

# Self-legitimation in selected speeches of Abubakar Shekau, the Boko Haram terrorists leader

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines self-legitimation in selected speeches of Abubakar Shekau, the longest-serving leader of Boko Haram terrorists (BHT). The article analyses seven of the speeches Shekau delivered during his reign as the BHT leader between 2009 and 2021, using f4analyse as a coding tool and Theo van Leeuwen's (2008. *Discourse and practice: New tools for critical discourse analysis*) Discourse Legitimation approach to discourse analysis. The analysis discloses that Shekau uses three legitimation strategies: authorisation, moralisation and rationalisation to justify the actions and practices of BHT. The three legitimation strategies are linguistically realised through positive self-presentation strategy by engaging in self-glorification, personalising and collectivising victory, and claiming and announcing success to legitimate the mission of the group in carrying out the struggle. The strategies are deployed to positively present Abubakar Shekau as fighting a legitimate struggle.

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## Introduction

Studies on global terrorism, especially outside Africa, have recognised the discourse strategies and ideological issues that relate to terrorism discourses. Scholars like Clutterbuck (1973) and Wilkinson (1977) have engaged in systematic research instrumental to the development of the field of terrorism. Some other studies have examined terrorists' upheaval vis-a-vis political violence (Droogan & Peattie, 2016), media constructions and representations (Altheide, 2009; Nacos, 2002) and terrorists' speeches (Taylor, 2013), terrorists' ideological orientations as Islamists, fundamentalists and so forth (Baker & Vessey, 2018; Macdonald, 2003), wars on terrorism by political leaders (Ivlie, 2005). Other scholarly works have engaged terrorist-related matters across the world; for instance, in the Middle East, most of such studies have been on the *Al-Qaeda* terrorists and the 9/11 attacks (Blanchard, 2007) and some on ISIS/ISIL (Cockburn, 2015; El-Nashar & Nayef, 2019).

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Extant studies on ISIS/ISIL and *Al-Qaeda* terrorists have dominated terrorism-focused research endeavours. Such studies have examined the role of the Internet in giving terrorists prominence and more relevance. Simons (2018) examines the ISIS brand, submitting that ISIS uses language as a propaganda tool to shape an emotional perception of the projected reality. Other studies have emphasised how ISIS uses the internet to spread its message online. Lieberman (2017) in his paper, 'Terrorism, the Internet, and Propaganda: A Deadly Combination' submits that the Internet has transformed terrorists' usage of propaganda in numerous ways, including posting messages directly on social media and websites, reaching a wider audience since the spatial barrier is broken, taking advantage of the non-regulation of Internet postings, taking advantage of the anonymisation-supported Internet, encrypting to ease communication secrecy without law enforcement, among other. Irshaid (2014) confirms that ISIS uses YouTube videos for campaign purposes and to recruit new members. Similarly, Awan (2017) opines that ISIS has manipulated the use of the Internet to promote its ideological leanings by developing an app to spread its propaganda via the use of images and streaming of violent online videos. Alghorra and Elsobky (2018) discuss how the arrival of the Internet benefitted ISIS, enabling them to release numerous pieces of propaganda via Twitter and other social media platforms. The use of the Internet by ISIS and other terrorist groups has also been linked to Boko Haram – the terrorist organisation of interest in this study. Osisanwo (2024, p. 14) avers that Boko Haram, like other terrorist groups, 'project, protect and promote their ideologies through (social) media publicity, subtle/real threat and recruitment campaigns'. In Africa, existing studies have examined the activities of *Boko Haram* (Chiluwa, 2017; Odebunmi & Oloyede, 2016; Osisanwo, 2016, 2019, 2020), some on *Al-Shabaab* (Ortiz, 2013), *Ansaru* (Chiluwa, 2017), *Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahidiin* of East Africa (Meredith, 2005); *Ansar al-Din* in Mali (Shurkin et al., 2017), among others, especially about representations by the media. However, despite the considerations, previous studies have not sufficiently explored the rhetoric or speeches of terrorists, especially the speeches of Boko Haram terrorists (BHT).

Despite the relevance and importance of legitimisation in unearthing discourse strategies in terrorism discourse, existing studies have not sufficiently deployed it to unpack the hidden constructions in the discourses. The application of legitimisation to the deconstruction of discourses has been applied to language use concerning compulsory education (Van Leeuwen, 2007), in news(paper) discourse (Ali et al., 2016; Doudaki & Boubouka, 2019; Sadeghi et al., 2014), in the speeches of political leaders (Reyes, 2011), parliamentarians (Rojo & van Dijk, 1997), and political activists (Igwebuiké & Akoh, 2022). Nonetheless, scholarly attention has not been devoted to analysing legitimisation in the speeches of terrorists whose voices are often seen through their leaders who occasionally air their grievances and make their speeches public. In such speeches, terrorist leaders deploy language strategies to justify their actions, battles and struggles, and fight against the government and people of a country or community.

