

“We Still Living”

The Digital Media and Fake-talk around COVID-19 in Tanzania

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Abstract

In Tanzania, as COVID-19 emerged and became a pandemic, many claims about the fakeness of virus-related news began to appear in the digital media. These claims, or what I refer to as ‘fake-talk’, served to expose and discredit ostensibly false information and distinguish it from real news. However, I suggest that these instances of ‘fake-talk’ have a deeper sociopolitical meaning. Analysing posts collected between August 2020 and May 2022, I argue that such instances are performative acts of citizenship, whereby Tanzanians enacted and embodied ‘good’ citizenship when ‘fake news’ appeared to criticise their country and its leaders. This fake-talk, the paper shows, follows a pattern in Africa of criticising Western science and medicine, and can therefore be understood as an example of a specific form of postcolonial citizenship. Additionally, the paper reveals that claims about fakeness do not necessarily discredit the entities referred to as ‘fake’. Instead, in the very process of decrying something as ‘fake’, fake-talk can create a spectacle. Further attention still may be directed to it when fake-talk gives rise to moral and legal concerns that require intervention.

Keywords

Fake news, Tanzania, COVID-19, News media, Fake-talk.

Introduction

Soon after the threat of COVID-19 emerged and the virus was found within Tanzania's borders, the country began fighting an 'infodemic' as well as the pandemic (see Pulido et al. 2020, 349). Concerns about the fabrication and publication of 'fake' information about the virus and its spread were voiced in the digital media (Tarimo and Wu 2020) and expressed in posts such as the one below by Joshua Mwafyuma. In a Twitter thread made up of four rather emotional messages published on 16 May 2020,¹ Mwafyuma denounced a report stating that there were 16,467 cases of COVID-19 in Tanzania. In addition to defending President John Magufuli and his policies, Mwafyuma railed against the report's 'fake and sinful informant', demanding that they come out of hiding and justify their claims:

The person who has realised such horrifying data should first compartmentalize about all repercussions regarding the fake data. Does he/she think by doing so he/she is more condescend than others? Who are supposed to release information ...

regarding covid 19 in Tanzania? Is this person not perfectly a puppet? There is no content validity of 16467 cases of COVID19 in Tanzania as released by the fake and sinful informant. Majestically the informant should come out from hideout and openly prove and affirm ...

... beyond reasonable doubts his/her information. Our President John Pombe Magufuli is in the rightful track regarding measures being taken on the issue of confronting and solving the largely problem of Covid 19. Anyway the nice fruit tree is normally, enthusiastically

... and enviously stoned.²

On Twitter, many people shared similar sentiments about reports of COVID-19 risks, infections, and deaths in Tanzania, calling them 'fake news' and dismissing them as deliberate attempts to deceive people and undermine and harm the country. Furthermore, government policies were implemented to punish people for spreading such misinformation, as I describe below.

We might understand such concern about 'fake news' in terms of disinformation, denoting false information or stories that are deliberately fabricated (Mare, Mabweazara, and Moyo 2019, 1; Mutsvairo and Bebawi 2019, 147; Marwick 2018, 476). Disinformation is produced and shared with the intention of misleading and

1 See <https://twitter.com/JMwafyuma/status/1261621322091835392>.

2 I have reproduced verbatim the tweets and quotes from online newspaper articles and comments, leaving spelling and punctuation mistakes intact.

deceiving individuals (Pulido et al. 2020, 1; Van Heekeren 2019, 308) in order to cause harm. Like Cabañes, Anderson, and Ong (2019), I treat 'fake news' itself as a research subject. My goal, however, is not to try to distinguish between 'true' and 'false' information. Rather, I follow Hodges and Hornberger's (this issue) conceptualisation of 'fake-talk', or claims of fakeness, and their call for scholars to inquire into the work that fake-talk does. This Research Article therefore asks: what is revealed when claims of fakeness are examined more closely?

