Research Africa Reviews Vol. 9 No. 2, August 2025

These reviews may be found on the *RA Reviews* website at:
https://researchafrica.duke.edu/

ʿUlamāʾ and Peacemaking in the Digital Age in Somalia: The Case of Laacaanood.

Written by: Abdifatah Shafat, PhD (Visiting Assistant Professor, Jigjiga University).

Abstract

The ʿulamāʾ (sing., ‘alim, Islamic scholar) are primarily understood as interpreters of Islam’s sacred texts and guardians of the faithful. While not many would disagree with these descriptions, it is also important to recognize that the work they do in their societies is much broader than merely talking about religion. This paper explores another vital function of the ʿulamāʾ, namely as peacemakers. Though many other individuals and groups abound as peacemakers, particularly in the Somali territories where this research was carried out, their version of peacemaking is more widely accepted as they are seen and treated as impartial, objective, and fair. As such, the paper puts into perspective the seminal role of the ʿulamāʾ as peacemakers in the ongoing conflict in Somalia, particularly in the town of Laascaanood. It does so by examining the statements made by a single ‘alim regarding the conduct of war and ways to resolve it from an Islamic standpoint. To locate the changing patterns of the ʿulamāʾ in the digital age in this conflict, the paper interrogates the reactions of some Somalis toward this intervention.

Introduction

The recent representation of Somalia is that of a failed state, a basically nonexistent entity. True, the country has been embroiled in a civil war that began in 1991, which destroyed all its institutions of governance. During this long-drawn-out civil strife, several peacemaking interventions have been made by intergovernmental organizations, regional governments, and Somali elders. From 1992, large Somali delegations have been assembled in the capitals of East African countries to negotiate for peace, which ended up producing resolutions that often resulted in new political formations. Because these outfits were mostly put together by foreign agencies through threats and promises of political or monetary support or retributions, the Somali political crisis, with very limited and sporadic positive signs,

is still hurtling on. In its latest iteration, the breakaway state of Somaliland launched an unprovoked attack on Laascaanood, visiting indescribable horrors on the residents of this town. But what is different this time around—despite the toll of the conflict—is the remarkable rise of the Somali ʿulamāʾ as formidable agents of peace. In this new phase of the war, a section of the Somali ʿulamāʾ has come out to declare their opposition to the war. It is not the first time that the ʿulamāʾ have acted as a bulwark against aggression, hostility, or injustice, but the swiftness and forcefulness with which they spoke during this specific outbreak took many Somalis by surprise. In a blistering message to Muse Bihi Abdi, the leader of Somaliland, some of the ʿulamāʾ demanded a speedy ceasefire and a resumption of peace. This paper is therefore an assessment of the activities of the ʿulamāʾ in the current discourse for peace in Laascaanood, using social media. It explores what role the ʿulamāʾ played as peacemakers by assessing their speeches in mosques and other religious-themed functions.

Setting the Context

Toward the tail end of 2022 and at the beginning of 2023, the ongoing conflict between Somaliland and the residents of Laascaanood, a town of a little over 500 kilometers east of Hargeisa, the capital of Somaliland, picked up momentum. Somaliland forces bombed the town, killing hundreds of people, destroying property, and creating hundreds of thousands of refugees. [1] While the news media has tried to locate the triggers of this conflict in the short term, this town and its place in Somali history is much broader and deeper. Though a relatively small town in terms of physical size and population, Laascaanood's current predicament can be understood through a more in-depth analysis. This is especially imperative and urgent as much of the news media, policymakers, and commentators claim, rather erroneously, that the assassinations of prominent residents of Laascaanood and the mistreatment of ordinary people by Somaliland forces were the causes. For instance, they point to the brutal assassination of Abdifatah Abdullahi Abdi—a prominent local personality—as the immediate trigger of the uprising. While it is true this incident catapulted many to action, it was the last straw of a long-running suppression that sparked the revolution which resulted in the expulsion of Somaliland from the Sool region. In fact, this crisis offers us a rare glimpse into the more general though pervasive challenges facing Somalia and Somali territories, where, like the rest of Africa, they were carved out and arbitrarily incorporated into other countries with no regard for local sentiments.