Abubakar Shekau, the longest-serving leader of Boko Haram, was a Kanuri man from Yobe State, and was born in 1975. He served as deputy leader of Boko Haram's founding leader, Mohammed Yusuf until his (Yusuf's) execution in July 2009. Upon the death of Yusuf, the activities of Boko Haram were rested for a while. Shekau emerged as the new leader, after a regrouping period. Upon assumption of office in 2009, Shekau led the transformation of the group from an underground sect to a deadly insurgency

group in Nigeria and neighbouring countries. The Boko Haram (BH) movement was founded in 2002 by Mohammed Yusuf in the city of Maiduguri. The goal of the movement was to establish a Sharia government. The BH is an outgrowth of the Maitatsine uprising of the 1980s and the religious and ethnic tensions that followed in the late 1990s (Adesoji, 2011; Osisanwo, 2016). Boko Haram terrorists (BHTs) have been attacking African countries, especially Nigeria, and other countries in the North Region of Cameroon, Niger and Chad. The group is opposed to a Western-based incursion that erodes traditional values, beliefs and customs among Muslim communities (Osisanwo, 2016). The 2022 report of the *Global Terrorism Index* (GTI) records that Nigeria ranked 6th among the ten countries that were most affected by terrorism-induced deaths all over the world. The six countries come in the order – Afghanistan (9109), Iraq (8511), Somalia (8398), Burkina Faso (8270), Syria (8250) and Nigeria (8233). The alarming terrorism-induced death rate in Nigeria conflicts with the general claim by the state that the BHT has been decimated. Abubakar Shekau pledged allegiance to ISIL leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in March, 2015. By 2016, a disagreement ensued between Shekau and ISIS. Shekau was requested to relinquish the leadership of Boko Haram to Abu Musab al-Barnawi; however, he refused. Shekau's refusal led to the emergence of the splinter group known as Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP). This led Shekau to end his relationship with ISIS. In 2021, through ISWAP, ISIS launched a major operation against Abubakar Shekau and his supporters at the Sambisa Forest. When Shekau discovered there was no escape route for him, rather than allow himself to be killed by the opposing group, he decided to detonate an explosive device which killed him on 19 May 2021. Hence, he was the deadliest and longest-serving leader of Boko Haram, having led from 2009 to 2021. Both Nigerian and international security services had hunted Abubakar Shekau for over 10 years without success.

Under the reign of Shekau, Boko Haram bombed many public buildings, kidnapped Nigerians of different ages, and shot and killed many others. The group earned global attention following the 2014 kidnapping of 276 girls from Chibok School, Borno State, Nigeria. Shekau characteristically released videos to relay the demands of the group. In May 2014, he released a video where he asserted that his goal was to create a caliphate. The group seeks the creation of an independent Islamic state in northern Nigeria solely administered by Sharia laws (Chiluwa, 2017). Among others, the group also strove for the self-exclusion of its members from the mainstream corrupt society by living in areas outside or far away from society to intellectualise and radicalise the revolutionary process that would ultimately lead to a violent takeover of the [Nigerian] state (Umar, 2011). Since 2010, the group has engaged in unabated attacks on the Nigerian State, principally attacking villages and towns in the northeast. Such states were later declared the Islamic Caliphate of Boko Haram terrorism in the Northeastern States of Borno, Yobe and Adamawa in 2014 (Adesote et al., 2022). With the attacks, the BHT were able to capture different towns which they declared as their territories. In August 2014, they took over Gwoza town and the BHT leader, Abubakar Shekau 'declared the town a Caliphate and hoisted their flags in Ashigashiya ward of Gwoza Local Government Area' (Adesote et al., 2022, p. 139). Besides Gwoza, they later gained partial or full control of other villages and towns including Bama, Dikwa, Ngalla, Kala-Balge and Gwoza (Borno State); (Madagali, Michika and Mubi (Adamawa State); and Gujba and Gulani (Yobe State) (*The News*, 24 November 2014:45). Shekau pledged allegiance to ISIL leader,

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, in March 2015. During his reign, more than 30,000 people were killed and over two million were displaced from their homes (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2021). Existing studies have not sufficiently examined BHT language. Chilwa and Ajiboye (2014) deployed the critical discourse theory to examine ideology in Boko Haram tweets. The application of other critical discourse models like legitimisation promises to further enhance the reading of the speeches.

The different videos released by Shekau were replete with legitimisation strategies to promote the individuality of the group. This study, therefore, examines Shekau's use of self-legitimation strategies in selected speeches, and the study is guided by the following research questions: (1) How did Abubakar Shekau use linguistic resources in the selected speeches to justify or legitimate himself and his group, the BHT? And (2) what are the social and ideological implications of the deployed legitimisation strategies for Nigeria, Africa and the world?

### Discourse construction of legitimisation

'Legitimation', also called 'legitimisation', refers to making 'justification' (Reyes, 2011). Legitimation is justifying one's action or a social process. Legitimation can also be defined as discourses that explain, clarify or justify the appropriateness of a social. When speakers speak or write, whether politically or otherwise, legitimisation is at the core of their speech to convince their audience. Thus, legitimising war has always been an aim of many speeches, where the speech giver is about to send arms serving a certain agenda (van Dijk, 2005). As Van Leeuwen (2008, p. 105) has suggested, legitimisation provides an answer to the questions 'Why should we do this?' and 'Why should we do this in this way?' The legitimisation process is accomplished through argumentation when a person or group presents an argument to explain their actions or to seek approval for their actions (Rojo & van Dijk, 1997). As text producers, such persons are at a vantage position to construct language to their advantage. Chilton says legitimisation is

usually oriented to the self, includes positive self-presentation, manifesting itself in acts of self-praise, self-apology, self-explanation, self[-]justification, self-identification as a source of authority, reason, vision and sanity, where the self is either an individual or the group with which an individual identifies or wishes to identify (Chilton, 2004, p. 47).

