

# Integrating for development: Pictorial body narratives of opinion leaders in the 2015 Nigerian presidential elections

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## Abstract

The paper examines pictorial body narratives of opinion leaders in the 2015 Nigerian elections. It describes their body interactions during the Abuja Accord and renewal of the peace pact workshops and the meanings derived. The study examined the symbolic body acts of political, religious, social and diplomatic agents to determine their disposition towards non-violence elections. Adopting the qualitative research design, observation and narrative analysis were used to gather data on the phenomenon. Findings reveal the predilections of opinion leaders for the 2015 elections. Pictures disseminated messages geared towards integration and peace. Their body interaction and facial expressions tended towards cooperation, collaboration, concord, partnership, unity, brotherhood and comradeship. These constructs symbolise peace. The non-speech and verbal narratives suggest an integrating political system and paradigm shift from the politics of individualism to collectivism and nationhood. Despite the display of patriotism, there exists gender disparities in leadership, politics and peace structures in Nigeria as there was no female representative in all the pictures. The paper submits that deployment of appropriate verbal and nonverbal narratives would deflate election violence and promote peace development. Visual imagery is a social reality that has implications on violence-free elections.

**Key Words:** Pictorial Body Narratives, Symbolic Interaction, Opinion Leaders, Election Violence, Political Development

## Introduction

Pictures convey information. Nonverbal body language of political opinion narrates their stance on issues regarding the 2015 elections. These nonverbal social behaviours either complement verbal words and physical actions, igniting interpretations based on sociocultural symbols and settings. Body language creates messages that arouse interpretations and perspectives from society. While “body language” has become a popular phrase in the Nigerian social discourse, it provides the context for interpreting and formulating meaning from nonverbal manifest contents.

Meanwhile, research has been silent on symbolic communication of political figures in Nigeria. While emphasis has been placed on verbal communication (Akubo, 2015; Kukah, 2015; Obono & Onyechi, 2017), body language remains grossly understudied. Also, studies have focused on the deployment of social media, cartoons, hate speech, peace-building, strategic communication styles and coverage of the 2015 campaigns on

television, social media and newspaper (Campbell, 2010; Akubo, 2015; Kukah, 2015; Adibe, 2016; Obono, 2016; Obono & Onyechi, 2017) but little attention has been given to pictorial body narratives as a form of political communication. Accordingly, there is dearth of knowledge on the use of pictures for political expression in Nigeria.

The study analysed the body narratives of opinion leaders during the 2015 presidential elections. Analysis of the non-lexical components of speech provides nuanced understanding of the place of agency in national development. The paper is premised on the assumption that pictures tell stories that can affect political attitudes and behaviours, and with implications on the growth of politics in Nigeria. The study was driven by these research objectives: To

1. examine pictorial body narratives of opinion leaders during the 2015 presidential elections in Nigeria
2. describe the meanings that emerge from the body interaction of opinion leaders in specific socio-political settings

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Following the turbulent political season, peace workshops were organised, bringing leaders together to commit to violence-free elections. This created a forum for major presidential contenders like Goodluck Jonathan of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and Muhammadu Buhari, of the All Progressives Congress (APC) to come together following public campaigns of attack. Out of the 26 political parties, 14 had presidential flag bearers, most of whom met and signed papers committing to nonviolence election. What it is not very clear is whether the nonverbal actions of participants correspond with their verbal utterances. Accordingly, much remains to be known and understood about the correlation between body narratives and sociopolitical actions of opinion leaders during the election period. The comparison of their verbal and nonverbal behaviour constitute the addition to the body of knowledge on political communication.

Opinion leaders are well-known individuals that have the ability to influence public opinion. In this paper, they include party leaders, members of the diplomatic community, and socioreligious leaders. The group consists of persons from diverse geographical, occupational, religious, political and ethnic backgrounds. Pictures provide information about their symbolic interaction and perceived meanings to human behaviour.