In a similar manner, the area inhabited by Somalis was broken up and placed under different European colonial administrations: French (Djibouti), British

(northwestern Somalia, and northern Kenya), and Italian (southern Somalia). Western Somalia, a restive region that has traditionally been referred to as the Ogaadeen region and more recently Kilil 5 in the Ethiopian political reorganization of the 1990s, has a complicated history, and it would eventually be forced to join with Ethiopia without any regard to local sentiments. Thus, the consequence of this history is that these regions and their residents are forced to live with the ever-present ghost of colonialism, influencing daily life in monumentally real ways as is the case with Laascaanood. After independence and the reunification of northern and southern regions of Somalia, many had assumed there would be a solid political formation given the "homogeneity" of Somalis. As we will see in the case of Laascaanood, a host of other factors, including colonial experiences, clannism, and the effects of the civil war have curtailed these assumptions as well as expectations. Perhaps the most remarkable reason for which many Somalis know the Sool region, in which Laascaanood is the major town, more than any other is its vigorous opposition to colonial rule. In the waning days of the 19th century and the first quarter of the 20th century, this region is known to have put up a spirited rebellion against European colonialism and their local collaborators; it is well remembered for its two-decade-long war against the British. Under the stewardship of the revered Somali nationalist, Islamic scholar, and poet, Mohamed Abdille Hassan, or simply the Seyid, the Dhulbahante who dominate this region waged and sustained one of the longest anticolonial uprisings against the British in Africa. With his two-pronged approach to the war—fighting colonialism (and western culture) from gaining a foothold as well as preventing local support, the Seyid and his supporters fought with zeal and determination. The Dhulbahante—the Seyid's maternal uncles—were the backbone [2] of his mission and his struggles and were labeled Daraawiish, a term that they came to happily domesticate. Because of their support of the Seyid, the Dhulbahante paid a heavy price, losing countless men in the many battles they fought, not to mention the loss of property. In the colonial imagination of Africa, the British are generally notorious for their use of collective punishment, [3] and in their confrontation with Somalis, they confiscated livestock, seized water wells, and torched grazing lands to rein in this opposition. By standing up to the force of the British and their local collaborators, the Dhulbahante came to cultivate an image of great fighters and warriors.

More recently, however, Laascaanood has attained legendary status in the Islamic reform movements in Somalia. Some scholars have theorized that al-Shabab, the terror network that operates in much of Somalia and other parts of the Horn of Africa (HoA), came into existence in Laascaanood. [4] The claim is that Somali youth who were members of Al-Ittihad Al Islamiya (AIAI) and the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC), groups that some argue directly birthed al-Shabab, met in

Laascaanood to chart the way forward after the Ethiopians dismantled UIC. Subsequently, a dozen or so of these youth in attendance stormed out of the conference while deliberations on the nature of the new organization to be formed were still ongoing. These rebellious youths were not the typical Somali youth, but veterans who had participated in foreign wars. The motive for their storming out arose from a proposition that was made in the meeting to form a Salafi political organization. The youth argued that the terms of the proposition were too acquiescent to the prevailing conditions in Somalia. Later, the dissidents convened a parallel meeting in Laascaanood from which al-Shabab would eventually be born. In large part, however, it is the geographical location of this town that has tended to most profoundly result in its constant instability. Since the collapse of the Siad Barre regime in 1991, what used to be Somalia descended into factions controlled by clan-based warlords and then more recently provinces or states. Consequently, many controversies have arisen over who owns where and who belongs in it, and Laascaanood is no exception. In fact, Laascaanood presents the best-case example of the disaster left behind by European colonialism. The town is caught in the middle of the breakaway states of Somaliland and Puntland, both of which claim the town and larger Sool region for different reasons—historical or otherwise [5]. Somaliland anchors its claims on the British colonial boundaries, which placed Laascaanood within its borders, as was clearly articulated recently by the Somaliland opposition leader Faysal Ali Waraabe. [6]. Puntland, on the other hand, points to the clan factor—a poignant feature of Somali social and political organization—as both Dhulbahante and Majeerteen are part of the Harti clan family of the larger Daarood. However, the majority of the Dhulbahante are staunch unionists with little appetite to secede from Somalia. Because of these contestations and the hostilities resulting from them, Laascaanood has been a theater of violence with costly consequences for the locals.