Van Leeuwen and other scholars (Rojo & van Dijk, 1997; Van Leeuwen, 2007, 2008; Van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999) who have worked on the grammar of legitimisation have identified some strategies including appeal to history, teleology (divine purpose or final cause), belief systems, authority, rationalisation, moralisation, narrativisation (construction of a compelling plot), mythopoeisis (storytelling), blame allocation, exceptionality or effectiveness (Bogain, 2017). In explaining the critical discourse model called the Discursive Construction of Legitimation, Van Leeuwen (2008, p. 125) explicates that legitimisation is 'discursively constructed to explain why social practices exist and why they take the forms they do'. In particular, Van Leeuwen (2007, 2008) has developed the legitimisation concept around four major categories: authority, rationalisation, moralisation and mythopoeisis. The Discursive Construction of Legitimation framework is considered suitable for this article because terror-related discourses are imbued with or assigned legitimisation

and because the present study seeks to unpark how self-legitimation strategies are manifested in the speeches of Abubakar Shekau. However, since cases of mythopoeisis are not found in the self-focused aspect that this paper examines, only the first three categories are deployed for analysis. Authorisation is legitimation by reference to personal or impersonal authority or authority of tradition, role models, experts, and conformity to support actions or practices; moralisation is legitimation with argument about value systems to justify actions, beliefs or practices; while rationalisation involves making claims to validate actions or social practices. A detailed explanation of each category is provided in the 'Analysis' section. The final methodological stage included an examination of linguistic means.

Some existing studies (Abduljalil & Mohd, 2014; Lirola, 2014; Oddo, 2011; Reyes, 2011; Vaara, 2014; Vaara & Tienari, 2011; Van Leeuwen, 2018) have investigated legitimation models and applied it to text and talk. The comprehensive theoretical platform presented by Van Leeuwen (2007, 2008) gives way to the analysis of more than one level such as sociological, discursive and linguistic practice of legitimation with a detailed analysis of lexico-grammatical manifestations of legitimations. Van Leeuwen's discursive construction of legitimation has been usefully applied in the analyses of text and talk, where text and talk producers validate or discredit actions, opinions and practices. Prevailing terrorism-and-violence-focused studies which have relied on the analytical insights from legitimation have been focused on other speeches but those issued by terrorists or terrorist organisations. Such studies which have dwelt on legitimising the use of force to control terrorists and other perpetrators of violence have examined military operations and the use of armed force in different war-like contexts (Aoi, 2011; Duyvesteyn, 2017; Motta, 2018; Podder, 2017; Succi Junior, 2021); police and the use of force during violence (Gerber & Jackson, 2017; Hirschfield & Simon, 2010; Levy, 2021); extrajudicial violence (Gordon, 2020); and war on terror in presidential addresses (Graham et al., 2004; Oddo, 2011).

The way terrorists legitimise their texts and talks requires accentuation because there is an avalanche of the manifestation of legitimation strategies in terrorist speeches. Much is left to be desired about legitimation in the context of terrorists' discourses. Extant studies have focused more on other Western terrorist discourses while BHT discourses are underexplored. One related study which dwelt on the discourses of both the Al Qaeda terrorists and the US is Motta and Succi Junior (2021). Motta and Succi Junior (2021) examine legitimation through collectivisation in Al Qaeda and US discourses on the use of force. More precisely, more needs to be uncovered in BHT discourses with a bias for self-legitimation strategies. Therefore, this study explores the BHT discourses within the underexplored African context, using the Nigerian terrorism situation as a case in point, to spread knowledge frontiers on legitimation beyond the current space.

## Methodology

The data for this paper comprised seven BHT speeches delivered by the longest-serving BHT leader, Abubakar Shekau during his reign (2009–2021) as the leader of the BHT. Out of the 10 available speeches delivered by Shekau, seven were selected for this study based on the heavy presence of self-legitimation strategies. The speeches were all directed to

the Nigerian State and Nigerians – young and old, with contents addressing BHT demands and expectations. The speeches were originally video-recorded and written predominantly in Arabic and Hausa languages; they were subsequently translated into English. Such English translations are often carried out by English-speaking members of the group, and membership of the group varies and includes educated professionals from northern Nigeria, and other neighbouring countries (Agbiboa, 2013 and Chiluya, 2017). The data focus is on the translated versions, which are believed to represent the objectives and goals of BHT. To authenticate the translated versions and ascertain originality, the speeches were certified by language experts – Arabic and Hausa. Although related researchers like Aggarwal (2017) have sourced their extremist texts from the Internet, other studies have emphasised the danger of possessing such texts because it can result in prosecution (Baker & Vessey, 2018; Droogan & Peattie, 2016; Frampton et al., 2017). The reproduction of such texts ‘can lead to the recirculation of extremist discourse’ (Baker & Vessey, 2018, p. 260). Due to the need to forestall recirculation, only token samples of the data are offered in this article.