### Literature Review

The media play significant roles during elections. They inform, persuade, mobilise and set the election agenda. Different media platforms, including digital, broadcast, print, outdoor and indigenous media are used for politicking. Online newspapers, political rallies, town hall meetings, advertorials, photographs, and music convey election campaign messages. In Nigeria, old and new media are deployed to disseminate information to voters across geopolitical and linguistic frontiers (Obono, 2018). Recorded comments, motion pictures, print materials and live broadcasts also connect politicians with millions of people. Exposure to media messages defines public knowledge and attitude to politics.

Election campaigns are inevitable. They are pre-structured and determined by the media, discursive structures, publics and sociocultural factors. They are used to inform and confront opponents. Contestants use different campaign strategies to display their abilities but inabilities of their opponents. Acclaim, attack and defend strategies showcase the credential and liabilities of contestants. While enthusiastically praising

themselves, attack campaigns destroy opponent's image through hate speech, personality documentary and negative adverts. Defend campaigns counter attacks to forestall a candidate's reputation.

Campaigns increase message visibility. Oral, written, interpersonal, and new media facilitated the reach, availability and accessibility of the 2015 campaign messages (Kukah, 2015; Obono, 2016). Social media and the Internet contribute in expanding campaign messages. While websites and emails complement traditional campaigns, social media was intensively used during the 2015 Nigerian elections (Iyengar & McGrady, 2007; Obono, 2016). Social media provide open space for political engagement, expression, activism and social mobilization (Conroy, Feezell & Guerrero, 2012; Nam, 2012; Halpern & Gibbs, 2013). They are particularly useful for transforming campaigns from linear transfer of information to interaction on discussion forums, weblogs, YouTube, Wikis, WhatsApp, Twitter and Facebook. The strengths of social media lie in their ability to share information and ignite networking. They reach majority of citizens and enhance political discourse and participation. Social media facilitate speedy dissemination of political messages and discussions (Okonji, 2015; Obono, 2016). Online platforms have become veritable tools for political campaigns but they are susceptible to abuse due to their fluidity and limited gatekeeping.

Political actors rely on media publicity to disseminate election news, which is becoming more negative as conflict and negativity have become prominent based on increasing market pressures. The overall rise in negativity, conflict and personalization are taking place at the expense of political issues (Vliegthart, Boomgaarden & Boumans, 2011). In other words, although political news is increasing, its coverage mostly focuses on conflict. Politically motivated attacks may demobilize the electorate and undermine the election process. Accordingly, political tension erupted after the 2011 elections in Nigeria, following the victory of Goodluck Jonathan, a southern Christian, not Buhari, a northern Muslim (Campbell, 2010; 2015; Alechenu, 2015; Kukah, 2015; Adibe, 2016). Region and religion-based crises led to several deaths, resulting to the greatest bloodshed since 1967–70 civil war (Human Rights Watch, 201; Campbell, 2015). The tension disrupted national peace.

Following the 2011 experience, skepticism surrounded the 2015 election as people predicted post-election violence since loyalist of Jonathan

and Buhari announced their determination to cause trouble if their candidate lost the bid. The election was perceived to add to the existing tensions and lead to intense politicization and polarization of the Muslim-Christian and north-south dichotomy (Adibe, 2016). Coupled with the Boko Haram insurgency in the North, Niger Delta militancy in the South and the economic downturn, Nigeria was perceived as a country at the brink of war. Accordingly, while over 12,000 deaths were recorded in Niger Delta due to ethnic, religious, and regional conflicts, the strife for space led to the destruction of properties (Campbell, 2010; Alechenu, 2015). To this extent, Campbell (2015) foresaw violence following historical structures, antecedents and existing regional, religious and ethnic polarities. Political violence has been on the increase since the emergence of Boko Haram. The insurgency has led to the displacement of persons and property, family disintegration, economic hardship, hunger, poverty, health challenges, insecurity, abandonment, and death. It should be noted that conflict has immediate and remote consequences that are avoidable. Verbal and nonverbal communication are crucial in demobilising or moderating political tensions.