Theory and research method

Islam is widely considered to have no central authority like other faiths; however, the ʿulamāʾ have historically been a central pillar in Muslim communities and were by no means the only ones in the complex distribution of power. The authority of the ʿulamāʾ commenced with the Prophet Mohamed, who provided leadership par excellence in all areas of Muslim life: social, political, military, and religious. As Muslim rule developed and took shape in the subsequent centuries, the relationships between the ʿulamāʾ and the other structures of leadership oscillated and took various forms. But the last two centuries have presented a particular dilemma to the ʿulamāʾ[7]. It began with the arrival of European colonial enterprises, which unleashed an unparalleled test to their authority. These situations spilled into the

postcolonial era, where administrative outfits modeled after the colonial state sought to keep the ʿulamāʾ in check. The last several decades have only plunged the ʿulamāʾ into further quagmire, as they sought to remain relevant in the wake of mass Muslim education and the emergence of modern[8], university-educated practitioners. In addition, the crises that the Somali ʿulamāʾ have faced have been particularly adverse. In a society broken by wars, hostilities, displacement, and distrust, the ʿulamāʾ have found it especially impossible to project their voice. Many of these ʿulamāʾ are themselves refugees in foreign countries and are not able to speak directly to their audience in the HoA. The struggles of the Somali ʿulamāʾ speak to the more historical trend of crisis within Muslim authority, which in all likelihood will continue to persist.

This study used a blend of research methods; in particular, it utilized library research and the ethnographic method. While the former is clear and does not need much expounding, I clarify the latter, which was shaped by my own personal background. I am a native to the HoA region, and I have been following the geopolitical developments of this highly volatile region for the last two decades. While the bulk of any Somali-based news and information has traditionally traveled through word of mouth, this trend is now quickly moving online (YouTube clips, Facebook posts, WhatsApp messages, and the many Somali news websites). Because of my positionality and the fact that I was in Kenya during the course of this conflict, I tracked its evolution, culminating in the war that resulted in the expulsion of the Somaliland forces from Laascaanood. However, using local resources, especially Somali news websites, can be tricky, owing to their possible bias toward one party or another. I checked in the flow of information with people who were highly informed and sought their guidance. Similarly, the sermons of the ʿulamāʾ, as well as speeches by political leaders, set off a firestorm both online and offline, allowing me to partake in them and gain a more rounded perspective. I was able to watch the YouTube videos of the ʿulamāʾ as many times as I could, read the comments and other reactions, helping me get a feel for their attitude toward the conflict.

ʿUlamāʾ as peacemakers

The ʿulamāʾ are perhaps the only group of people who are celebrated in all Muslim societies around the world. While they are respected for the many activities they carry out in their respective communities as well as their leadership, the reverence and admiration that Muslims demonstrate toward them largely transpires from how they have been portrayed in the Qur'ān and the hadīth. The status of the ʿulamāʾ within Muslim societies is elevated above all others largely due to their religious

training, as illustrated in several verses of the Qur'ān. For instance, one of the verses depicts ʿulamāʾ as follows: "Are those who know equal to those who do not know?" (Surah al-Zumar, verse 9). In addition, the Prophet Muhammad is reported to have stated that the closest people to the status of prophethood are the people of knowledge.

These representations of the ʿulamāʾ follow from their possession of knowledge and the attendant responsibilities that accompany such a status, where they serve as guardians of the faith, interpreters of the sacred texts, various social functions within the community, and until recently have been among the few literate members of their societies [9]. For years and decades, they have committed themselves to studying the various disciplines in the Islamic sciences, including the Qur'ān, hadīth, and tafsīr, among others. Consequently, their knowledge and their impartiality have thrust them into a position of high status in their communities.
These portrayals of the ʿulamāʾ are quite prevalent among the Somalis as well, who are some of the earliest people to adopt Islam. Somalis are orthodox Sunnis of the Shafi'te persuasion; among the Somalis, Islam does not only shape their identity and how they view the world, but it also deeply influences their daily lives and the choices they make. However, since most Somalis cannot read or write Arabic and therefore are not able to understand the Qur'ān or hadīth, the ʿulamāʾ are located in the vitally pivotal position of interpreting it for the vast majority of them. What is more, the ʿulamāʾ are indispensable in other facets of Somali social life, such as resolving conflicts and maintaining collective peace. However, that is not to suggest that other structures of traditional peacemaking in Somali society do not or have not existed. Somalis have a well-developed system of arbitration that is somewhat independent of Islam.

