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Framing Jihad and Marginalization: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Al-Shabaab's Recruitment Propaganda in Eastern Africa

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ABSTRACT

This article examines jihadist propaganda by analysing two key video messages from Al-Shabaab leadership, specifically Sheikh Fua'd Muhammad Khalaf and Sheikh Ali Mohamud Raage, alongside a radical Kenyan cleric, Aboud Rogo. Through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the study investigates the use of Islamic scripture, emotional appeals, and socio-political grievances to legitimise violence and recruit youth. The findings reveal the strategic use of Quranic texts, historical references, and socio-economic marginalisation to construct a compelling call to arms. Further narratives are juxtaposed with the prevailing situation in the East African region to contextualise the cultural dimension covered in religious clothing. Surprisingly, the three individuals speak from the same script despite being geographically apart and sharing different linguistic codes. Mr. Fua'd Muhammad Khalaf and Mr. Ali Mohamud Raage doing the bidding in Somalia with the Somali language as their medium and Al-Shabaab brutality as their ideological microphone, while Aboud Rogo gives the same message on the Kenyan coast to different audiences with different language- Swahili. The paper concludes by highlighting gaps in counter-narrative strategies and the necessity for localised ideological interventions.

Key words: Al-Shabaab, Critical Discourse Analysis, jihadist.



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INTRODUCTION

There are serious security and ideological fears about the spread of violent extremist ideas in East Africa, perpetuated by Al-Shabaab leadership and its sympathisers. Radical clerics and militant individuals have increasingly utilised multimedia platforms such as YouTube and TikTok to propagate jihadist narratives that contradict mainstream Islam. This article focuses on two compelling propaganda videos, one from Mr. Ali Mohamud Raage, an Al-Shabaab spokesperson, and one from his colleague Mr. Fua'd Muhammad Khalaf, eight (8) minutes with both speaking in turns. Another is from Aboud Rogo Mohammed, a radical Kenyan cleric who established himself as an undisputed ideologue of al-Shabaab and is on record urging the coastal youth to join Al-Shabaab. These videos offer insights into the rhetorical strategies used to radicalise youth and justify violence. Moreover, the videos integrate elements of radicalisation, recruitment, ideological indoctrination, and calls to action, all of which are encapsulated within the two recordings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Mahood and Rassler (2020) highlight the centrality of religious ideology in the legitimisation of jihadist violence. This assertion has been reinforced by Nacos (2016), who argued that radical groups often reframe Islamic scripture to endorse martyrdom and frame conflict as a cosmic battle between Islam and disbelief. In particular, Aboud Rogo, deploying his eloquence and articulation, used his persuasive power and juxtaposed it with the perceived marginalisation in fueling radicalisation, especially among Muslim youth in Kenya's coastal regions (Botha, 2013).

A study by Vlahos (2006) reveals that narrative forms the foundation of all strategy, policy, rhetoric, and action. This assertion explains why youth are easily radicalised and recruited into radical groups. Despite other fuelling factors, such as perceived or real marginalisation of the targeted population, narrative framing plays a critical role. In framing, every word evokes a frame because a frame is a conceptual structure used in thinking (Entman, 1993) and thus reflects constructs of social realities through the activation of shared frames of reference (Goffman, 1974; Tannen, 1993). In advancing the assertion of Entman

(1993) and Jackson (2022) posits that narratives give meaning to the lives of society and are essential to the process of framing policy. This implies that narrative acts as a canvas or a signpost towards a particular direction.

Narrative is a uniquely human phenomenon, occurring in all activities that serve to represent events in time mediated through media (Porter, 2002). This study agrees with Porter's notions in the framing of the narrative. In Porter's assertion, it gives terrorists visibility and sustainability in its recruitment and publicity. In his work, Polleta (2006) specifically identifies that narrative is more than merely description; it not only illustrates but also explains. Squire et al. (2014), while agreeing with Porter's (2002) claims, argued that narrative unavoidably generates meaning, making a moral point, no matter how subtle.

