

LIMINAL VIOLENCE AND THE CRISIS OF PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE IN NIGERIA: A PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTION ON TERRORISM AND SOCIAL BREAKDOWN

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Abstract

Peaceful coexistence, no doubt, presupposes stable social relations, shared moral horizons, and a collective sense of belonging. In contemporary Nigeria, however, these conditions have been severely undermined by terrorism, insurgency, and chronic insecurity, ranging from kidnapping to extrajudicial killing, etc. Employing the hermeneutic method of study, therefore, this paper argues that the persistence of violence in Nigeria, particularly in the Northeast, is best understood not merely as a security failure but as a manifestation of liminality, a prolonged state of social, moral, and political in-betweenness. Drawing on philosophical reflections on liminality, violence, and community, the paper examines how terrorism generates suspended social realities in which law, identity, and moral responsibility are destabilised. Within such liminal spaces, peaceful coexistence becomes fragile, if not impossible. The paper further contends that conventional counterterrorism strategies, rooted primarily in militarisation and surveillance, fail to address the deeper ontological and ethical ruptures produced by liminal violence. By foregrounding lived civilian experiences, moral dislocation, and communal fragmentation, the study reimagines peaceful coexistence as a restorative ethical project rather than a purely strategic or coercive one. The paper concludes by suggesting that peace in terror-affected societies requires reconstituting social meaning, communal trust, and moral accountability beyond the

logic of force.

Keywords: *Liminality, terrorism, peaceful coexistence, violence, Nigeria, social breakdown.*

1. Introduction

The notion of peaceful coexistence often appears as an aspirational cornerstone in societies grappling with division, yet its vulnerability is starkly revealed in environments plagued by ongoing strife. In Nigeria today, the security environment, characterized by insurgencies, banditry, and intercommunal clashes, highlights a profound irony where peace is frequently proclaimed in policy and rhetoric, but daily existence is increasingly shaped by apprehension, distrust, and the imperatives of mere endurance. For those in regions overshadowed by terrorism, coexistence shifts from an implicit social norm to a precarious, ongoing negotiation amid threats. Traditional examinations of terrorism in Nigeria have predominantly adopted frameworks from politics, economics, or defence, emphasizing factors like ideological radicalization, governance lapses, or the efficacy of military responses (Onuoha, 2014; Botha & Abdile, 2019). These perspectives that seem to be quite insightful tend to sideline the profound human and existential disruptions caused by extended violence. Terrorism, in this view, extends beyond physical harm; it disrupts the fabric of meaning-making in society, confining people and groups to a liminal existence, where they are suspended between stability and chaos, neither fully at peace nor entirely at war.

This study employs the lens of liminality to philosophically dissect how terrorism undermines the pillars of peaceful coexistence. It poses a fundamental inquiry, such as: What transformations occur in communal life when violence is entrenched, and unpredictability becomes a routine? Answering this is essential to grasp why peace efforts frequently stumble and why true harmony evades societies scarred by terror. Recent developments, such as the escalation of attacks by groups like the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) in Borno State since early 2025, underscore this urgency, with coordinated assaults on military installations exposing ongoing vulnerabilities (Soufan Centre, 2025). Similarly, the emergence of new threats like *Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen* (JNIM) in northern Nigeria in late 2025 also signals expanding instability, complicating efforts to restore normalcy (The Conversation, 2025).

Philosophically, this liminal state echoes broader reflections on crisis and transition. In African contexts, where colonial legacies and postcolonial struggles amplify such disruptions, violence often perpetuates cycles of marginalization (Mungwini, 2025). Nigeria's northeast, for instance, has seen displacement affect millions, with over 1.3

million internally displaced persons (IDPs) reported in early 2025 due to intertwined conflicts and climate shocks (IOM, 2025). These realities demand a hermeneutic approach that interprets lived experiences, revealing how terrorism reshapes identities and communal bonds. By integrating recent empirical insights, such as those from the Global Terrorism Index indicating Nigeria's high threat level despite some reductions in fatalities (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025), this section sets the stage for understanding liminality not as an abstract theory but as a lived crisis impeding coexistence. The paper contributes to terrorism studies by reframing prolonged insecurity in Nigeria as a condition of moral liminality, thereby shifting analytical focus from tactical violence to ethical/moral disintegration and communal loss of meaning.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a hermeneutic approach to explore the philosophical dimensions of liminal violence and its impact on peaceful coexistence in Nigeria. Hermeneutics, as a method of interpretation, focuses on understanding phenomena through the lens of lived experience, historical context, and textual analysis, allowing for a deeper engagement with the meanings embedded in social and philosophical discourses (Gadamer, 1975). This method is particularly suited to philosophical reflections on terrorism, as it enables the unpacking of complex concepts like liminality and violence not as isolated events but as interwoven elements of human existence and societal breakdown.