The takeaway is that, despite the long history of Islam in the Somali peninsula, Somalis have not totally embraced a theocratic political organization, creating a buffer between the ʿulamāʾ and the socio-political class; instead, Somalis have continued to partly apply a cultural phenomenon referred to as xeer to maintain harmonious coexistence [10]. Xeer is a framework that embodies the totality of the Somali social cosmos—ranging from the simple rules of receiving a guest to marriage to peacebuilding—it is a complex web within which several loosely connected networks of people and ideas are constituted. Though Somalis share a common heritage in terms of their commonality in language and history, they have developed diverse sets of terminologies for their social and political representatives over the centuries, including such designations as sultan, boqor, garaad, and ugaas. Other more general terms like nabaddoon (peace seeker) and odayaal (elders) commonly allude to representatives, emissaries, or councils of elders. However, the most dominant unit of social organization in the realm of war and peace is the diya-

paying group [11]. Taking its inspiration from the Islamic conception, this is a unit of closely related individuals and families—though they sometimes run into the thousands—who have usually acted as each other's protectors, rallying around each other in defense of their kin or helping to pay blood money if one of their own committed murders.

In Somali history, a clear distinction has been made between two main groups of men and their involvement in peace and war: wadaad (pl. wadaaddo: man of religion) and waranle (pl. warnaleyaal, spear bearer) [12]. Wadaaddo embody religion (Islam) and are primarily tasked with carrying out religious functions. They are imams (leading prayers and other devotional activities), teachers, and supervisors of social activities in their communities. At times of war, they are also crucial in working toward and bringing peace. On the other hand, waranleyaal—particularly in the nomadic milieu in which these terms came into effect—were mostly men who were illiterate (on issues of Islam) and whose concerns lay with the declaration of war and fighting in those wars, hence spear bearers. The distinctions emerging from these roles have become more meaningful in postcolonial and urban Somalia. As a society that has been gradually abandoning its nomadic ways of life to settle in towns and cities and eventually in the diaspora, the responsibilities of the ʿulamāʾ are growing more regimented but also convoluted as they deal with more diverse members of society. The tasks they shoulder are continuously being reshaped and reorganized to confront never-before-seen challenges; this essentially implies that while they still attend to their traditional roles, they also act as checks and balances on the complexities of the modernizing and transnational life of the Somali people.
Despite these strict demarcations, there are instances in Somali social history in which the wadaaddo have confronted the waranleyaal, which in its modern iteration is the nation-state. In these situations, the wadaaddo felt that the waranle had contravened or misrepresented Islam and considered it their place to correct it. One (in)famous example is their opposition to Siad Barre's social programs of the mid-1970s. Barre swept into power in 1969 through a bloodless coup and adopted scientific socialism to organize Somali society [13]. Many argue that his regime pushed Islam to the margins and lessened its traditionally central space by replacing it with socialism. But Barre's regime and the ʿulamāʾ came to a head when the former waded into the enormously sensitive area of Islamic family law. In particular, Barre sought to enact laws that were at the time viewed as alien to a deeply conservative Muslim society, attracting widespread condemnation from the ʿulamāʾ and the general public. In these new laws, the government proposed more rights for women in inheritance and divorce, even arguing for equality between them. The ʿulamāʾ led a growing disapproval of these new propositions and instigated a campaign of denunciation; they took to their pulpits to vehemently denounce these

laws that ordinary Somali folk could not do for fear. Deeply infuriated by this rare challenge to his ironclad, dictatorial rule, Barre moved swiftly to punish the ʿulamāʾ; he would eventually execute ten of them in 1975 [14].

ʿUlamāʾ in a war-torn society: Sheikh Mohamed Abdi Umal

Even by the standards of the long-running Somali civil war, the death and displacement that Somaliland has visited upon the residents of Laascaanood is horrifying. At a time when a tiny event occurring anywhere in the world can travel to the other end of the world within minutes of it happening, this conflict spread like wildfire, enraging most Somalis and rekindling debates on diverse topics such as political/clan violence, who could legitimately arbitrate in these conflicts, as well as breakaway states and their place in modern Somali society. Across various social media platforms, Somalis have expressed their concerns about what they consider not only a continuation of the fighting that has come to define their recent history but one that was unnecessary and avoidable. National, regional, and global news networks have been constantly reporting on the severity of the conflict, which has created an enormous humanitarian crisis. In the process, news and social media posts coming out of Laascaanood have also stirred the ʿulamāʾ to renewed activism.