### **Symbolic Interaction Theory**

Symbolic Interaction (SI) is one of the theories in the social sciences that focuses on interactive relationships among individuals in society. Founded by George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) and developed by Herbert Blumer (1900-1987), the micro-level theoretical perspective in Sociology sees people as active participants in shaping the social world (Herman and Reynolds, 1994). The theory examines meanings that emerge from the interaction of individuals in social environment. Also called Symbolic Interactionism, the theory is a process of human interaction that highlights symbols, interpretation and formation of meanings. It deals with the “peculiar and distinctive character of interaction” that takes place between human beings and mediated by the use of symbols, interpretation, or meaning (Blumer, 1969:180). The study adopted SI to give meanings to the pictorial face-to-face body interaction of opinion leaders in specific social settings because human beings are best understood during practical interaction.

The theory is centred on the idea that individuals use language and symbols during interaction to give subjective meaning to actions. It consists of human’s definition and interpretation, and addresses the creation and maintenance of society through repeated interaction (Carter &

Fuller, 2015). Dealing with interactive social behaviour, the basic tenets of Symbolic Interactionism are that: Individuals act based on the meaning objects have for them; interaction occurs within a particular social and cultural context; meanings emerge from interactions with others; and meanings are continuously created and recreated through interpreting processes (Blumer, 1969). The author’s orientation toward social phenomena centres on independent action, which people have capacity for. Being a dynamic theory, objects feature meanings within themselves and people are free to act and make autonomous contributions to social life (Shibutani, 1988; Schenk & Holman, 1980). In other words, the theory deals with human symbolic interaction, which is interpreted and given meaning based on particular sociocultural contexts.

Although the theory emphasises individuals, study of groups is also important to reflect social reality. The theoretical contention is, therefore, that human behavioural patterns and group life should be studied to determine what participants do together in units (Blumer, 1969; Shibutani, 1988). To this effect, Blumer’s Chicago School perspective added the principle of human agency (Snow, 2001; Collins, 1994) and the Iowa School emphasized agents’ behaviour as ‘purposive, socially constructed, coordinated social acts informed by preceding events in the context’ (Katovich, Miller & Stewart, 2003: 122). For them, rather than limit discourse to individuals, attention should be focused on dyads, triads, and small groups, which are seen as the loci for most social behaviour and interaction. The study took a panoramic view to examine the symbolic body interactions of opinion leaders in small-group social reality. It describes, interprets and gives meaning to their pictorial body interaction during the 2015 elections and its correlate with nonpictorial behaviour. This is because, all aspects of communication in society are symbolic and based on human interaction and formation of meaning. While language enables people to negotiate meanings through symbols, human beings act according to the meanings derived.

### **Method of Study**

Qualitative research design was adopted to examine pictorial body narratives of opinion leaders in the 2015 Nigerian elections. A triangulation of observation and narrative analysis was used to describe the face to face pictorial body interactions, nonverbal speech elements and body arts of the opinion leaders during the nonviolence sensitization workshop (January 14, 2015) and

renewal of the peace treaty (March 26, 2015). While the study primarily focused on their nonverbal body narratives, it compared presidential candidates' body narratives with their actual political actions during the election period.

Purposive sampling was used to select the analysed 2015 Nigerian election pictures, which much have at least two political leaders from opposing parties and two renowned public figures. The selected pictures are; products of spontaneous snap shots, not doctored, those that reflect social reality, taken within a natural social environment and reported on or a day after the peace event. Selection of online newspapers is to ensure representations from virtual and traditional media platforms. Accordingly, pictures emerged from online-only newspapers and the online versions of traditional newspapers. Out of the pull of online pictures, only nine were selected for the analysis while the rest were eliminated because many were mere replications while others had publication dates that were beyond the study period. The Abuja Accord pictures were selected from *Vanguard* (2015, January 15), *Nigerian Times* (2015, January 15), *Sumervilleafricajournalism* (2015, January 14) and *Greenbarga Reporters* (2015, January 14) while Renewal of Peace Treaty emerged from *Greenbarga Reporters* (2015, March 26) and *The Guardian* (2015, March 27). Most pictures came from online versions of the top three Nigerian newspapers.

Data were gathered through close viewing. The meanings were derived from the symbolic interaction and interpretation of the opinion leaders' facial expression, social distance and body interactions. Their body arts were examined, analysed, interpreted and given meaning based on the Nigerian sociocultural context and construct. The actual behaviour of the presidential candidates were compared with their body narratives to determine their compliance to anti-violence campaigns. The analysis, therefore, captured verbal and nonverbal discourse. Behavioural nuances of opinion leaders provide explanations to their political stance and narratives to influence public opinion and advance politics in Nigeria.