The speeches focus on different issues ranging from address to President Goodluck Jonathan and President Muhammadu Buhari (at different times); address to the Emir of Kano, Sanusi Lamido Sanusi; threat to sell abducted schoolgirls; address to members; and address to Nigerians, including government, the military, Christians and young minds (Table 1). A common denominator in all the speeches is the abounding presence of self-legitimation discourse strategies to promote the cause of the BHT, free the self from guilt, and win the hearts of readers to self. Using van Leeuwen’s discursive construction of legitimation, the selected speeches were subjected to qualitative analysis by identifying and interpreting the diverse self-legitimation strategies used in the data. Using references to authorisation, moralisation and rationalisation strategies, meanings embedded in the speeches were uncovered.

f4analyse was adopted as a coding tool for coding, tracking and collating. f4analyse is a text-based software primarily for qualitative analysis and assists with document reading, structuring, comparing, creating summaries and interpreting. Obtained results were exported to Word and Excel for a clear overview of findings as coded. The selected speeches were examined for occurrences of legitimation and manually coded on the f4analyse coding platform. Using trained assistants, a re-coding was done some weeks after the first to guarantee precision and reliability. Assertions in the speeches were marked using the following conditions: (i) does an assertion try to justify BHT-induced actions or social practice? (ii) does an assertion reference an authority, a personality, an

**Table 1.** Data information.

|        |              | Focus  | Word count |
|--------|--------------|--|------------|
| Text A | 2012 (Jan)   | Addressed to the State (through President Goodluck Jonathan) | 971        |
| Text B | 2014 (March) | Addressed to BHT members                                     | 2498       |
| Text C | 2014 (April) | Addressed to BHT members (pre-Chibok girls’ kidnap)          | 828        |
| Text D | 2014 (May)   | Address on the kidnap of Chibok girls                        | 2236       |
| Text E | 2014 (Dec)   | Addressed to Emir of Kano                                    | 1034       |
| Text F | 2015 (Jan)   | Addressed to Nigerians                                       | 605        |
| Text G | 2015 (Sept)  | Addressed to Brothers in Islam and Nigerians                 | 604        |
|        |              | Total  | 8776       |

expert, an institution, a role model, supreme being, rule, policy, regulation, book of law to justify BHT-induced actions or social practice? (iii) does an assertion evaluate BHT-induced actions or social practice as right? and (iv) does an assertion argue that BHT-induced actions or social practice is rational?

## Data presentation and analysis

Table 2 presents the frequency of realisations of legitimisation strategies in the texts. The most frequently deployed strategy is Authorisation which occurred 358 times, while Moralisation and Rationalisation occurred 44 and 43 times respectively. The BHT leader's attempt to engage in authorisation, moralisation and rationalisation led to the dereliction of mythopoesis or tales. Out of the seven texts examined, Text B records the highest deployment of the use of legitimisation strategies (250 times). The text which was delivered in 2014 was practically devoted to explaining and expressing the goals and expectations of the group. The leader uses different strategies to justify the activities of the group. Text F, with just 34 occurrences of legitimisation strategies, has the least number since the leader spoke to reiterate existing stances.

## Self-legitimation by authorisation

As revealed in Table 2, authorisation is the most deployed strategy. Authorisation is 'legitimation by reference to the authority of tradition, custom and law, and of persons in whom institutional authority of some kind is vested' (Van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 92; Van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 106). Table 1 shows that Shekau relies on authorisation strategies 358 times to justify his actions and those of his group. References are made to authorities to authenticate the actions and inactions of the group. From the six sub-categories of

**Table 2.** Frequency of self-legitimation strategies in the texts.

| Legitimation strategies | TEXT A | TEXT B | TEXT C | TEXT D | TEXT E | TEXT F | TEXT G | Passages in the code |
|-------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|----------------------|
| Authorisation           | 28     | 103    | 54     | 76     | 68     | 8      | 21     | 358                  |
| Personal                | 7      | 50     | 29     | 31     | 28     | 6      | 7      | 158                  |
| Impersonal              | 10     | 40     | 10     | 25     | 15     | 2      | 4      | 106                  |
| Conformity              | 3      | 3      | 2      | 1      | 3      | –      | –      | 12                   |
| Tradition               | 6      | 8      | 11     | 12     | 17     | –      | 5      | 59                   |
| Role Model              | 2      | –      | –      | 4      | 2      | –      | 3      | 11                   |
| Expert                  | –      | 2      | 2      | 3      | 3      | –      | 2      | 12                   |
| Moralisation            | 10     | 4      | 14     | 7      | 2      | 3      | 4      | 44                   |
| Evaluation              | 2      | 4      | 14     | 5      | 2      | 3      | 4      | 34                   |
| Abstraction             | –      | –      | –      | –      | –      | –      | –      | –                    |
| Analogies/Comparisons   | 8      | –      | –      | 2      | –      | –      | –      | 10                   |
| Rationalisation 1       | 6      | 5      | –      | –      | –      | 2      | –      | 13                   |
| Goal orientation        | 5      | 4      | –      | –      | –      | 1      | –      | 10                   |
| Means orientation       | –      | 1      | –      | –      | –      | –      | –      | 1                    |
| Effect orientation      | 1      | –      | –      | –      | –      | 1      | –      | 2                    |
| Rationalisation 2       | 1      | 13     | 9      | 2      | 1      | 4      | –      | 30                   |
| Prediction              | –      | 6      | 2      | –      | –      | 2      | –      | 10                   |
| Explanation             | –      | 3      | 5      | 2      | 1      | 2      | –      | 13                   |
| Definition              | 1      | 4      | 2      | –      | –      | –      | –      | 7                    |
| Passages in the text    | 90     | 250    | 154    | 170    | 142    | 34     | 50     | 890                  |

