PICTURING AFRICA: THE FIGURATIVE FRAMING OF THE CONTINENT IN ONLINE NEWS

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Abstract: The representation of Africa in Western media has usually been considered as highly stereotypical, unified and predominantly negative. Even though recent findings indicate a shift toward a changing narrative, certain frames and themes, such as violence, appear to be stable and stagnant over time. It has also been attested that figurative language types like metaphor and metonymy play an important role in shaping public discourse. Visuals contribute to this process by highlighting certain aspects of the news coverage, thereby shaping our intercultural knowledge. Despite the rise of visuality and visual studies, it appears that the continent's representation conveyed through visual means is a less researched area. Filling this paucity, this paper examines the visual metonymic relationships of violent news about Africa. A multimodal analysis is conducted to analyse the metonymical framing used by BBC Africa (www.bbc.com/news/world/africa) and CNN Africa (www.edition.cnn.com/africa) as seen in the headlines and featured images of the sampled articles in the 2010s. Since violence is a complex act, the analysis builds on the ACTION and COMPLEX EVENT frames. The results shed light on the substitutions through which news portals provide an interpretive framework for their readers to make sense of such complex events. On the one hand, the research highlights the importance of further inquiry into the role of visuals in news framing, while on the other hand, it hopes to contribute to the advancement of the hitherto little researched area of visual metonymies and provide an analytical framework that can be used to examine the media representation of any specific act of violence.

Keywords: news, framing, violence, metonymy, Africa

Introduction

When making sense of geographically and culturally distant affairs and events, we rely on mental models that are based on prior experiences, existing knowledge, and incoming information – the means of which is provided by different media platforms (Powell, 2017). For most citizens, the news media is the primary source of information on complex issues about which we have no personal experience, and which are discussed in this paper. Not only do the media select the issues they report on, but they also choose the ways in which they do so. Research into these mechanisms is relevant since issue coverage is bound to have a tangible effect on public opinion and public reactions to not-so-distant affairs.

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Accordingly, the present paper examines a specific category of news about Africa in the light of framing theory. To this end, the following Literature Review introduces the different facets of framing, with particular emphasis on the concepts of figurative framing and visual framing. I dedicate a separate paragraph to the presentation of visual metonymies because, in the course of my analysis, I interpret the news of violent acts published under the 'Africa' keyword through their detection.

I then present the role of Africa in the news, focusing on the concept of violence, which proves to be a stagnant topic, a recurring frame in international news about Africa. I then propose to categorize and analyse news of violence through the ACTION and COMPLEX EVENT[1] frames. Finally, I present the results of the research, while the last section concludes.

Literature Review

The facets of framing theory

Our knowledge of the world comes in the form of structured frames, or as cognitive linguistics calls: ICMs, short for idealized cognitive models (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980/2003; Kövecses and Benczes, 2010). We make sense of the complex relations of the world through these models. Framing theory also plays a central role in media studies. News frames can be defined as "a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events, weaving a connection among them" (Gamson and Modigliani, 1987, p. 143). By highlighting certain approaches and offering paths for interpretation and value judgment, news frames perform a selective function.

The majority of news framing studies analyse texts, which is usually referred to as verbal or textual framing. Less attention has been paid to visual framing (i.e., the analysis of images) and to multimodal framing, which is the combination of different communication forms (e.g., image, gesture) and modalities (e.g., verbal, visual) (Moernaut, Mast and Pauwels, 2020). Yet, it has recently been attested that framing theory is one of the main domains for visual research (Coleman, 2010). As stated by Messaris and Abraham (2001), "the special qualities of visuals…makes them very effective tools for framing" (p. 220). They are many times regarded as more convincing and credible than textual clues (Powell *et al.,* 2015), in addition to being less intrusive when capturing the essence of an issue or event (Rodriguez and Dimitrova, 2011). Although there are many questions which have rarely been explored, visual framing signifies a notable direction within visual studies due to its ability to interpret images, as well as serves as an extension of word-based studies.

A further "facet" of framing theory that needs to be included in the discourse is figurative framing. It has been attested that figurative language types like metaphor, metonymy, hyperbole and irony play an important role in shaping public discourse (Burgers, Konijn and Steen, 2016). The present inquiry focuses on metonymy for the reasons explained below.