## Results

All pictures feature a group of happy people that expose their feelings, thoughts, intentions and inclinations towards 2015 Nigerian elections. The nonverbal narratives of the group members have intersecting thematic narratives to affect politics in the nation. Ironically, all the groups consist of men trying to provide solutions to the political tensions

in the country through their body narratives. They showcase positive narratives, inducing political integration, unity, peace and national development, despite their sociopolitical differences.

## Pictorial Body Narratives of Opinion Leaders

Two meetings, Abuja Accord and Renewal of the Peace Pact, brought together distinguished human agents to commit party leaders to non-violence elections. The body narratives of opinion leaders reflected total compliance to the peace deal. Although the first meeting was attended by most presidential candidates, media reportage focused attention on the main contending political parties, the PDP and APC. Their photographs were featured with socioreligious leaders, displaying joy, peace, unity, togetherness, brotherhood and companionship. Presidential candidates, party chairmen, religious leaders, workshop organizers, and members of the diplomatic community showcased their political stance through pictorial narratives.

### *Abuja Accord workshop*

Abuja Accord was the first meeting organised by the office of the National Security Advisor and Senior Adviser to the President on inter-party affairs for all presidential candidates. It was a call on public office seekers to discuss violence-free elections as well as take anti-violence pledge to ensure peaceful elections. The signing of the agreement took place on February 14, 2015 in Abuja at the "2015 General Elections: Sensitization Workshop on Non-Violence". The event brought together national and international dignitaries including, former Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN), Dr Kofi Annan; Nigeria's former Permanent Representative at the UN, Prof. Ibrahim Gambari; Chairman of the Independent National Electoral Commission, Prof. Attahiru Jega; and national chairmen of the PDP and APC, Adamu Mu'azu and John Odigie-Oyegun, respectively. It was chaired by former Secretary-General of Commonwealth, Chief Emeka Anyaoku.

During the event, party leaders made violence-free commitment statements, which were supported by their nonverbal body behaviour. In line with their verbal utterances, their body narratives indicated peaceful concord. Figure 1 displays the accord between the party flagbearers (centre). Their joyous mood reveals political harmony, sportsmanship and allegiance

to the nonviolence rhetoric. They resonate peaceful elections demonstrated in the facial expression and social space among opinion

leaders, manifesting through holding of hands, laughter and hearty smiles.



**Figure 1:** Concord among political actors

This pictorial story provides political information. The positive emotions narrate good neighborliness among political rivals. It is a narrative of unity and construct of peace. Holding of hands and jointly facing the public indicates compromising, integrating and solidarizing persons. This social behavior in an era of politics of calumny is gratifying and would affect public attitudes.

A similar construct is revealed in Figure 2, where contestants unite against violence election

in the presence of former Secretary Generals of the Commonwealth and UN. The photographs presented by different sources have similar body narratives. The images synchronise and symbolise commitment to peaceful elections because all individuals are delighted as reflected in their laughter, smile, holding of hands and eye contact. The story in their body contact and facial expression unravels shared intent against election violence.



**Figure 2:** Positive emotions by contestants and international observers

Their countenance narrates peace. All agents exhibit peaceful demeanour that is decipherable. The setting projects warmth and alliance. The stern look by Buhari, the APC presidential candidate, in one of the pictures is a natural phenomenon when processing information. It is a display of real images. The group foreshadows compliance and commitment to peace.

Concord is also manifest in the behavior of presidential candidates and national party chairmen whose countenance narrates unity (Figure 3). The calm demeanour expressed in their faces and body posture supports the unity paradigm. The beauty of the narrative lies in the fact that party leaders of APC and PDP are favourably disposed to peaceful elections. They display affection and integration.