Gambhir (2014) argued that terrorist narratives are meant to articulate a clear message and vision, as well as serve as an outreach tool to incite or recruit new followers. Framing of these narratives, especially within the context of emotive contexts like marginalisation and economic informalities facing youth, is deliberate and meant to incite and recruit into terrorist organisations.

In a study, Halverson (2020) argued that a narrative offers a coherent system of interconnected and sequential stories to solve a conflict by creating expectations based on a known path. The videos transcribed verbatim confirm Halverson and colleagues' findings as the three al-Shabaab leaders use the same patterns, historical social and political orientation of Islamic history albeit in some twisted context. Schmid (2014) introduced a concept of master jihadist narratives that was set to inspire ummah to join the global jihad movement. Schmid opines that these narratives act as a unifying framework for recruitment and radicalisation. I call this master narrative an umbrella narrative that acts as a shade under which ideological or philosophical orientation is achieved. Al Raffie (2012) adds that a master narrative serves as the predominant political, ideological and religious glue that binds jihadists together in their common identity. However, fewer studies have conducted direct discourse analysis of the primary propaganda

videos used in recruitment. This study fills that gap by providing a detailed linguistic and thematic dissection of such media.

METHODOLOGY

This article employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as articulated by Fairclough (1995) to interpret the ideological foundations of jihadist rhetoric. The two designated videos, one by Mr. Ali Mohamud Raage and Mr. Fua'd Muhammad Khalaf and another by Aboud Rogo, were analysed for intertextuality, metaphors, and legitimisation strategies. These videos were selected due to their impact on regional radicalisation, the popularity of the platform on TikTok, availability, and the prominence and influence of the speakers.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Scriptural Legitimization and Martyrdom

Both videos heavily draw on Quranic verses to frame jihad as an obligation. Raage, for instance, repeatedly quotes Surah An-Nisa (4:74), stating:

"Let those (believers) who sell the life of this world for the hereafter fight in the cause of Allah..."

This verse is employed and interpreted as a moral justification and a motivational tool, aligning death in jihad with divine reward. Similarly, Rogo references the Qur'an 61:10–11, framing jihad as a divine enterprise that promises salvation from hellfire. These appeals are not purely spiritual. Jihad has its rightful place in Islam. The context and conditions of jihad are well defined, and this particular verse is not isolated, nor is it defined within the frame it speaks to. This is a legitimate verse of the Quran, but contextualisation of it and the framework of the holy verse and martyrdom, a legitimate concept if applied in the right context with the economic transaction, which resonates with youth facing economic hardship, is not to recruit and radicalise.

Historical Referencing and Mythologizing Struggle

Raage evokes historical battles such as Badr and Mu'tah to contextualise current conflict within a legacy of Islamic resistance:

"Throughout the history of Islam, there has never been a battle between disbelievers and Muslims in which the Muslims were superior in terms of equipment or numbers."

Historically, this is true during the formative years of Islam. In the videos, this rhetoric seeks to encourage and normalise asymmetrical warfare. While it appears as a way to inspire radicals or would-be radicals to a cause by evoking Muslim victories against numerical and technological odds, the context itself betrays these proclamations. First, Raage is evoking this in Somalia premises at the Al-Shabaab recruitment and training ground. Somalia is almost one hundred per cent (100%) Muslim. The 'War' is, therefore, against Muslims in Somalia and not disbelievers, as Raage alleges. Secondly, the historical context is misinterpreted. That Muslims were a minority during its formative years in the Arabian Peninsula is right, but the equipment and tools of war were the same- Sword.

Construction of 'Us vs Them' Binary

Speakers dichotomise the world into believers and disbelievers, truth and falsehood, Islam and Taghut (idolatry). Raage, Rogo and Khalaf claim.

"It is a war...between two factions...Islam and disbelief."

This dichotomy fuels exclusivist ideologies, demonising any form of governance outside Islamic law, especially democracy, which he labels as "manmade laws written by the disbelievers." Again, the war they talk about is being waged in Somalia, where the entire populations are Muslims. It also points to Al-Shabaab's hypocrisy and double standards. Al-Shabaab wants to take over the government, which informs their constant war engagement with Somalia's federal government. This can be collaborated by their own rhetoric of Sheria governance, which in and by itself is the system of governance built on Islamic Sharia governed through Islam laws that are political in orientation. The factions are, therefore, an imaginary created by the three speakers where there is none.