Green and Speed (2018, 129) write that 'in an era of heightened anxiety about the trustworthiness of expert sources of information, the cultural trope of "fake news" can describe any output the reader disagrees with'. Austin's contribution about how we use words makes it clear that when we say something we also do something (1962, 6; 12). The fake-talk around certain COVID-19-related news in Tanzania is similarly an expression of people's rejection of certain information and an effort to distinguish 'lies' from the 'truth'. However, when we look beneath the surface and focus on how these claims of fakeness are articulated, we can see that they do more than simply expose 'disinformation'.

Kingori and Gerrets (2019, 381) encourage researchers to inquire into the social and political value of efforts to detect and expose 'fakes' in the domain of health. Similarly, Copeman (2018, 63) writes that when 'fakes' are exposed, they also expose something: 'Exposing-fakes, revealing-fakes, debunking-fakes, that is to say, fakes may be exposed, but also expose, they may be debunked, but also debunk'. My research reveals that COVID-19 fake-talk is closely tied to ideas of what it means to be a citizen in Tanzania, and thus is socio-politically imbued and motivated. When tweets or news articles cast Tanzania's response to the pandemic in a negative light, some commentators saw them as an attempt to cause disorder, diminish Tanzania's sovereignty, and derail its aspirations, and thus as a threat to a country 'seeking to become great again' (Paget 2020, 1241).

This study of 'fake news' argues that fake-talk in this context is a performative act of citizenship, an embodiment and enactment of ideologies associated with what it means to be a Tanzanian. During the pandemic, when the country and the government were seemingly being undermined and questioned, making claims of 'fake news' became another way in which people could express their patriotism and affirm themselves as 'good' citizens. If we are to look at these events of fake-talk in relation to other similar criticisms in Africa of Western science and medicine, the performativity here takes a specific form of postcolonial citizenship. In addition, as much as fake-talk can be used to try to discredit certain entities and protect others, studying the fake-talk around COVID-19 news in Tanzania reveals that the fake-talk had the effect of turning the claimed 'fake news' being debunked into a spectacle, putting disputed news at the centre of heated debates and widespread

concern. What this essentially means is this: fake-talk that seeks to debunk does not necessarily cause something to become insignificant but can instead have the effect of amplifying what is being debunked. Therefore, what this article aims to contribute to the study of fakes is the insight that classifying things as 'fake' does not necessarily lead to them being discounted and dismissed.

To make these arguments, I first discuss performativity and fake-talk—two theoretical concepts that influenced my analysis of the data collected. Then, I discuss and reflect on my experience of using online ethnography as the primary method in the research discussed in this article, a relevant and useful approach given the difficulty of field research during the early phases of the pandemic. Besides, to provide some important context, I report on the Tanzanian government's efforts to regulate information about COVID-19 and to prohibit online content that might harm national unity, social stability, or the reputation and prestige of Tanzania. Thereafter, I present some examples of the controversies surrounding COVID-19 that arose in the digital media and the fake-talk that accompanied them.

Fake-talk and other conceptual premises

As part of the Wellcome Trust-funded *What's at Stake in the Fake* project, our team uses the concept of 'fake-talk' as a tool to 'help us identify both claims [of fakeness] and the work these claims do' (Hornberger and Hodges, this issue). Some of the contributions to this special section examine moral/legal claims and concerns about the production, trade, and consumption of 'fakes'—or seemingly deceptive, fraudulent goods (Hornberger and Hodges, this issue)—particularly of 'fake' pharmaceutical drugs. Similar concerns appear to exist around the 'fake' news regarding COVID-19. Like 'fake' pharmaceutical drugs, and like the virus itself, 'fake' news about COVID-19 seems to be viewed as threatening and dangerous, and therefore as a morally and legally charged matter. To understand such concerns, one must determine what exactly is considered to be the problem with 'fakes'. I do this here with 'fake news' by following the fake-talk around certain COVID-19-related news and looking at how such claims are articulated.