**Figure 3:** Presidential candidates and party chairmen

Facing the public reiterates their commitment to non-violence polls. This narrative is further highlighted by the social behaviour of party chairmen, whose hugs, smiles, and eye and body contact reflect a happy mood (Figure 4). They

show unreserved affection for each other. This nonverbal narrative reveals a move away from enmity to political harmony, and an expression of intimacy, cordiality and friendship.



**Figure 4:** APC and PDP party chairmen show of affection

The general narrative of opinion leaders is subsumed in a single group photograph, which highlights companionship, telling a story of accord in diversity (Figure 5). This nonverbal narrative for the maintenance of election peace emerges from persons of diverse ethnic groups (Igbo,

Yoruba, Hausa, Asante/Fante), religions (Christianity, Islam), regions (north, south, east, west), nationalities (Nigerian, Ghanaian) and occupations (politicians, diplomats, academician). Their cheerfulness symbolises unity and progress.



**Figure 5:** Peaceful demeanour of opinion leaders

Pictures corroborate nonviolence verbal statements made during the workshop. Holding of hands

together symbolises union, accord and unified force against election violence. Opinion leaders uphold political synergy and sagacity. Their body narratives tended towards political progress, integration and national peace development. Drawing from their body posture, opinion leaders narrate political harmony. Their nonverbal postures are consistent with the verbal declarations for nonviolence politics.

***Renewal of the peace treaty***

A follow-up meeting was organized to renew politicians’ commitment to peaceful elections. It took place a day prior to the general elections (March 26, 2015), to inform the public about the premium placed on the country over individuals’ political aspirations. The meeting was meant to

uphold peace and harmony before, during and after the elections. It was chaired by General Abdulsalami Abubakar, a former Nigerian President. In attendance were religious leaders like Cardinal John Onaiyekan; Dr. Mathew Hassan Kukah (Bishop of Sokoto Catholic Diocese) and Dr. Mohammed Sa’ad Abubakar III (President-General of the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs and Sultan of Sokoto). The religious coloration stems down religious crisis in a religion-sensitive environment that produces presidential contenders from different religions backgrounds. Inclusion of religious leaders as stakeholders and observers in the workshop is a nonverbal declaration of religious alliance, tolerance, and support for peaceful elections. Figure 6 reveals the disposition of religious and political leaders. They showcase solidarity and supports for nonviolence elections.



**Figure 6:** Presidential candidates with religious leaders

These agents played different roles at the event, transmitting the message of inclusiveness. While Dr Abubakar (Muslim) was one of the three signatories to the accord, Dr Kukah (Christian) read its content to presidential candidates, who repeated same to restate their commitment to nonviolence elections, thus: “We meet today to renew our pledge for peaceful elections. We therefore call on all fellow citizens of our dear country, and our party supporters, to refrain from violence or any acts that may in any way jeopardise our collective vision of a free, fair and credible election...We also pledge to respect the outcome of free, fair and credible elections.”

Pictures of their body narrative was consistent with the content of the agreement read and signed. Images of opinion leaders display their political stance to the public in conformity with the verbal

message to refrain from any acts of violence. A juxtaposition of verbal and nonverbal communication reveals cohesion and collective peace constructs. The pictures display unity, tolerance, commitment and accommodation of opposing factions. Figure 7 also narrates an aspect of the agreement to “stand together”. All the agents are happy and standing together for a single political course. Compliance to the peace deal is expressed in the behaviour of presidential candidates, religious officials and social leaders. Their cheerful countenance manifests through laughing, clapping and hugging. The jubilant mood sends positive messages to party supporters to eschew election violence.