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[1] Conceptual metonymies are formatted in small capitals according to the traditions of cognitive linguistics (Kövecses, 2005).

In the classical sense, metonymy refers to a relationship in which there is substitution: we use X to stand for Y (Kövecses and Radden, 1998; Radden and Kövecses, 1999). At the same time, it is important to point out that the case of metonymy is not just a matter of one entity substituting another, but also of a new, complex meaning created by the relationship. This relationship can be understood on the visual level as well, although this approach is still in its infancy.

Recently, the study of visual metaphors has received a great deal of scientific attention, but conceptual metonymies have also come to the fore. In this context, for researchers, "the study of nonverbal metonymy is the logical next step" (Forceville, 2009, p. 56). Although the ubiquity of (verbal) metonymy logically implies the frequent occurrence of nonverbal manifestations, visual (and multimodal) metonymies have so far been pushed into the background behind metaphors (Benczes, 2019). According to the current state of the literature, the study of visual metonymies remains a research gap, especially in the light of online news. The unavoidable nature of the phenomenon and the research potential inherent in it give the motivation of the present research. Thus, the paper incorporates notions of cognitive linguistics and framing theory into the field of visual communication to advance work examining the above research gap.

The case in focus: Africa

Africa was chosen as the focus of the research; therefore, the idea of visual metonymic framing was applied to a sample including online news about Africa. Talking about Africa in the news, the critical approach states that Africa and the developing world is featured less in the international news flow, and the portrayal is characterised by misinformation and messages of struggle, famine, poverty and instability (Ebron, 2002; Mahadeo and McKinney, 2007). Meanwhile, other researchers see a new narrative on the rise concerning reports on Africa, which is believed to be much more varied and positive in tone (Nothias, 2014; Zhang and Matingwina, 2016; Bunce, 2017).

The changing narrative has been reflected in several studies, but certain frames and themes appear to be stable and stagnant over time. Béni and Veloso (in press), for instance, shed light on how some frames of the continent, such as a diverse continent and a place of exotic wonders and wilderness worthy to be explored by the outside world, seem to be stagnant over time. Violence is a similarly dominant and recurring theme in news reporting. For a focused and narrowed approach, in the present research I examined the visual metonymic framing specifically of news that cover violent acts.

Violence can be defined as "a behaviour that is intentional, unwanted, nonessential and harmful" (Hamby, 2017, p.168). Violence can be categorised based on who has committed the violence and based on the nature of violence (Rutherford *et al.,* 2007). The present research builds on the latter categorization; however, the typology needs further refinement.

When it comes to covering violent acts in the news, it is important to note that the editorial guidelines of the sampled news websites, that are BBC and CNN, state that explicit depictions of violence are only possible in the most justified cases (BBC, n.d.; CNN, n.d.). So, the question arises: what substitutions are used to depict violence if explicit depiction is not possible? Therefore, the research question can be summarized as follows:

> RQ: How is violence visually depicted in online news about Africa, 2011-2020?

Because violence presupposes some kind of action, news about violent events can be analysed through the ACTION frame. The ACTION frame includes relationships such as those between an ACTION and an INSTRUMENT used in the ACTION, an ACTION and the RESULT of this ACTION, etc. (Kövecses and Radden, 1998). Meanwhile, the COMPLEX EVENT frame states that events may involve several distinct subevents and phases. In this sense we can talk about initial, central and final phases. Since violent acts are always complex, the use of the COMPLEX EVENT frame allows for a better understanding of the sequentiality of such cases.

Summarizing the above, the research uses an exploratory approach to explore on the one hand, which forms of violence are present in news about Africa and on the other hand, to detect which visual metonymic relationships help to interpret the concerned events. The research objectives are based on multidisciplinary foundations, they were designed following the visual metonymy concept of cognitive linguistics and the framing concept of media studies, thereby reflecting on an area that has been little researched in the literature.

Materials and Methods

In order to answer the research question and meet the objectives, a corpus containing 200 URLs was set up. The links were gathered from the Wayback Machine internet archive (www.archive.org/web) using a python selenium script for the following URLs: www.edition.cnn.com/africa, www.bbc.com/news/world/africa. Sampling took place for the period of 2011-2020. Scholars investigating the media representation of Africa generally refer to 2011 as the herald of a shift in narrative (Nothias, 2014; Ojo, 2014; Bunce, 2017), hence the decision to mark it as the starting year of the research. It also allows me to cover a decade of news and guarantees that the corpus can be easily expanded later. The choice of the media outlets can be validated by several aspects but most importantly, BBC and CNN are among the most influential news websites worldwide and have had a longstanding hegemonic position in global news provision.