The ʿulamāʾ have been at the center of Somali public life for as long as Islam has been around. During Somalia's civil war, for instance, many Somalis argued that as political and military leaderships have failed to unify the country and create any meaningful administration, Islam was better placed to do so. Consequently, a host of Islamist groups have come and gone, with al-Shabab resiliently outlasting them all. Over this time, however, the more centrist group with the deepest level of acceptance among Somalis was the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC), which briefly wrenched power from the notorious warlords and brought about a semblance of stability in the mid-2000s. The ICU's rise to power in Mogadishu and its surrounding villages was triggered by the unprecedented surge in lawlessness, forcing local residents, as is presently the case with Laascaanood, to take the matter into their own hands and defend themselves. After the ICU was routed by the Ethiopian military, who saw them as a threat, one of its core members, Sharif Sheikh Hassan, was elected and served as Somali president from 2009 to 2012. More recently, Ahlu Sunnah Wal Jama'a (ASWJ), a Sufi-leaning outfit, took up arms and confronted al-Shabab, gaining widespread acceptance in the central regions of Somalia [15]. The genesis of this encounter was al-Shabab's imposition of its interpretations of Islam and its deep detestation toward Sufi Islam, setting off ideological and sectarian contests.

However, despite the relative successes in peacemaking, the ʿulamāʾ in the Somali territories have been anything but organized [16]. As can clearly be seen in

this conflict in Laascaanood, there has hardly been any point in recent history when the ʿulamāʾ spoke with a unified voice. This may partly be explained by the fact that Somalis are a historically decentralized society and lack a single authority. Each ʿalim lived with his clan and moved around with them wherever they sought water and pasture in their transient lifestyle. Within this traditional setup, the ʿulamāʾ had to contend with the ever-powerful Sufi leadership. The latter did not possess as much knowledge as the regular ʿulamāʾ did: they did not study Islamic law, theology, or exegesis as the ʿulamāʾ did and could not offer any useful opinion on seminal religious matters or comment on emerging concerns or questions. However, what they lacked in learning and erudition, they made up for in political shrewdness; they marshaled the crowds and controlled both the resources and the discourse, while the ʿulamāʾ simply acted complementarily to them. In addition, during the colonial period, the ʿulamāʾ found themselves in the difficult situation where the secular leadership overshadowed them. These historical contexts have shaped how they have conducted themselves, including the absence of organizations or associations. Each ʿalim spoke on his own behalf, as they have over the centuries, and as is the case for the conflict in Laascaanood. In what follows, I will discuss one ʿalim to illustrate the position taken by this ʿalim and the responses it has created in some quarters of the Somali population.

Sheikh Mohamed Abdi Umal is a Somali scholar and Imam based at his mosque in the predominantly Somali section of Eastleigh in Nairobi, Kenya. He was educated in xer/halaqāt (circle studies) in the HoA, formal madrasa education in Kenya, and is a graduate of the Islamic University in Madinah, Saudi Arabia, where he obtained a degree in shari'a. Accordingly, his educational background is a combination of the traditional and modern systems of education. Umal has been active in the region for more than two decades and has cultivated a large following because of his knowledge and eloquence; he confronts emerging issues for a population that has lacked a center to turn to for guidance and direction. He preaches against vices, immoral behaviors, and political and social corruption when he learns of them; he declares the onset of important events and dates such as Ramadan (the month of fasting) and the two eids (festivals that mark the end of Ramadan and Hajj). His position as a global Somali mufti has garnered a significant boost from the absence of a strong Somali central government to carry out these obligations. Accordingly, Umal has distinguished himself as a sheikh who addresses wide-ranging topics that span legal, social, and political matters, basing them on the Qur'ān and hadīth.

When the conflict in Laascaanood erupted, Umal was one of the first ʿulamāʾ to speak about its causes, consequences, and ways to end it. Skillfully weaving xeer (local customs) with the Qur'ān and the hadīth, he cautioned against the needless

