex marriages and non-heterosexual relations in their respective territories. In Nigeria specifically, this pro-gay movement initiated by the Obama administration was more muscled/aggressive than diplomatic. It had the negative effect of breeding serious waves of criticism which, in turn, elicited new popular perceptions of Obama and new representations of its country (America) in the Nigerian society. Thus, the incident generated new, complex and incidental representations of America in the mainstream Nigerian media as well as on social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, 2go and Internet blogs among others. Indeed, Obama’s threat phenomenally became the talk of the town in most political and religious quarters as well as on the media, particularly on social networks. Even popular comedians and hip hop musicians seized the issue as food for thought with such an unprecedented trepidation.

This chapter sets out to explore how the Nigerian web/citizen journalists and social media users (bloggers) interpreted, framed and represented Obama’s pro-gay advocacy in Nigeria. The chapter equally seeks to explore how these Internet users’ interpretations of the American anti-homophobia movement generated new religion-inspired representations of the U.S. and Americans on the social networks.

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