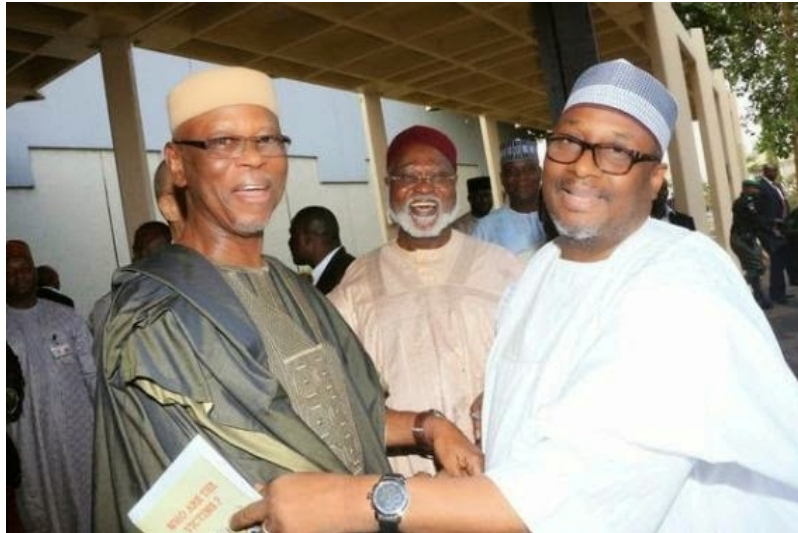
**Figure 7:** Jubilant mood of political and socioreligious leaders

The opinion leaders nonverbally narrate concord within a peaceful social environment. The picture is a proactive way of negating earlier accusation by Jonathan during the Abuja Accord that threats by opponents and hate messages from religious leaders instigate confrontation and induce division. Their pictorial body language negates this violence perspective by constructing a peace frame to change public perceptions and attitudes towards

2015 elections. The images unravel the stance of stakeholders concerning politics and nationhood.

The disposition of party chairmen in Figure 8 further highlights solidarity and concord irrespective of their ideological differences. Although the main political actors are laughing and hugging, the social behavior of attendees at the background is equally one of solidarity and ease following their conviction about a peaceful state.





**Figure 8:** Solidarity between APC and PDP national chairmen

Peaceful narratives of political actors, religious leaders and elder statesmen send strong positive signals to the public. Facilitated by journalistic reportage, pictorial reportage plays a crucial role in framing elections in Nigeria. Journalists made prominent pictorial narratives that show the synergy among political, religious and social leaders, and a shift from the politics of calumny to unity. The pictures succinctly express the mindset

of opinion leaders, thus, irrespective of political differences, stories of affinity, conformity, cordiality, unity and integration are projected through individual and group body language.

#### **Body interaction and physical actions: An integrating paradigm for development**

Pictures disseminate political messages and ideologies. They portray interpretable images. Body interactions of opinion leaders are symbolic, with meanings that are socially situated. Pictures have a long-life span based on continuous viewing and interpretation of their innate features. The facial expressions and body and eye contacts of opinion leaders symbolize political integration and subscription to non-violence elections. A comparison of the mass-mediated pictorial interaction of opinion leaders within the confines of the peace treaty environments and their non-mediated actual social behavior show agreement to nonviolence elections. This is particularly true of the main presidential candidates, whose pictorial body interactions, verbal utterances and physical behavior are in conformity. Frequent exposure of the public to the verbal and nonverbal stance of the political actors affects public opinion.

The pictorial bond of leaders emits peaceful coexistence. The pictures unveil cooperation of the different factions. This paradigm shift suggests

attitudinal change in national politics as the body language of the presidential contenders counteracted the presumed religion-instigated election violence, regional killings, ethnic cleansing, political unrest, Boko Haram insurgency and the activities of the Niger Delta avengers. The body interaction, spoken views and political actions of opinion leaders reframed election crises to peaceful coexistence.

The interpretations that emerge from the pictorial narratives of group members are diverse. Genuine smiles, laughter, hugging, clapping, embracing, body and eye contact, holding of hands, and the serene sociopolitical environment is politically therapeutic, curative, educative and persuasive. The verbal interaction of presidential candidates and their actual social behavior further accentuates the similarities between candidates' body narratives and actual political actions. For instance, Buhari and Jonathan did not stop at pictorial display of their commitment to non-violence elections but displayed same practically in the physical world. Against this backdrop, Jonathan made verbal utterances that indicated his support for peaceful elections. He spoke against electoral violence and politicians who made inciting statements during the campaigns (Adiele, 2015). In other words, their actual actions are distinct and in agreement with their body narratives.