spilling of a Muslim's blood. Cognizant of his prominence, stature, and the power of his voice, Umal outlined the trajectory of the conflict, who was culpable, and how to address it. In the end, however, he reiterated the pointlessness of dwelling on who to blame and instead pursuing solutions, drawing on the Islamic concept of maslaha. Putting maslaha into a more historical context, Umal recounted the outcome of the battle of Siffin, which took place between Ali ibn Talib and Mu'awiya ibn Sufyan. After Ali was murdered, Hassan, Ali's son and the Prophet's grandson, relinquished his quest for leadership for the sake of peace. However, despite extolling maslaha and its considerable potential to address this conflict, Umal was still adamant that the foundation of peace within Islamic shari'a was the equal provision of justice under the law. He lauded the relative peace that other towns and villages in Somaliland have enjoyed since the Somali civil war broke out, but which the residents of Laascaanood have been denied. Similarly, Umal also pointed to the importance of other Muslims acting as arbiters and mediators between warring Muslim parties. Arbitration is an indispensable instrument of peacemaking in Islam, and citing both the Qur'ān and hadīth, Umal observed that other Muslims should put pressure on Somaliland and the residents of Laascaanood to end the conflict.

Umal's speech was not only an account of the triggers of the conflict or ways to amicably conclude it, but also tangible steps to be taken to that end. He put forth a roadmap that would bring about peace. While other ʿulamāʾ voiced their strong desire for peace, Umal clearly articulated ways to achieve it. Umal proposed the ʿulamāʾ as the best alternative to mediate in the conflict. For a region that has struggled with insecurity since independence, Umal's reasoning is obvious but also complex. As a Muslim scholar, Umal asserted that the deployment of shari'a was the only surefire means of attaining peace. Somali ʿulamāʾ, like ordinary Somalis, are keenly suspicious of the presence of foreign interventions in Somalia, whether for peacekeeping or to help in the provision of humanitarian aid. From the Italians and British to the Americans in the early 1990s, to the present day, where an array of foreign troops under the auspices of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) operate in Somalia, local hostility has only intensified. The rise of Islamist groups in Somalia has partly been geared toward ousting these foreign troops, who are viewed as occupiers. Umal's notion of deploying the ʿulamāʾ to tackle local tensions would mean that only Somalis—or fellow Muslims—would be engaged in peacemaking. As such, the proposition of the ʿulamāʾ to mediate the peace process would eliminate any doubt of bias or one-sidedness.

The Laascaanood conflict: Peacemaking, clannism, and social media

A popular Somali refrain goes as follows: Sheikh tolkii kama Janna tago. This age-old maxim can roughly imply that a sheikh does not leave his people and go into

Jannah (paradise) without them. What, in essence, this means is that even a man of religion is still a member of his clan with whom he stands, no matter the situation. While this depiction might be hyperbolic and may not necessarily speak to the conduct of the majority of the ʿulamāʾ who place Islam before their social and political affiliations, it is nonetheless revealing of the Somali approach to the significance of the clan and how it impacts their conceptualization of identity. Suffice it to say, the two—Islam and the clan system—have operated amongst Somalis for centuries and have been profoundly powerful, sometimes in contradictory ways, in the formation of the Somali worldview. While Somalis are deeply Muslim, the clan identity amongst the waranleyaal has remained a powerful medium of self-identification, coming, in some cases, even before Islam. This identity shapes how a Somali would relate to fellow Somalis and to the world, and the ʿulamāʾ have been caught in the fray. For instance, during the colonial period when the ʿulamāʾ rose to positions of social and political leadership, leading revolts against colonialism, criticisms have swirled that they did so at the behest of their clans or that they targeted opposing clans. In postcolonial Somalia, certain quarters of the ʿulamāʾ have been accused of siding with their clans in the various social and political formations of the country. The situation has, however, only worsened during the civil war and now in the age of social media.

Despite this and more generally, the emergence of modern technology and the Internet has been enormously beneficial to the ʿulamāʾ, as it has allowed them to conduct da'wa (pl. da'wat, invitation to Islam or simply to preach to fellow Muslims) very easily and conveniently [17]. Somali ʿulamāʾ based in the HoA, the Middle East, or in the West have their own YouTube channels where they deliver lessons in the various fields of the Islamic sciences such as the Qur'ān, hadīth, and tafsīr, among others; however, the majority of the ʿulamāʾ tend to preach about Muslim daily or occasional ritual practice. In addition to teaching live sessions, they also post recordings of topics that range from the ways to pray correctly to more complicated social challenges such as raising Muslim children in the contemporary world. Consequently, they attract thousands of viewers as well as followers. On the other hand, social media has had a destructive effect on modern societies, particularly through its remarkable capacity to stoke and spread violence. This is especially the case for the Somali community with an already active civil war. Social media has been used as a tool to memorialize historical grievances between various warring factions but also to exacerbate existing ones. Acutely aware of these detrimental effects of social media, the ʿulamāʾ consistently advise against its harmful effects. What they are also concerned about are the ways in which social media users have a penchant for twisting words or taking them completely out of context.