Enria and Lees's (2018) research on the Ebola epidemic similarly examines a health crisis accompanied by tales of patriotic sacrifice. Their work shows that while some people were willing to participate in the 2015 Ebola vaccine trial, considered a deadly risk in their communities, others spoke about their wish to encourage people to participate 'as a citizen' and for the love of their country (Enria and Lees 2018, 42). I also draw inspiration from Butler's work (1990, 2009; see also McKinlay 2010) on gender performativity, to analyse citizenship as an identity that is also based on embodiment and enactment. Like Butler and others who write about the 'doings' of identity (Nayak and Kehily 2006; Wood 2012; de Abreu and

Hale 2011), I analyse fake-talk—which seeks to debunk COVID-19 news because it is viewed as a weapon against Tanzania—as a tool or 'performative utterance' (Austin 1962, 6) used for the doing and enactment of being 'Tanzanian', according to the moral principles of citizenship of the country.

Methodology

Online ethnography

In early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic travel bans, quarantines, and physical social distancing, as well as the risks of and anxieties about contracting the virus, made it extraordinarily difficult to conduct anthropological fieldwork, which typically relies on in-person interviews and observation. At that time, relying on other, perhaps less familiar, research methods such as online ethnography was not only the most practicable approach since people continued to congregate in online spaces, but also an ethically appropriate one (Rishita Nandagiri, comment to author, 16 September 2022). Using this method exclusively for the first time, I conducted online ethnography with the intention of identifying and comprehending the motivations behind claims of 'fake news' relating to COVID-19 in Tanzania through online archival research and online observation. I started following discussions about the status of COVID-19 in Tanzania and events around it on online news platforms and Twitter on 15 August 2020. Using Google Search to find news articles, I entered key terms such as 'Tanzania and COVID-19' and 'fake news and Tanzania,' and then reviewed the articles that appeared. I also identified and collected news items that were accompanied by relevant reader comments. Over time, my searches became more specific, focusing on certain events and people. I searched Twitter using the same key terms for posts about COVID-19 in Tanzania and the rest of the world. Until May 2022, I regularly searched online news platforms and visited Twitter to follow new developments and find new posts. This entailed analysing hundreds of tweets from as many accounts and jotting down those that were relevant in a notebook.

Twitter as a field

Twitter thus served as a virtual 'field' in which I could follow conversations about COVID-19, particularly in Tanzania, both after and as they happened. I used my personal Twitter account, which had been inactive for years, as my entry to this field. My engagement was limited, as I mostly observed online posts and conversations; to avoid interrupting the flow of conversations I did not directly participate in them by commenting or liking, sharing or re-tweeting posts. Furthermore, I did not cultivate a specific group of research participants, which felt strange given my previous ethnographic fieldwork. The people whose posts I share here do not know me. I did not (have to) introduce myself or my research to them.

Ethically, the thought of sharing their thoughts and opinions without having spoken to them and without their consent was unsettling. I had moments when I questioned whether this was a principled way to conduct research. Although I reassured myself with the fact that the data I was using was public, I still felt occasional discomfort.

Twitter is indeed an open social media platform. Its wide use across the world makes it a relatively easy site from which to collect data (Webb et al. 2017, 339). Even so, ethical questions have been raised about its use, for both the researcher and its users (McCandless 2021; Webb et al. 2017, 339). What makes the situation even more complex is the lack of consensus over how to resolve such concerns. Webb and colleagues (2017, 339) suggest, as I do, that constructive debate is needed in order to develop good practice in this area.