authorisation, personal (158 times) was the most used, followed by impersonal (106 times), tradition (59 times), conformity (12), role model (12) and expert (11). Shekau's stretched usage of the authorisation strategy was to institutionalise the justification of his argument. Authorisation strategy is realised mostly in Text B (103 times). This is followed by Text D (76 times), Text E (68 times), Text A (28 times) and Text G (21 times), while Text F (8 times) has the least occurrence. Shekau's references to self and the supreme being, Allah or God almighty, are meant to justify the mission of the group. Shekau's deployment of 'I' to connote personal authority and 'WE' to connote group authority are used to constantly self-legitimate the activities of BHT. The second most deployed authorisation strategy, impersonal strategy (106 times), is used to depersonalise the activities of the group using and regularly referencing and reverencing Allah and God as the supreme authority whose dictates the group carries out. To authoritatively legitimate the activities and quests of the team, Shekau unabatedly deployed the 'because I say so', 'because so-and-so says so' in his texts, where the referent 'is someone in whom some kind of authority is vested' as an attempt to regularly answer the question – 'Why should we do this?' or 'Why should we do this in this way?' (Van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 106) as used in samples 1 and 2.

Sample 1: Despite all this, we will continue to act according to Allah's will. Therefore, as the leader of this community, I am asking you to convert. (Text A)

Sample 2: The information I have for you today concerns the attack in the city of Maiduguri, in the military camp they call the Giwa barracks, the barracks of the elephant. Allah is great. (Text C)

Reference to claims that the group is doing the bid of Allah legitimises the thought-process and actions of the Boko Haram group. For instance, in Sample 1, Shekau used the words 'we', 'leader' and 'I' to reference personal authority to justify his intentions as the leader of the BHT community, while he also used 'Allah' as impersonal but supreme authority to authenticate the marching order to covert non-Muslims to Muslims. With the use of the collective pronoun 'we', Shekau collectivises the struggle as belonging to the entire BHT group, while 'I', and 'me' in some other contexts personalise the struggle, thus using 'we' to manufacture in-group consensus and in-group solidarity (Rojo & van Dijk, 1997). In the expression 'we will continue to act according to Allah's will' in Sample 1, Shekau associates himself and BHT with pious individuals who carry out the orders of the Almighty to show that Allah is in full support of their actions. He also deploys the collective 'we' to reinvent confidence in the members of the BHT, assuring them that their mandate is divinely endorsed. Similarly in Sample 2, the words 'I' and 'Allah' serve as pointers. Shekau uses personal authority to give information on the attack in the city of Maiduguri. Characteristically, BHT leaders often warn or inform communities before and after an attack to send signals of self-confidence and threat to the inhabitants of such locales. Sample 2 confirmed that the BHT carried out the attack and Shekau was quick to swiftly depersonalise by deploying Allah as the supreme authority to praise for the success of the group's attack. The constant reference to Allah legitimates BHT attacks and other activities. Shekau wields this power of authority by asserting his claims with utter conviction, using the first person singular pronoun 'I', to show personal commitment to the dreams of BHT and present himself as a spokesperson

of the group and a dependable authority with commensurate power. He constantly references and defers to Allah in his constructions to construct himself as an Allah-sent BHT leader. Graham et al. (2004, p. 199) analyse war declarations, comparing George W. Bush's 'war on terror' speech and aver that war speeches contain 'an appeal to a legitimate power source external to the orator and presented as inherently good' (Van Leeuwen, 2018, p. 146). Similarly, the BHT leader consistently calls upon an external and superior power (Allah/God) to justify and legitimate the ideological pursuit of the BHT as not only doing Allah's bidding but morally evaluating the BHT behaviour as patterned after Allah's dictates which is inherently good.

Shekau mentions persons with some institutional authority to legitimate his claims. Such persons who are role models or who have expertise in the discourse are mentioned in the texts to justify his argument. The mention of the name 'Prophet Muhammed' and the claim that 'Prophet Muhammed took slaves himself during Badr war ... and killed many' in Sample 3 validate the need to take slaves and kill people who do not conform with their agenda.

Sample 3: There are slaves in Islam, you should know this, Prophet Muhammed took slaves himself during Badr war. He killed many and because of this, I will also kill ... (Text D)

Sample 4: This is Shekau, if you didn't get it [shoots in the air, then tosses his Kalashnikov aside] (Text E)

Shekau's argument in the text ideologically legitimised his actions, calling on other followers and believers in 'Prophet Muhammed' to adopt his behaviour on slavery and killing. Beyond Shekau's use of personal authority, he also occasionally assigns himself the expert role since his name has become associated with BHT. The mention of his name, Abubakar Shekau, is often accompanied by fear and trembling. It is the expert face behind the actions of BHT. 'In multimodal texts, the credentials may be visual, signified by ... professional attributes'. (Van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 107). This is evident in the video version of the text under examination, where Shekau demonstrated his capability. In Sample 4, for example, he legitimises his actions, priding in the mention of his name, being the expert identity that characterises BHT, tossed his Kalashnikov and shot in the air to validate the authenticity of his personality as the speaker. This is an instance of 'legitimation through emotions' (Reyes, 2011, p. 788), such that the mention of his name and the shooting action evokes different types of emotions in the minds of the viewers (of the video), readers (of the text) or listeners (of the speech). The appeal to emotions allows social actors to skew the opinion of their interlocutors or audience regarding a specific matter (Van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999). Hence, the action and message emotionalise 'his argument with passionate beliefs' to manipulate the audience (van Dijk, 2006, p. 378).