The analysis proceeds through an interpretive reading of key philosophical texts on liminality, such as those by van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1969), alongside contemporary accounts of terrorism in Nigeria drawn from scholarly literature, reports on insurgencies, and civilian narratives. No primary empirical data collection was conducted; instead, the study synthesizes existing sources to reveal underlying patterns of moral and social dislocation. Recent developments in Nigerian security, including insurgent activities post-2025, are integrated to contextualize the hermeneutic insights, ensuring the reflection remains relevant to ongoing realities. This approach prioritizes depth over breadth, aiming to reinterpret violence as a liminal condition that demands ethical reconstitution rather than mere suppression.

3. Liminality: From Ritual Passage to Social Condition

Liminality, initially conceptualized in anthropological studies of transitions, describes phases of ambiguity where established structures dissolve, paving the way for new forms. Arnold van Gennep (1960) introduced it in his work: *Rites of Passage*, marking the intermediary stage between detachment from old roles and

incorporation into new ones. Victor Turner (1969) deepened this by portraying liminality as a state of flux, ambiguity, or in-betweenness, where hierarchies fade, and creative potential emerges, though not without risk (Egara, 2026).

In contemporary applications, liminality transcends rituals to encompass broader societal upheavals. Thomassen (2014) posits that societies can become ensnared in liminality, yielding chronic disarray rather than renewal, where progression stalls without resolution. This resonates in political and social crises, as seen in recent literature applying liminality to global disruptions like pandemics and migrations (Stenner, 2025). In such scenarios, the “in-between” state fosters disorientation, with temporal rhythms collapsing and ordinary patterns fracturing (Baumbach & Neumann, 2023).

Terrorism in Nigeria exemplifies this extended liminality. Affected areas linger in an indeterminate state, where daily life oscillates unpredictably, education halts abruptly, commerce and economic life partially resume, and mobility is curtailed by fear. This is not fleeting; it is a persistent erosion of order, amplified by recent insurgent adaptations. For example, ISWAP's tactical shifts since 2025, including sophisticated assaults on infrastructure, have prolonged instability in the Northeast (Soufan Center, 2025). In the Sahel region, overlapping with Nigeria's borders, violent extremism has exploited governance voids, creating zones of perpetual uncertainty (Council on Foreign Relations, 2025).

Philosophically, this liminality intersects with African thought on community and transition. *Ubuntu*, emphasizing interconnectedness, is strained in such spaces, where suspicion replaces solidarity (Mungwini, 2025). Recent studies on migration and conflict in Africa highlight how liminal states worsen identity fluidity, turning refugees and IDPs into perpetual outsiders (Gökay, 2025). In Nigeria, communal clashes in the Northwest, fuelled by resource scarcity, mirror this, with peace initiatives struggling against entrenched ambiguity (IOM, 2025). Thus, liminality evolves from ritual to a societal trap, demanding philosophical re-evaluation for pathways out.

4. Terrorism as Liminal Violence

Violence has long been intertwined with power dynamics, but terrorism introduces a unique modality, thriving on indeterminacy, public spectacle, and psychological upheaval (Crenshaw, 2011). It erases distinctions between non-combatants and fighters, tranquillity and turmoil, routine and crisis, thus fostering a pervasive sense of suspension.

In Nigeria, Boko Haram's insurgency embodies this liminal violence, with communities caught between state oversight and neglect, relying on ad-hoc survival tactics (Higazi, 2015). Recent escalations, such as JNIM's incursion into Kwara

State in October 2025, illustrate boundary-blurring threats expanding southward (Al Jazeera, 2025). ISWAP's 2025 offensives, absorbing remnants of rival factions, have entrenched this limbo, with attacks exposing military frailties (Soufan Center, 2025). Beyond material damage, this violence unmoors ethical frameworks. Trust dissolves as interpersonal relations turn suspect, breeding existential insecurity where shared realities splinter. Philosophical inquiries into trauma reveal how such violence induces collective numbness, aligning with liminality's disorienting effects (Stenner, 2025). In African contexts, this resonates with postcolonial critiques, where terrorism exploits historical fractures, perpetuating marginality (Mungwini, 2025). Recent data from Statista (2025) also shows that Nigeria's terrorism threat remains elevated, with societal impacts extending to economic stagnation and displacement. Thus, liminal violence not only sustains terror but redefines social existence.