The raw corpus was then cleaned and narrowed down to news pieces covering acts of violent nature. For this, I relied on the titles of the articles, keeping only those that contained keywords indicating a violent act. Finally, I cleaned the corpus from video news pieces, audio slideshows, articles without images, as well as articles containing solely images and thus arrived at the final sample containing 200 URLs (10/year/website). Consequently, the units of analysis are articles, but the present inquiry focuses only on their featured images and headlines.

The analysis followed the below steps:

1. Firstly, I categorized the headlines based on the type of violence relying on the work of Rutherford *et al.* (2007) and the relevant publications of the United Nations (n.d.) and Victim Support (n.d.). When defining the categories, I aimed for mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive values following the principles of content analysis (Neuendorf, 2017).

2. The second and third steps relate to the detection of visual metonymies following the principles of frame semantics and figurative framing theory (Kövecses and Benczes, 2010;

Burgers et al., 2016). I identified the frame elements, which highlighted that most of the conventional metonymic relations take ACTION as the target of the metonymy.

3. Then, I also examined the frames sequentially via the COMPLEX EVENT frame, mapping out whether the sampled images depict the initial, central, or final phase of the act of violence.

Considering that audiences consume visual and verbal information together (Coleman, 2010), it would be problematic to fully disconnect featured images from their context, hence the decision to incorporate headlines into the analysis. Still, the present study is primarily a visual one. Although the study of textual frames is a fruitful field and provides an interesting basis for comparison, the aim of the present research is to shed light on the importance of visual metonymic relationships. Thus, the below discussion of the results also tilts in favour of the visual modality.

Results and Discussion

The presentation of the results follows the same steps that were taken in the analysis. Regarding the distribution of the types of violent acts as seen in the headlines of the sampled articles, three categories stood out. The most dominant topics include terrorism, homicide and sexual abuse that can all be understood as forms of crime. These are followed by less prominent military acts and human rights violations, such as genocide and human trafficking. Examples demonstrating the three most dominant categories can be seen below:

1. Terrorism: "Nigeria unrest: Suicide bomb targets church in Jos" (BBC, 2012)
2. Homicide: "Italian nuns killed in Burundi convent attack" (BBC, 2014)
3. Sexual abuse: "Peacekeepers accused of raping girls" (CNN, 2016)

Keywords denoting the terrorism category in the headlines included the names of extremist groups or referred to the perpetrators as "suicide bombers", while homicide cases operated with keywords like "killing" and "murder". Headlines about sexual abuse either referred to "rape" or "sexual violence". In case it was not clear in which category a headline should be classified, I relied on the keyword detection function of the Text2Data software.

