

Case of Mistaken Identities

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This article appeared in *Weekly Trust* on 15 January 2011.

A little over a year ago, five armed robbers broke into my house and stole my laptop. The armed robbers were young men wearing entirely western clothes who spoke educated-sounding English during the incident. I live near a university campus where a majority of the students are Christians, so I could easily assume that the armed robbers were Christian students.

After something as traumatic as an armed robbery, it is perfectly natural to want revenge and compensation. In the aftershock of the robbery, suppose I crept into the male hostel at the university and stole a laptop from a Christian male student. After all, it was a Christian male student who stole my laptop, wasn't it? Is this reasonable? There are at least three reasons that make this an irrational response.

1. The revenge was not taken on the armed robbers themselves, but on someone who has similar characteristics to the thieves. I was an innocent victim when my laptop was stolen. However, I have now made another innocent victim of the person whose laptop I stole in my act of revenge. That student's only crime was to have similar surface characteristics to the robbers who stole my laptop.

2. More fundamentally, I don't even have certain knowledge of who the robbers were. During the robbery, I did not get their names, check their ID, or get their GSM numbers. Therefore, I have no way of really knowing whether the robbers were actually Christians or students or perhaps another group of males who spoke English and wore western clothes. Based on the context of the robbery, I can make an assumption about who the robbers were. However, it is only that: an assumption, not actual factual knowledge.

3. The laptop I stole cannot replace the laptop that was stolen from me. My original laptop contained my personal files: pictures of my family, important documents from my work, and favorite music that I had legally purchased over the years. The laptop that I stole would have none of these sentimental and practical files on them, but would instead contain the personal files of the student whose laptop I stole. This act of revenge cannot replace what was originally mine; it can only create additional innocent victims.

No victim of armed robbery would ever take revenge as I just described. It is foolish. Robbing others simply because they have similar characteristics to armed robbers is clearly unreasonable.

So why is it acceptable to take this exact type of revenge when it is human lives, not laptops, at stake?

Take, for instance, the recent Christmas Eve bomb blasts in Jos. Clearly, these bomb blasts were wicked. The perpetrators of the blasts must be caught and justice must be served for inflicting immeasurable loss of life and property. However, was the violence that was committed after the

bomb blast justifiable? The same three reasons apply to revenge in crisis situations as in an armed robbery situation.

1. Acts of revenge do not often serve justice to the actual people responsible for the bomb blasts. The bodies that went to the morgues from the violence committed after the bomb went off were almost certainly not the individuals who planted the bombs. The violence that followed the bombings was not justice; it was senseless violence that killed people who had nothing to do with the crimes on Christmas Eve.

2. When the revenge killings took place on Christmas and Boxing Day, the public had no certain knowledge of who caused the bomb blasts. Since the bombs were detonated around a Christian holiday, it is natural to assume that the people who were responsible for the bombs were not Christian. However, no investigation had uncovered who actually caused the bomb blasts. Therefore, any acts of revenge did not really target those who planted the bombs, but additional innocent victims who were assumed to share similar religious convictions with the assumed perpetrators.

3. Revenge violence can replace neither the lives nor the property that was damaged by the bombs. The only real conclusion to revenge violence was to add to the count of innocent victims, add to the count of lost property, add to the count of grief from remaining friends and relatives, add to the count of the pain and trauma of individuals within Jos, and add to the difficulty that we and our children will have to living in the once peaceful Jos.

Violence always causes more violence. When John kills Ahmed, then Ahmed's brothers will kill John's cousins, and John's other cousins will kill Ahmed's other brothers, and the cycle never stops. We must break the cycle of violence that is destroying Nigeria from the inside. Please, cousins of John, make the deliberate choice to not revenge John's death. Please, brothers of Ahmed, make the deliberate choice not to revenge Ahmed's death. If you choose revenge, the cycle of violence will eventually come back to you, resulting in your own death or those close to you. Your act of revenge guarantees that when your body is in the morgue, your family will be forced to make the same choice that you are now faced with: to revenge your death, or instead choose to break the cycle of violence.