5. Moral Disintegration of Coexistence

The bedrock of peaceful coexistence lies in mutual ethical presumptions: recognition of shared humanity and restraint from harm via norms or structures. Terrorism shatters these, rendering reciprocity obsolete amid arbitrary violence. This echoes Hannah Arendt's (1970) observation that violence erodes public spheres essential for human diversity. In terror-stricken areas, dialogue is displaced by isolation, as the pursuit of safety supersedes social engagement. Narratives from Nigeria's northeast depict this ethical fatigue, with survivors expressing detachment from peace as a tangible experience (Zenn & Pearson, 2014). Recent studies affirm terrorism's moral toll, fostering societal fear and cohesion erosion (White, 2025). In IDP camps, for example, communal conflicts amid COVID-19 exacerbated vulnerabilities, thereby highlighting moral fractures (Abubakar et al., 2024).

Philosophically, this disintegration undermines African ethics of relationality, in which personhood is constituted through communal bonds. Violence fractures the *Ubuntu* ontology, recasting neighbours as existential threats (Mungwini, 2025). Ethical analysis interrogates the justifiability of terrorism and consistently finds it wanting, as it fails key moral criteria such as right intention and proportionality (Patterson, 2024). In the Nigerian context, this erosion reduces coexistence to mere survivalist proximity, stripped of genuine ethical substance.

6. Counterterrorism and the Limits of Force

Nigeria's response to terrorism has predominantly emphasized military operations, enhanced surveillance, and territorial reclamation, reflecting a security-centric paradigm that prioritizes immediate threat neutralization. Initiatives such as Operation Lafiya Dole and the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) have aimed

to dismantle insurgent networks through coordinated offensives and border controls. However, these efforts, while achieving tactical gains like reclaiming territories, often overlook the enduring societal scars left by violence, sometimes intensifying local grievances through collateral impacts on civilians (Amnesty International, 2020; Egara, et al., 2025). Recent assessments highlight how such approaches, despite their intent, can alienate communities by associating state forces with arbitrary detentions or excessive force, thereby sustaining the very cycles of distrust they seek to break.

In philosophical terms, this reliance on coercion reveals inherent instabilities, as Johan Galtung (1969) differentiated between negative peace (merely the cessation of overt conflict) and positive peace, which encompasses justice, equity, and structural harmony. Militarized strategies frequently result in the former, where insurgent activities may temporarily decline, but underlying issues like poverty, marginalization, and governance deficits persist, allowing liminal conditions to fester. For instance, community feedback from affected regions indicates a perception that government countermeasures exacerbate isolation, with residents viewing military presence as intrusive rather than protective, leading to reduced cooperation and heightened vulnerability (Conway et al., 2022). This disconnect underscores a broader critique, such as treating terrorism solely as an external adversary, ignoring its roots in internal social dislocations, and rendering responses reactive rather than transformative.

More so, recent developments in Nigeria's counterterrorism framework illustrate both advancements and persistent shortcomings. The launch of the National Counter Terrorism Centre's (NCTC) Strategic Plan 2025-2030 marks a significant step, outlining nine priorities to bolster national resilience against evolving threats, including enhanced inter-agency coordination and rule-of-law-based approaches (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2025; Egara et al., 2025). This plan, unveiled amid rising attacks by groups like Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), aims to integrate preventive measures with kinetic operations, drawing on international support from bodies like the UN Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT) (Egara et al., 2025). Yet, evaluations suggest that implementation faces hurdles, such as resource constraints and the need for greater community involvement, as evidenced by ongoing insurgent consolidations in the Lake Chad Basin (Security Council Report, 2025). Moreover, the role of vigilante groups, like the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), has been reassessed as a potential asset in alternatively governed spaces, where formal military reach is limited; however, without structured training and oversight, their integration risks further blurring lines between state and non-state actors, potentially perpetuating human rights concerns (Ajala, 2025).

International dimensions add complexity to these limits. The UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy's upcoming 2026 review emphasizes holistic, rights-respecting responses, yet Nigeria's alignment remains partial, with reports of overreach in operations contributing to civilian alienation (United Nations, 2025). U.S. interventions, including airstrikes in late December 2025, have provided tactical support but highlight dependency issues, urging Nigeria to build sustainable capacities beyond foreign aid (Punch Newspaper, 2026). Philosophically, this coercive emphasis commodifies peace as a by-product of dominance, neglecting ethical rebuilding. As liminal violence thrives on eroded trust, strategies must evolve to incorporate dialogue and accountability, lest they reinforce the suspension of social norms they aim to restore.