As for the visual metonymic relationships, i.e., the elements of the action frame, an individual-centric result is seen in Figure 1, in which either the agent or the person involved in the action stand for the action visually. Agents are most often soldiers, terrorists, or protesters, while the people involved in the violent acts are almost always the victims, hence the two metonymic relations distinguish between perpetrators and victims.
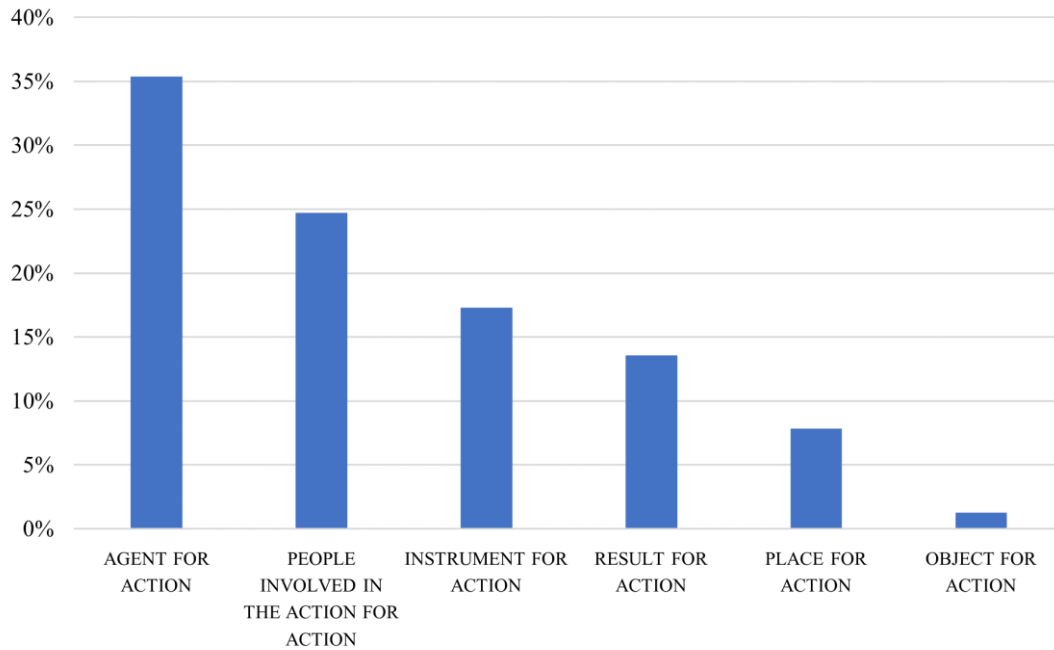
Figure 1: Distribution of visual metonymic relationships in online news about Africa, 2011-2020

The instrument for action metonymic relationship frequently accompanies the agent for action connection, especially when agents are soldiers who are depicted with guns and in some cases with tanks that metonymically stand for the act of shooting or attacking (see Example 1 in the Appendix). The result for action metonymic relationship also uncovers an interesting scenario, the one of the aftermath images. Most of these featured images depict ruins that stand for destruction (see Example 2 in the Appendix).

In the next step, I examined the occurrence of metonymic relationships in light of the three most common categories of violence. Figure 2 illustrates that although the sampled news websites refrain from the explicit representation of violence, the visual depiction of the most prominent category, terrorism, is quite dynamic. For the most part, the images depict armed perpetrators, possibly the location of the action or the circumstances that developed as a result of the action. Thus, units of analysis listed under the category of terrorism are primarily characterised by the agent for action, instrument for action and result for action metonymic relationships.
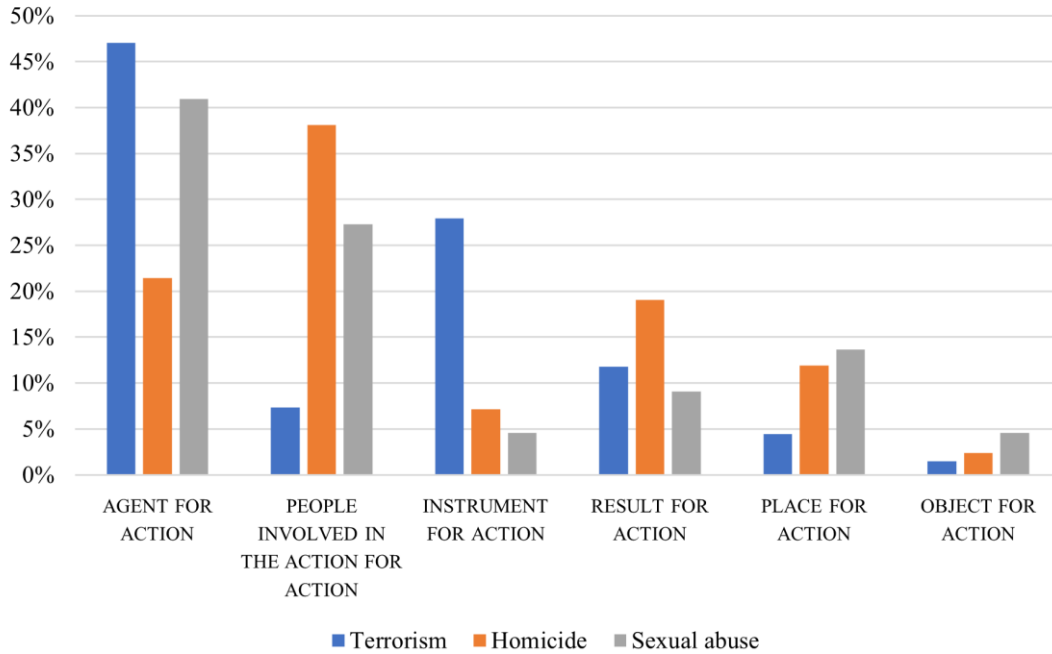
Figure 2: Distribution of visual metonymic relationships in the most prominent categories