Neither Buhari nor Jonathan made inciting statements to instigate violence. Rather, Jonathan readily accepted defeat by making a conceding call to Buhari, congratulating him. By this action, Goodluck Jonathan made history by becoming the first Nigerian politician to make a conceding call. This positive political action and show of sportsmanship is unprecedented in Nigerian politics, hence, unlike most politicians, Jonathan

did not file any petition against the winner. This behaviour further points to the fact that there is a correlation between Jonathan's pictorial body language during the peace treaty and his physical social actions. Based on the consistency between his verbal and nonverbal communication, his supporters eschewed election violence and accepted the victory of Buhari. The content and behaviour of Jonathan during the conceding call became another opportunity where the actions of political leaders contributed to peace building (Obono and Onyechi, 2017). Although Buhari's actions before the elections were peaceful, one cannot exactly ascertain what his response would have been if he lost the election.

The actions of political leaders translate to the reformation of public opinion and political integration. The intrigues of body interaction show commitment of opposing factions to political stability and the placement of the nation before individual or party ambitions. Political fusion and social partnerships are emblemized in the pictorial and physical constructs of brotherhood. This diffusion of information epitomize conformity and has systemic relevance and national significance.

The message of Kukah in Mohammed (2015) is apt. He applauds and project the expected friendly social behavior of the contenders. His interpretation of the body language of the presidential candidates informed his advice that party supporters should be wise and maintain similar decorum during the 2015 elections. He stated: "These gentlemen will finish their business in politics, you saw the two chairmen of the political parties, PDP and APC hugging each other and laughing together, Buhari and the President will finish, they will probably sit down and have coffee together. In other words, politics is not as bitter, but we, the ordinary people tend to go well beyond the line of duty and so this symbolic gesture should demonstrate to ordinary people of Nigeria not to cry more than the bereaved."

His observation is a social reality. Although political leaders have different agenda and ideologies, their interactive behaviour is a comprising one. Contestants and party chairmen are displayed as models to their supporters. They exhibit the spirit of sportsmanship, having the good of the nation at heart. The social behavior of opinion leaders is a deliberate attempt to eschew violence. One of the core meanings that emerges from this union is the development of social, religious and political integration. The body narratives of opinion leaders tilt towards political

will, integration, harmony and unification. It is a consensus to maintain safe elections and accord in politics.

These positive symbols are roadmaps to political change. The demeanour of opinion leaders has its role in public understanding and response to election matters. The narratives transform ideas about opposition, politics and nationhood. They create political role models, peace imaginations and national development. The slant of reportage highlights partnership. The construct of presidential candidates is skewed towards political integration, peace and development, and their verbal and nonverbal behaviours have implications for development.

These political partnerships and integration convey anti-violence messages. The synergy of verbal and nonverbal actions is a social reality that transforms and shifts public election orientation to paradigms of nationalism and international best practices. This ideological shift fosters political union. The observation that most pictures were spontaneously taken reflects actors' predilections and integrity. The communication narratives attempt to foster unity in a nation with multiple sociocultural and political peculiarities.

Pictorial and non-pictorial images project the candour of opinion leaders. The unity construct culminates to harmonious existence. The success in assembling persons of diverse backgrounds indicates that irrespective of a mixed multitude, unity, solidarity, peace and integration is achievable when people bond together as a monolithic entity to achieve a common good. Such unity enhances national development.

Interpretation and formation of meanings from pictorial body interaction did not emerge from a few photographs but repeated observation of pictures that display individual and group consensus across social settings. Pictorial events added to the creation and maintenance of peaceful ideologies. Meanings that emerge from human interactions form the basis for the pontification of an integrating political paradigm. The notion of 'integrating' indicates an ongoing process, a systematic social activity, a conscious effort, and a goal-oriented strategy to repositioning politics in Nigeria. While opinion leaders have a stake in society and drive public opinion, the media define social reality and provide the framework for people's interpretation and understanding of the world. Body language reveals the inner self. The language of integration affects public ideas and behaviour, contributing to a shift in public focus from violence to nonviolence. In essence,

communication arts can stem down or escalate, deflate or inflate, and positively or negatively affect public attitudes and behaviours. Leaders should, therefore, utilise appropriate verbal and nonverbal language for human development.