7. Reimagining Peaceful Coexistence beyond Liminality

To transcend the liminal entrapment wrought by terrorism, peaceful coexistence demands a shift toward ethical and communal restoration, where rebuilding trust and shared narratives takes precedence over mere enforcement. This involves not just a nostalgic reversion to pre-conflict states but a forward-oriented reconfiguration of social bonds, acknowledging trauma while fostering inclusive institutions that affirm human dignity. Philosophically, this resonates with communitarian ideals, where identity emerges through relational ties rather than isolated individualism (Etzioni, 1996), and aligns with African philosophies like *Ubuntu*, which prioritize collective healing amid disruption.

Recent initiatives in Nigeria exemplify this restorative pivot. The International Organization for Migration's (IOM) Crisis Response Plan for 2026-2028 emphasizes community-driven stabilization in crisis-hit areas, integrating conflict-sensitive projects to address displacement and psychosocial needs, thus promoting resilience through local participation (IOM, 2025). Similarly, the Search for Common Ground's efforts along the Nigeria-Benin border advocate for cross-border peace strategies, enhancing collaboration in states like Kebbi and Niger to mitigate communal tensions and build security networks (News Agency of Nigeria, 2025). These approaches recognize that liminality dissolves when communities co-lead reconciliation, as seen in UNODC's Youth Peace Champions programme in Bayelsa, empowering young people to drive local peacebuilding amid emerging threats (UNODC, 2025).

National frameworks further support this re-imagination. The launch of Nigeria's Third National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security in late 2025 integrates gender perspectives into conflict resolution, advancing inclusion in peace processes to counter marginalization (Egara, 2025; Facebook, 2025). The Peacebuilding Fund's project on reconciliation in the Northeast, extended into 2026, facilitates reintegration for former combatants and communities, emphasizing policy

coordination at the federal and state levels to foster long-term harmony (UNDP, 2025). In the Northwest, the Operational Response Plan for 2025-2026 outlines advocacy for the humanitarian-development-peace nexus, urging private sector investment in conflict zones to sustain economic recovery and social cohesion (INGO Forum, 2025; Voice of Nigeria, 2025).

USAID's Community Initiatives to Promote Peace further illustrate practical pathways, enhancing local capacities through trust-building and sustainable mechanisms to manage disputes (Funds for NGOs, n.d.). By embedding these in broader regional leadership restoration, as advocated by the International Crisis Group (2024), Nigeria can leverage diplomacy to amplify peace efforts, moving beyond liminality toward a coexistence grounded in mutual recognition and ethical renewal.

8. Evaluation and Conclusion

This paper has evaluated terrorism in Nigeria beyond dominant security-oriented paradigms by interpreting it as a condition of prolonged liminality, an enduring state of social, moral, and political suspension in which ordinary norms of coexistence are destabilized. Through a hermeneutic philosophical analysis, the study has shown that terrorism functions not only as physical violence but as an ethical rupture that fractures communal meaning, erodes trust, and dislocates shared moral horizons. In such contexts, peaceful coexistence ceases to operate as a lived social reality and instead becomes a fragile aspiration.

From an evaluative standpoint, the analysis reveals significant limitations in prevailing counterterrorism strategies that prioritize militarisation, surveillance, and territorial control. While such approaches may achieve short-term containment, they largely fail to address the deeper ontological and ethical disruptions produced by sustained violence. As theorists of peace and violence have long argued, the absence of direct violence does not necessarily constitute peace if structural injustice, fear, and moral disintegration persist (Galtung, 1969; Arendt, 1970). In Nigeria's terror-affected regions, coercive responses often risk reproducing liminal conditions by reinforcing alienation and weakening the relational bonds essential for social recovery. The paper further evaluates peaceful coexistence not as a static condition to be restored but as an ethical project that must be actively reconstructed. This reconceptualization aligns with African communitarian philosophies that locate personhood within relational networks and shared responsibility, where the breakdown of community signals a profound moral crisis rather than merely a political one (Gyekye, 1997; Mungwini, 2017). By foregrounding moral accountability, trust-building, and communal meaning-making, this study offers a normative framework that complements, rather than replaces, necessary security interventions.

Ultimately, overcoming liminal violence in Nigeria demands an integrated approach that combines necessary security interventions with sustained ethical, political, and communal reconstruction. Philosophical reflection is indispensable to this task, as it exposes the deeper ontological and moral fractures that technical solutions alone cannot heal. Without addressing these foundational disruptions, peace remains fragile and provisional. A durable and meaningful coexistence can only emerge when societies move decisively out of liminality, restoring the conditions under which trust, dignity, and shared humanity can flourish once again.

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