In contrast, the metonymic framing of the homicide category is rather victim centred. Although the agent for action metonymic relationship is also present, the people involved in the action for action relationship proves to be more characteristic. Practically speaking, these images depict the victims of the murder cases. This finding is supplemented in some cases by the result for action metonymic relationship, when, for example, the victim is depicted with a broken arm in a ravaged environment. And in some cases, no personification takes place on the visual level, the act of murder is replaced by the scene of the murder via the place for action metonymic relationship (see Example 3 in the Appendix). This latter scenario is also present in the category of sexual abuse. In addition, the third most common act of violence is substituted somewhat more often by the perpetrator than by the victim, although the difference is not significant.

As a third step, the analysis targeted the frames sequentially via the complex event frame, mapping out whether the sampled images depict the initial, central, or final phase of the act of violence. The findings presented on Figure 3 are interpreted in connection with the metonymic relations. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the result for action scenario always represents the final phase of an action, while the instrument for action (e.g., gun for shooting) is not depicted during use, but rather before the action. More interestingly, perpetrators (agent for action) and victims (people involved in the action for action) are usually depicted in the initial phase of the given violent event. Practically speaking, such depictions include very static images in which, for instance, soldiers are standing or sitting and visually there is no direct sign of violence (see Example 1 in the Appendix). However, in cases where the people involved in the action for action are portrayed in the final phase, either wounded victims or survivors are depicted in the analysed featured images. This view of violent acts as complex events made up of several sequential subevents allows us to perceive them as a script, thereby understanding the temporal substitutions found in the metonymic relationships.
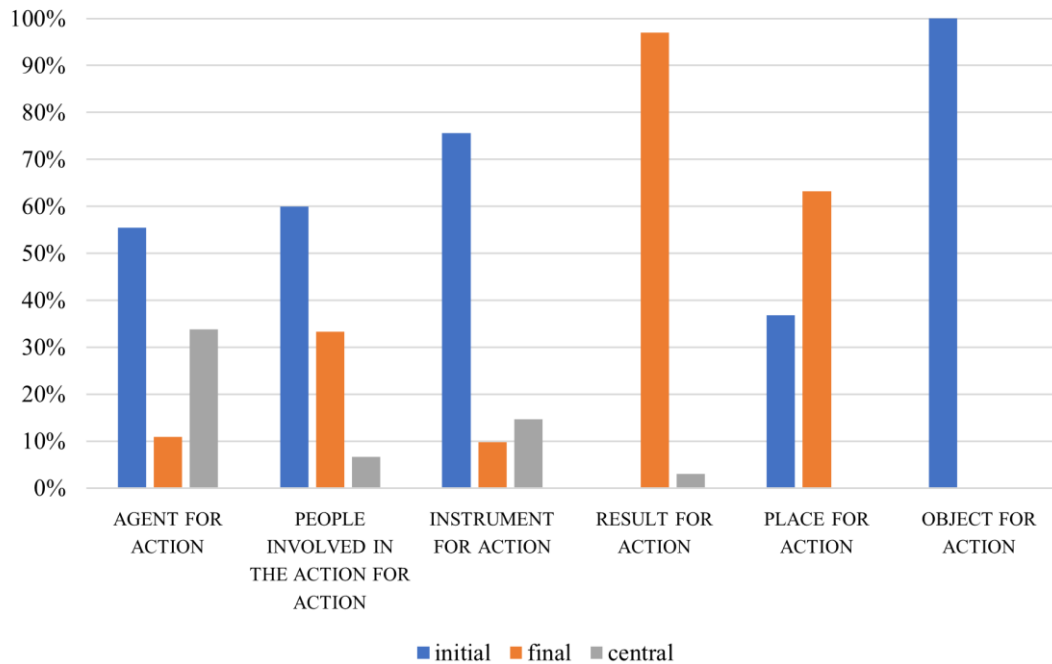
Figure 3: The distribution of the phases included in the complex event frame in light of the visual metonymic relationships