Framing of Marginalization as Justification for Violence

Rogo, Raage and Khalaf's appeals are overtly localised. Raage and Khalaf focused on Somalia affairs with their theme-based foreign military presence in Somalia. Rogo urges Mombasa youth to join Al-Shabaab, citing their socio-economic and political marginalisation. According to Botha and Abdile (2014), this grievance-based justification merges perceived injustice with

religious duty, making radicalisation more palatable to disenfranchised populations.

Emotional Appeals and Eschatological Threats

The messages from the speakers leverage the fear of divine punishment to induce compliance. In the videos to pass on new recruits, Raage states:

“The Messenger of Allah (pbuh) told us that the rock that was thrown into the hellfire was descending to its bottom for seventy years.”

This imagery was used in a narration by the prophet to emphasise the magnitude and vastness of hellfire; however, Rogo, Raage and Khalaf are framing eschatological imagery as intensifying the urgency and stakes of participation in jihad, presenting it as the only path to salvation. The framing is particularly significant for radical groups for recruitment. It places the burden on recruits or potential recruits to make a choice as is as clear as day from night. The choice of answering a call to jihad to evade bottomless hellfire is imagery that has the potential to clear fear in the hearts and minds of the people. Furthermore, this *hadith* is the saying of the prophet; while the *hadith* is not in constation, it should be known that the chain narration might be weak, distorted and even misinterpreted contextually.

Discussion

The investigation reveals that Al-Shabaab's recruitment strategy is built upon a multi-layered narrative. Narratives built on local grievance contextualised in scripture powered by historical memory and fear of the unknown. Significantly, both videos are contextually tailored to fit the situation and audience, this is a deliberate strategy, according to Anderson and McKnight (2015). The resonance of such rhetoric is underpinned by socio-political conditions, including perceived state neglect and identity suppression.

Khalaf and Raage's message appeals to a broader pan-Islamist vision, with Somalia as their traditional working base. The pan-Islamist vision is designed to have a broader radicalisation and recruitment base for radical groups. It also has to do with creating false reality and opium for potential recruits. Further, Somalia has been hyped as a sort of golden ground for Muslims who need cleansing from invaders. It also provides an escape

route for coastal Muslim youth from marginalisation and harassment by Kenyan security agencies.

Rogo's message targets Kenya's marginalised coastal Muslim youth. Contextualising social, political and economic challenges of the Kenyan coast in a historical and religious context, Rogo calls on the coastal to join Al-Shabaab in Somalia, where they have free access to world material and a blessing of hereafter for joining jihad. Rogo's deliberate localisation of his narrative is meant to appeal to locals who can relate to local challenges, a fertile and low ranking for radicalisation and recruitment.

These results expose glaring gaps in counterterrorism communication strategies, which often fail to address the local realities and emotional narratives that make radical messaging efficient and effective. Moreover, counter-narratives are mechanical and structurally redundant, more state-centric and too abstract, bordering on wanting religious legitimacy or emotional appeal needed to fight radicalisation.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: Radicals like Ali Raage, Fua'd Khalaf and Aboud Rogo represent not just ideological but communicative threats. Their ability to use faith, history, and emotion in their speech makes their propaganda quite convincing. To fight these kinds of narratives, we need a holistic approach that is culturally sensitive, grassroots, and theologically sound to disrupt Raage and Rogo's master narratives. Local religious leaders, civil society members, and former radicals are given the power and space to change the intellectual environment that supports violent extremism and youth facing economic informalities are given a support system to stop radicalisation and recruitment into radical groups.

Recommendations: Different methodological approaches to Islamic teachings by Muslims and giving prominence to mainstream Islam with local realities given priorities. The content and context of Islamic literature should be clearly demarcated by Muslim scholars, and the ability to interact with Islamic literature by Muslims accorded necessary weight.

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