### **Discussion**

Pictorial narratives describe nonverbal human behaviour and the information they portray. They are non-linguistic expressions that convey meanings based on the interaction of individuals in society. Political figures use body language to send messages because, they see persuasion as a method to interact and build networks with the community (Anom, Kee & Zawawi, 2014). Nonverbal communication relays messages that bind or polarises a society based on meanings assigned to visual images. Positive facial expression and body language indicate the power of cohesion in modelling frameworks that culminate to the maintenance of peace. In the political sphere, online photographs of presidential candidates were used in resolving political tension (Obono, 2018). Nonverbal social actions display meaningful political information, which brings thought to reality. They add meaning to verbal content, showing “how social structures affect communication and how communication, in turn, affect social structures” (Hacker, 1996:37). Meanings formulated from nonverbal language emerge from sociocultural interpretation, individual experiences and people’s world views.

Political communication does not exist in isolation of human operation. It is a product of a combination of political actors, media and citizens that play roles to ensure functional operations and collaborations. Exposure to, and understanding of, political messages depend on the dynamics of communication, media choice, and clarity of the language of communication. While language mediates social reality, verbal and nonverbal speech transforms the mood and mode of politics.

Opinion leaders are peace advocates. The consistency of their body narratives depends on their convictions about the election process. Their projection of a harmonious election negated violence imaginations because images have the capacity of changing and influencing public opinion. Since political leaders were constructed in a peaceful light, they contributed in building and maintaining peaceful polls rather than confrontational politics. Their body narratives surmounted hatred to love that tilted towards political and national development.

In society, individuals respond differently to social situations. Agents in group photographs also

differed slightly based on their individual dispositions. Buhari, at different points displayed personal emotions, adding to the validity of pictorial constructs. The group pictures reflected authentic social behaviour because individuals displayed distinctive character traits. The APC presidential candidate and some workshop attendees exhibited freedom in their appearance. Their distinct social behaviour is in consonance with Symbolic Interactionism, which highlights peculiarity and distinctiveness of individuals (Blumer, 1969).

While the symbolic interaction of persons from diverse backgrounds contribute to peace formation, there exists gaps in gender leadership, politics, peace initiatives and national development. There was no female representation in all the pictures, thus, symbolising gender inequality. This observation raises questions about the positioning of women in the Nigerian society. Are there no female opinion leaders in Nigeria? What is the place of females in politics? Male-only groups reflect gender disparities and subliminal display male supremacy. While patriarchy is a social construct, positioning of women for leadership and national responsibilities is important to ensure gender partnership, balanced decision-making, and human development.

The role of journalists in the social construction of reality is profound. They display and make prominent images that symbolise peace and harmony. Political, religious and social actors happily interacted to forge a unified political voice. Instead of polarization, plural images projected counter-hegemony and nonviolence information. Pictures express social reality. They are objects of persuasion, instruction and information. Pictures display multiple meanings and project human ideologies, corroborating the ideas of Sanawi (2014) concerning the construction of photographs. Pictures reveal the power of visuals in communication and their implication on political accord, collaboration, integration and peace development. A comparison of the body narratives with their actual actions during the elections reveals an agreement between both levels of communication on the maintenance of nonviolence elections.

### **Conclusion**

Pictorial body language narrates the intentions of opinion leaders concerning the 2015 Nigerian general elections. The group photographs reveal the stance of political, religious and social leaders in a volatile election environment. Instead of conveying violence messages, the body images

and social interactions of opinion leaders reflected unity, partnership, brotherhood, collaboration and integration. Their verbal and nonverbal actions reveal a peaceful political atmosphere. The constructed images resonate human integration and development. Pictorial narrative of presidential candidates and party chairmen showcase a shift from individual to collective action. Their positive facial expression and body language in group photographs indicate the power of cohesion in modelling frameworks that culminate to the maintenance of peace. Because region, religion and social differentiation are sensitive issues in Nigeria, citizens should refrain from using them to jeopardise national peace. Rather than violence, adoption of peace symbols would foster and maintain a crises-free environment. Citizens should be empowered to observe and make decisions that would improve their existence in society. They should not be passive receivers of information but active producers of development messages. They should be creators of their own destinies through active decision making and participation in national affairs.

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