Finally, it is worthwhile to briefly discuss the central phase, which occurred most rarely in the analysed sample. This finding is unsurprising given that in the script of the complex event frame, the main part of the action, i.e., the explicit part (the depiction of which – as detailed above – is treated with caution by the sampled news organisations), is in the centre. In cases where the central sequence did occur, it can be attributed to the agent for action metonymic relationship, quite precisely to the few dynamic images that portray actively protesting people (see Example 4 in the Appendix). These visuals do not relate to violence directly, but their accompanying headlines contain keywords that do (e.g., protesting against a case of rape, a given terrorist group etc.).

Conclusion

Overall, the present research set the objective to interpret violence in the visual modality through the metonymic relationships of the ACTION and COMPLEX EVENT frames. To the best of my knowledge, no previous study has analysed violent news through these metonymic relationships, although the definition and characteristics of violence suggest that the approach is well-founded.

On the one hand, the analysis revealed on the textual level what are the dominant types of violence that the BCC Africa and CNN Africa columns link to the continent. And on the visual level, metonymic relationships reveal an individual centred outcome that personifies actions and most often puts either the perpetrators or the victims at the centre of attention. These variants are able to evoke both positive (such as compassion) and negative (such as outrage) feelings. However, this is rather an assumption, further investigation is needed on the consumer side to draw better conclusions.

The study also revealed the distribution of visual metonymic relationships in the most prominent categories, highlighting the dynamic representation of terrorism and the victim centred metonymic

framing of the homicide category. I also introduced the notion of sequentiality into the discourse via the COMPLEX EVENT frame, the results of which uncovered that the significant portion of the images can be classified into either the initial or final phases. These visual representations are static and do not directly suggest that they were followed or preceded by a violent act. In contrast, the central phase represents a much more dynamic depiction; however, this case occurred the least frequently in the sample.

The above detailed research represents a pilot study which has many extension options and limitations. Firstly, the typology of violence and the elaboration of the mentioned scripts require further work. Additionally, the research focuses on the issuer's side, not the decoding of the frames by recipients, thus, the results refer to only one side of the coin. Furthermore, the research only looked at the online versions of two leading newspapers, therefore findings cannot be generalised to the overall press, nor do they account for cross-cultural media representation and frames. Nevertheless, I trust that the demonstrated trends can promote research into a broader range of media.

The relevance of the research is twofold: on the one hand, it tries to advance the little-researched field of visual metonymies, and on the other hand, it provides a multidisciplinary analytical framework for understanding violent news that can be easily put into practice. In further research, it would be worthwhile to work on a larger sample and develop a better categorization of violent acts. Since the results imply the validity of the approach described above, it would be important to test the method through the examination of as many cases as possible (e.g., Russo-Ukrainian War).

The main limitation and potential of the research is that the literature on the study of visual metonymies is very scarce. Therefore, the paper hopes to contribute to the advancement of this theoretical framework and provide an analytical framework that can be used to examine the media representation of any specific act of violence. After all, violence, conflict and negative events have always been considered newsworthy, they have always represented news values, and this will certainly remain so in the future as well.

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Declaration of Interest Statement

The author declares that she has no conflict of interests.

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Appendix

Mali crisis: France announces big troop cuts

🕒 31 December 2013

Example 1: Mali crisis: France announces big troop cuts. (2013, December 31). Retrieved from https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-25561019

Boko Haram blamed for deadly attack on Nigeria village

🕒 31 January 2016

Example 2: Boko Haram blamed for deadly attack on Nigeria village. (2016, January 31). Retrieved from http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-35454652

Three teachers killed in suspected militant attack on Kenya primary school

By Chandler Thornton and Bukola Adebayo, CNN

Updated 1414 GMT (2214 HKT) January 13, 2020

Example 3: Thornton, C. & Adebayo, B. (2020, January 13). Three teachers killed in suspected militant attack on Kenya primary school. Retrieved from https://edition.cnn.com/2020/01/13/africa/teachers-killed-in-kenya-militant-attack/index.html

Nigeria protests: President Buhari says 69 killed in unrest

23 October 2020

Example 4: Nigeria protests: President Buhari says 69 killed in unrest (2020, October 23). Retrieved from https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-54666368