In anticipation of the backlash that their speeches would generate, especially those that touch on the clan, some of the ʿulamāʾ avoid commenting on it. In the case of Laascaanood, leading ʿulamāʾ who live in Somaliland, such as Sheikh Mustafa and Sheikh Dirir, have been criticized for not speaking about the injustices in Laascaanood, with some even pointing to their clan affiliation for their reluctance, even unwillingness, to speak up. Nonetheless, some ʿulamāʾ have prefaced their talk with the caution that neither clan nor political or regional affiliations influence their decision to comment; instead, they are guided by the desire to bring about peace or maintain it. One of those ʿulamāʾ who introduced his speech with such a disclaimer was Sheikh Umal. Cognizant of the sensitivity of the conflict in Laascaanood, Umal began his sermon in this way: "I know that the knowledge and understanding of the average Somali revolves around clannism. I also understand that most Somalis will say that I am addressing this issue because of the clan to which I belong. However, I do not care. What is important to me is to raise the voice of justice," [18]. Umal's predictions regarding how his words would be misinterpreted bore out to be true only a few hours after making those comments. His message was twisted in ways he could perhaps barely imagine. Immediately after the video of his talk was uploaded on YouTube, social media sites were abuzz with a variety of reactions. What was bizarre was not only how negative and vitriolic some of the comments were, but their cruelty and the extent to which the accusations painted Umal as a tribal warmonger and anything but an 'alim or a peacemaker. Perhaps unexpected were the people who made those comments. One fabrication that was leveled against Umal was that he had abandoned his role as a religious scholar and leader. These comments all emanated from Somaliland, where government officials and ordinary people partook in the slander of Umal in equal measure. Below, I offer a few examples, beginning with a press statement by a politician from Somaliland who said as follows:

> "Sheikh Umal and Shibli (both of whom belong to the same clan family as the residents of Laascaanood) have put the Qur'ān and the hadīth away; instead, they have resorted to using Islamic texts (Qur'ān and hadīth) as maah maahyo (mere poetry), interpreting them the way they want (wrongly) for the purpose of galvanizing support for their clans (Daarood), while at the same time targeting those they want (Isaaq)." [19]

The politician's approach was to discredit Umal and his standing in the Somali community by distorting his message. His denunciation used Umal's clan association with the residents of Laascaanood and Islam as a cover for his real—albeit nefarious—intentions. The more far-reaching strategy, however, was to fan the clan fervor by ramping up support for a war that few supported both regionally and globally. Hence, the actual target of this distortion and misinformation was the

residents of Somaliland, to summon them in pursuit of larger political legitimacy and social mobilization. Unfortunately, many took the bait and piled insults on Umal in shockingly unspeakable ways. In fact, the excerpt above would appear quite mild and measured in comparison to the more virulent ones written under Umal's YouTube video. Despite the anonymity provided by social media, one need not expend much energy to determine the commentators' regional and clan affiliations based on their reaction to the video.

Below are a few of the remarks on Umal's speech as shown on YouTube to explain the dilemma that Somali ʿulamāʾ encounter as they engage in peacemaking in their communities. I chose a few of them to demonstrate how Islam and clan identity intermingle in complex ways. These online remarks are written in a regular social media fashion: terse, informal, and without much form or organization. Often, they are written in Somali or English, or a combination of the two. What follows are some of the comments, with a rough English translation of those that have appeared in Somali. Fartun Haji, one of the first commentators under the video, wrote as follows, "Daaroodism iga dheh," which means that Umal was speaking at the behest of his clan, the Daarood. An account user under the name Khadar penned a more complex message which, as discussed in this paper, shows the intersection of Islam and the clan. He writes: "halkii masaajiddada maad soo marteen walee katahay anagana culimaanu leenay." This can roughly be translated to mean that they (Daarood, using Sheikh Umal as their representative) have now gone to the mosque to attack Isaaq, and that they (Isaaq) have their own ʿulamāʾ to represent them (fight back on their behalf) in the mosques. Finally, someone using the name Ahmed Joker left the most disturbing post when he referred to Umal simply as "sheeydhaan Umal," or Umal the Satan. The allusion to Satan is symbolic, as the character of Satan is held to be antithetical to Islam as one who misleads true Muslims from the Straight Path.