Shekau invokes institutionalised authorities, particularly using keywords like 'tradition', 'practice', 'custom', 'habit' to justify actions with authorities of tradition, invokes institutionalised authorities, using acclaimed Islamic 'policy', 'regulation', 'rule', 'law' to validate claims with impersonal authorities, and invokes the authority of conformity with implicit messages like 'everybody else is doing ...' or 'most people are doing it, and so should you' (Van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 109) or more appropriately in our context to say that is what is expected to be done by everyone who belongs to our group. For instance, in Sample

5, the expression ‘people should follow the rules of Islam, the way of Allah’ impersonalises the authority of the speaker, yet legitimises the speaker’s speech focus.

Sample 5: All we are saying is that people should follow the rules of Islam, the way of Allah. Only in this way will we have peace, and only in this way will our conscience be at rest in accordance with Allah’s word, but if we go against that, we won’t have peace. (Text A)

The whole idea in Sample 5 implies the need to conform to Islamic rules, practice and tradition, thus demanding the need for others to join the expected Islamic tradition. Shekau legitimises the authority of tradition by enforcing the group’s ideological inclination on all since ‘the rules of tradition are enforced by everyone’ (Van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 108), and stating that adhering to this is the only condition for peace. Arguably, Shekau validates his stance on BHT using the authorities of impersonality, conformity and tradition.

### Self-legitimation by moralisation

As revealed in Table 2, moralisation is deployed as a self-legitimation strategy 44 times. Moralisation is ‘legitimation by reference to value system’ (Van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 92; Van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 106). Moralisation legitimation is a value judgement strategy which entails making moral evaluations, abstractions and analogies or comparisons to justify a particular action or viewpoint as good or bad. It involves using the binarity principle to assess whether an action, a practice, a belief or tradition is necessary or unnecessary, good or evil, legal or illegal, normal or abnormal. In moralisation, as posited by Van Leeuwen (2018, p. 148) ‘it is not possible to find an explicit, linguistically motivated criterion for identifying moral evaluations ... we can only “recognise” them, on the basis of the commonsense cultural knowledge which we share with others’. It is unlike other legitimation strategies that have linguistic pointers. This position is corroborated by Doudaki and Boubouka (2019) and Igwebuiké and Akoh (2022, p. 584), ‘supports, critiques and blames and can have a strong emotional effect, helping actors to legitimate positions and decisions’. Shekau deploys the moralisation strategy to legitimate and validate the actions of the group. Table 2 shows that the strategy is mostly used in Text C, followed by Text A, Text D and others. Shekau uses it to self-legitimate the self-evaluation of self and group as good. Moralisation is used in Sample 6 to self-praise the intention of the group as clear, while in Sample 7 to praise the greatness of Allah and distance group members from hypocritical and lying intents.

Sample 6: Our intentions are clear. (Text A)

Sample 7: Allah is great ... .We’re not hypocrites or liars. (Text E)

Sample 8: We carried out the attacks in Maiduguri and we were responsible for the other attacks being carried out all over. (Text C)

Sample 9: Allah is great and has given us privilege and temerity above all people. (Text D)

Sample 10: Our brethren are in good state ... .If you want your girls, bring back our brothers. This is Shekau and I am good and healthy.’ (Text G)

Sample 11: Even if people don’t know us, Allah knows everyone. (Text A)

Sample 6–11 were culled from the addresses to the state, BHT members, Emir of Kano, Nigerians and the pre-and-post attacks on and kidnap of the Chibok girls in Borno State. Through moral evaluation in the sample, Shekau justifies his actions and claims that he is doing the bidding of a Supreme Being. Taking responsibility for the attack in Sample 8, he moralises BHT attack on Maiduguri, Chibok (girls) and its environs as carrying out Allah's dictates – forbidding the education of the girl child.

Using moral evaluation, Shekau praises the BHT attacks in territories and praises the killings achieved through Allah's empowerment. He deploys the collective 'we' to own up to the Maiduguri attack on behalf of the group. The rendition did not castigate or negatively portray BHT, rather it morally evaluates from the standpoint of the speaker who positively portrays and praises their killing efforts for engaging in a worthwhile venture for Allah. Thus, in Sample 9, he praises the BHT as heroes whose success was achieved by Allah who 'has given us privilege and temerity above all people'. The portrayal is akin to positive self-representation. van Dijk (2006, p. 373) notes that

the overall strategy of positive self-presentation and negative other – presentation is very typical in this biased account of the facts in favour of the speaker's or writer's own interests, while blaming negative situations and events on opponents or on the others (immigrants, terrorists, youths, etc.).

Shekau positively evaluates the state of BHT using positive adjectives to describe their association and membership: 'Allah is great' (Samples 7 and 9), 'our brethren are in good state' (Sample 10), and 'I am good and healthy' (Sample 10) in a bid to emotionally taunt those who are not on their side and morally justify the activities and state of the group.

In Sample 10, Shekau emotionally taunts the state and its security architecture since they have launched a series of counter-attacks on him and his group. The state-directed counter-attack that led to the release of this address was followed by speculations that the group had been wiped out, and possibly that Shekau had been killed. 'This is Shekau and I am good and healthy', therefore, moralises his health status to silence speculators and further reassure that BHT is on the right path directed by Allah. His choice of 'infidels' to qualify Nigerian soldiers in 'we ... killed infidels in Giwa Barracks' depicts the Nigerian army as a people who lack faith and belief in the dictates of Allah. The choice evaluates and links the success of BHT over the Nigerian soldiers to BHT's belief in Allah, while the downfall of their enemies was due to their unbelief. However, Shekau arrogates success to his group and failure to the state. Yet, a critical look at his self-issued condition for releasing the Chibok girls, in the 2015 address, is the release of BHT members that had been overpowered and arrested by the state as revealed in the statement 'If you want your girls, bring back our brothers'. Shekau plays down the success of the state over BHT, and associates the success of BHT with doing the bidding of Allah, not being infidels but believers in the doctrines of Allah. This strategy sustains his moralisation legitimisation of the actions of the BHT.

Shekau also morally justifies intention as 'comparisons can also be expressed explicitly, through similarity conjunction or circumstances of comparison' (Van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 112). In Sample 11, he compares others' knowledge of group members to Allah's knowledge and confirms satisfaction by the fact that members who carry out their activities are known, acknowledged and will be rewarded by Allah. Shekau's consistent deployment of Allah to moralise BHT's activities and actions positively evaluates 'self' and positions 'self'

on the right path. Overall, Shekau's strategy is akin to using positive self-presentation by moral superiority. And 'positive self-presentation by moral superiority' is a strategy deployed to manipulate the audience (van Dijk, 2006, p. 378); and such manipulative tactics in the case of BHT endear them to the audience for membership recruitment and retainment purposes (Osisanwo, 2024).

### Self-legitimation by rationalisation

Rationalisation is deployed as self-legitimation strategy 43 times as displayed in Table 2. Rationalisation is 'legitimation by reference to the goals and uses of institutionalised social action, and to the knowledge society has constructed to endow them with cognitive validity'. (Van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 92; Van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 106). Rationalisation as a legitimation strategy is used by a text producer to argue or to show that some activities are normal, natural, necessary or useful, while others are not. Rationalisation can be instrumental or theoretical. Instrumental rationality which involves the construction of the purposes of actions 'legitimizes practices by reference to their goals, uses and effects', while 'theoretical rationality legitimizes practices by reference to a natural order of things'. (Van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 101). Whereas instrumental rationalisation focuses on references to means, goals and effects of actions, theoretical rationalisation relies on explanation, definition and prediction.

Rationalisation strategy is used more in Text B (18 times), followed by Text C (9 times) and so on. However theoretical rationalisation legitimation (30 times) is more deployed than instrumental rationalisation legitimation (13 times). While Shekau uses theoretical rationalisation to state the goals, effects and means of carrying out the group's operations, instrumental rationalisation is deployed to define, explain and predict the group's agenda and potential success. Exemplifying instrumental rationalisation, Van Leeuwen (2008, p. 114) says 'I do x in order to do (or be, or have) y' (*goal orientation*), realizable by a purpose clause with "to," "in order to," "so as to," etc.' Or in the case of *means orientation*, the purpose is constructed as either 'I achieve doing (or being, or having) y by x-ing' Van Leeuwen (2008, p. 114). And in the case of *effect orientation*, it 'is expressed by result clauses with "so that," "that way," etc.' (Van Leeuwen (2008, p. 115). Shekau uses the three instrumental rationalisation references – means, goals and effects of actions, to support his arguments. For instance, in Sample 12, he states that the *goal* of the group's struggle is 'to act according to Allah's will', 'to fight', while the *effect* of acting to Allah's will and fighting is to 'go to paradise'.

Sample 12: We will continue to act according to Allah's will ... to fight you and go to paradise. (Text E)

Sample 13: Do you understand that this message is to claim credit for the Maiduguri attack and to talk about our brothers' liberation. (Text C)

Sample 14: Allah didn't tell us to love them, but to make them aware and persuade them to follow Him so that we can deliver justice. (Text A)

In Sample 13, Shekau states that the goal of the message is 'to claim credit for the Maiduguri attack' while the attack also serves as a means to gain attention to be in a vantage position to negotiate the liberation of their brothers. In Sample 14, he deploys

the *so-that* clause to justify his claim that the *effect* of Allah's commission which they are carrying out is 'so that we can deliver justice'. Instrumental rational arguments are offered to justify the goals of his group and the need for more Nigerians to join them.

Also exemplifying the three aspects of theoretical legitimation, van Leeuwen states that a *definition* is in place if the link between both activities is either 'attributive ("is," "constitutes," etc.) or signficative ("means," "signals," "symbolises," etc.)' (2008, p. 116). In the case of *explanation*, he says 'explanations describe general attributes or habitual activities of the categories of actors in question', and answers the 'why' question: 'because doing things this way is appropriate to the nature of these actors' (Van Leeuwen (2008, p. 116). *Predictions* claimed to 'have a ring of authority about them', are made based on expertise (Van Leeuwen (2008, p. 116). Shekau relies on the three theoretical rationalisation features – explanation, definition and prediction – to establish and clarify the group's demands. Exercising his ring of authority, based on personal assurance, expertise and confidence, Shekau boastfully predicts in Sample 15 that he is ready to kill all except those 'who follow Allah and the Prophet'. The threat self-glorifies the group's capability to unleash terror on all 'non-converts'. Shekau's emphasis on self-strength and capability is akin to 'emphasising speaker's power' which is one of the manipulation strategies identified by van Dijk (2006, p. 378).