Such a predicament faced by the ʿulamāʾ has been a long time in the making and results largely from the turmoil ushered in by the colonial and postcolonial experiences. Ethnic tensions forged during these administrations, resulting from the drawing of arbitrary borders or favoring certain ethnic groups or individuals over others, have fostered deep antagonism that persists to the present. These hostilities have manifested themselves in the numerous corps d'état and civil wars that have characterized African politics over the last 60 years; in effect, they have shaped the ways in which Africans interact with their religious leaders. In fact, the harsh ways that certain ʿulamāʾ who spoke about the Laascaanood incident have been treated dovetail into a larger pattern of distrust toward African men of religion, regardless of the tradition. In particular, clergies of countries that have experienced ethnic violence have been accused of a similar deep involvement in violence. One revealing

example is the Rwandan genocide where a section of the clergy was accused of participating in the persecution of members of an opposing ethnic group. [20].

Conclusion

This article has examined the contemporary functions of the Somali ʿulamāʾ in carrying out their historical functions of peacemaking within their communities. It demonstrated the resilience of these ʿulamāʾ in the face of the many forces that are trying to undo or even oppose their authority or the work they do. Their efforts are frequently curtailed by attacks from traditional and political leaders, as well as ordinary people, even being accused of misrepresenting the true message of Islam. These attacks are often buttressed by social media, where the ʿulamāʾ are abused, vilified, and denounced. Still, many Somalis hold them in high regard and believe in their fairness and objectivity, often legitimized through the Qur'ān and the hadīth.

Cited References

1. Ahmed, Kaamil, "Tens of Thousands of Refugees Flee from Somaliland Clashes." *The Guardian*, February 22, 2023.

2. Hoehne, Markus. "Dervish State (Somali)." *The Encyclopedia of Empire* (2016).

3. Whittaker, Hannah. "Legacies of empire: State violence and collective punishment in Kenya's North Eastern Province, c. 1963–present." *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 43, no. 4 (2015). Retrieved on December 10, 2024.

4. Shinn, David. "Al Shabaab's foreign threat to Somalia," *Orbis* 55, no. 2 (2011).

5. Haji, Mohammed, "What is driving conflict in the disputed Somali city of Las Anod," aljazeera News, Feb. 20th 2023.

6. Watch the full video here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6BAn5a0Rm_

7. Robinson, Francis. "Crisis of Authority: Crisis of Islam?" *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 19, no. 3 (2009).

8. Eickelman, Dale F. "The coming transformation of the Muslim world." *Middle East Review of International Affair* 3, no. 3 (1999).

9. Gilsenan, Michael, *Recognizing Islam: religion and society in the modern Middle East* (London, IB Taurus) 2006.

10. Adam, Hussein. "Islam and politics in Somalia," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 6, no. 2 (1995).

11. Lewis, Ioan. *A Modern History of the Somali: nation and state in the Horn of Africa*. Ohio University Press, 2003.

12. Andrzejewski, B. "Is there Arabic influence in Somali poetry?" *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 23, no. 1 (2011).

13. Makinda, S. "The Somali crisis and the post-cold war order." In *Political and Strategic Changes in the Indian Ocean Region: Implications for Australia*, pp. 61-75 (Indian Ocean Centre for Peace Studies) 1993.

14. Marchal, Roland, and Zakaria Sheikh. "Salafism in Somalia: Coping with coercion, civil war and its own contradictions." *Islamic Africa* 6, no. 1-2 (2015).

15. Hassan, Abdullahi. "Inside Look at the Fighting between Al-Shabab and Ahlu-Sunna Wal-Jama," *World* (2009).

16. Shafat, Abdifatah. Transformation of Islam in Northern Kenya: Changing Islamic Discourses in Garissa Town and the Influence of Returning Kenyan Somali Graduates from Two Saudi Universities (PhD Diss. University of Bayreuth, Germany, 2021).

17. Moore, Kathleen. "Da 'wa in the United States." *The Oxford Handbook of American Islam* (2014).

18. For more on this, watch here: Video explanation on YouTube.

19. The full speech can be accessed here: Find the speech here: YouTube Video.

20. Magnarella, Paul. "Can the US State Department Surrender Rwandan Fugitives to the UN Criminal Tribunal?" *African Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 3 (1998).

ISSN 2575-6990.