Sample 15: I'll spare none but who follow Allah and the Prophet. (Text B)

Sample 16: This is to confirm to you that we carried out the Baga massacre, and we are going to do more. (Text F)

The strategy is also deployed in Sample 16 where he brags based on his expertise and experience in unleashing terror. He collectivises the credit for the Baga massacre as the collective success of BHT under his leadership and promises or predicts the competence of his group in performing more: 'we are going to do more'. Shekau also deploys *definition* and *explanation* strategies to rationalise and legitimise his actions. In Sample 17, he collectivises the definition, using the attributive 'are' to define the constituents of the membership of the group.

Sample 17: We are the Jamā'atu Ahl al-Sunnah Lidda'awati wa-l-Jihād ... We are the disciples of the Prophet Muhammad. (Text A)

Sample 18: I am not Boko Haram, I am Jamaatu Allus sunna lil daawati wal Jihad. (Text D)

The expressed attribute of the group, 'Jamā'atu Ahl al-Sunnah Lidda'awati wa-l-Jihād' means 'People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad'. The definition signals, symbolises and associates the group with the teachings of the Prophet, while the next sentence 'We are the disciples of the Prophet Muhammad' also collectivises the definition, using the attributive 'are' but pointedly defines group membership as disciples of the Prophet to rationalise the actions and intents of the group. Meanwhile, in Sample 18, Shekau accompanies his text with personal authority by personalising the explanation to clarify that his group should not be labelled Boko Haram but that the group is 'Jamā'atu Ahl al-Sunnah Lidda'awati wa-l-Jihād' (People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad). The explanation and the intention to describe the general attributes of the group and to associate their habitual activities with the teachings of the Prophet, and not Boko Haram, legitimises and rationalises the

purpose behind the group. Theoretical rational arguments are offered to justify his claims for the rationale behind establishing the group and the need for more Nigerian 'converts' to join them. This positively evaluates the actions and inactions of the BHT who are on a mission to accomplish Allah's expectations and fulfil the teachings of Prophet Muhammad. Shekau's arguments are tactical in justifying the group's mission, vision and social practices.

## Conclusion

This article has analysed the texts of the foremost BHT leader, Abubakar Shekau to show how Shekau deploys self-legitimation strategies to justify the group's mission in Nigeria. The article has demonstrated the relevance of van Leeuwen's discursive construction of legitimation in the reading, re-reading and understanding of the worldview of BHT with implications for other terrorist groups in Africa and the world at large. Shekau's text depicts a leader who fronts a legitimate self-image (individual and group) to justify the actions and inactions of the group as the right thing to do and the appropriate way to follow. Shekau deploys three legitimation strategies: authorisation, moralisation and rationalisation as tools to validate and accomplish the mission of establishing a parallel government and launching a caliphate in Nigeria by persuading members and convincing non-members to join the group. True to his word, the caliphate was established in the northeastern part of Nigeria where the group defeated, conquered and captured numerous communities. Principally, Shekau embellishes the self-legitimation strategies with other discursive strategies. He deploys the positive self-presentation strategy by engaging in self-glorification, personalising and collectivising victory, and claiming and announcing success to legitimate the mission of the group in carrying out the dictates of Allah, the teachings of Prophet Muhammad and establishing a caliphate in Nigeria. Thus, Shekau is found to deploy self-legitimation strategies to formulate a discourse to project self-image. The success of these strategies can be seen in the fact that 'BHT was able to control and dominate territories in Nigeria' (Adesote et al., 2022, p. 139). Through the dissection of the interplay of language, ideology and social processes in self-legitimation, this study has, therefore, contributed to the understanding of the role of (critical) discourse in the deconstruction of terrorists' discourse.

Following the position advanced by Chilton (2004), therefore, Shekau's engagement of self-legitimation is oriented towards justifying self (personal and group) through positive self-presentation, self-praise, self-glorification, self-explanation, self-justification, self-identification, self-confidence, personalisation and collectivisation to accentuate in-group consensus and in-group solidarity (Rojo & van Dijk, 1997). As averred by van Dijk (2006, p. 373), this is typical of terrorists (speakers) who deploy 'the overall strategy of positive self-presentation ... in favour of the speaker's or writer's own interests'. Boko Haram like ISIS, as submitted by Simons (2018) therefore, also uses language as a propaganda tool to shape an emotional perception of the projected reality. The current study has also shown that there is a correlation between Boko Haram and other terrorist groups, following positions held by existing scholarly endeavours (Awan, 2017; Irshaid, 2014; Lieberman, 2017). According to the studies and the current one, therefore, access to the Internet has transformed terrorists' usage of propaganda and emboldened terrorists to have direct access to the audience. They have manipulated narratives to their advantage,

using positive self-presentation to legitimise their stories rather than possible doctoring by traditional media in the past.

The legitimisation strategies combine to manipulate ‘converts’ and would-be ‘converts.’ Manipulation is at the core of the legitimisation strategies in Shekau’s speeches. The findings in this study conform with the strategies of manipulation spelt out by van Dijk (2006) including ideological polarisation, positive self-presentation by moral superiority, emphasising the speaker’s power, and emotionalising the argument with passionate beliefs. The social practices already entrenched in the minds of (would-be) ‘converts’, members of Boko Haram and related terrorist groups require the attention of the state and religious leaders to disassemble. To find a leeway out of terrorist dominance, therefore, the state needs to do more to help ‘converts’ to unlearn, learn and relearn from the entanglement already created via the kind of teachings that leaders like Abubakar Shekau have secured to control, programme and manipulate the ‘innocent’ and captured minds.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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