'Fake news': An age-old problem refashioned as a new threat

Anything described as 'fake news' has a reputation for being seen as a problem, from a worrisome and disruptive one to dangerous and even damaging one. Some of the studies that have been done on the topic have to do with how the term 'fake news' is used as a weapon against the media and democracy (Lee 2019; Bechmann and O'Loughlin 2020, 11; Chenzi 2020, 1; Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019) and how concern about fake news can create moral panic, fear, and hatred (Bratich 2020, 1; Samanga 2019; Oneko 2019). Others have studied the relationship between fake news and propaganda, examining why and how people share fake news (Maweu 2020; Marwick 2018, 477; Ncube 2019), while others still have focused their efforts on verifying content, and on detecting and preventing the spread of misinformation (Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Conill 2018, 964; Lunga and Mthembu 2019; Aldwairi and Alwahedi 2018; Molina et al. 2021).

Citing the work of Rodny-Gumede (2017), Mare, Mabwezara, and Moyo (2019, 1) make the compelling assertion that fake news is 'an age-old problem' that social media and the internet have refashioned as a new threat. In their view, social media has become the medium for 'spreading ... fake news, rumour, hatred, disinformation and misinformation' (Ibid., 3). Apuke and Omar (2020, 1) concur, stating that 'social media is now the place to disseminate misinformation and fake news rapidly'. Many scholars have made similar statements, including that social media platforms have ended the monopoly of print journalism as the legitimate purveyor of news, blurring the distinction between what is authentic and what is fake (Chenzi 2020, 6; see also Van Heekeren 2019, 307; Tandoc Jr, Lim, and Ling 2018, 2).

In Kenya and South Africa, scholars have studied the use of social media for spreading messages of hatred and violence, misinformation, and disinformation during presidential elections. Chenzi (2020) writes about social media's role in spreading anti-immigrant sentiments and triggering violence against foreign nationals in South Africa. Examining the episodes of xenophobic violence in that country in 2008 and 2019, Chenzi (2020, 16) argues that social media and fake news do not cause xenophobia but rather that the two act as vehicles for spreading tensions between South Africans and foreigners both within and outside the country. Similarly, Maweu (2020) shows that social media platforms were used to spread propaganda and disinformation during Kenya's 2017 general election. She concludes that these platforms are the latest frontier in Kenyan political engagement, being used as they are to share completely false information, propaganda, and half-truths to manipulate the public during elections (Maweu 2020, 75).

In my research, I keep my distance from those who claim to know what is true and what is fake news. Instead, I use the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, a time of great uncertainty and doubt characterised by claims, counterclaims, and counteractions—where the available, so-called authoritative knowledge was also questioned—to capture the arguments about 'real' and 'fake' information, as expressed through fake-talk. As already mentioned, I am interested in what these claims of fakeness did and, more specifically, how they took on a life of their own.

Tanzania's response to fake news

On 7 July 2020, Kwanza Online TV published an alert issued by the US government that warned US nationals about the spread of the virus in Dar es Salaam (Misa Zimbabwe 2020). It came after the then president of Tanzania, John Magufuli, had declared the country free of the virus in June 2020. Kwanza Online TV's report was not well received by the Tanzania Communication Regulatory Authority (TCRA) Content Committee. That committee, consisting of government officials nominated by the then Tanzanian information minister, Harrison Mwakyembe, suspended the TV platform for eleven months for 'generating and disseminating biased, misleading, and disruptive content' (Reporters without Borders 2020), which the committee claimed was 'intended to cause panic and harm the country's economic activities such as tourism' (Misa Zimbabwe 2020).

Soon after, on 17 July 2020, minister Mwakyembe signed into law the Electronic and Postal Communications (Online Content) Regulations. This Act serves to monitor the use of social media platforms in the country and the data posted on them, with the intention of preventing harm and disorder. The Act prohibits any 'false or misleading information', hate propaganda, or hate speech, as well as

messages that could harm the reputation or status of Tanzania (Karashani 2020; ANA Reporter 2020). It further prohibits the publication of content relating to the outbreak of deadly or contagious diseases, whether in the country or elsewhere, without the approval of the TCRA (Karashani 2020; ANA Reporter 2020), which regulates telecommunications and broadcasting services as well as information and communication technologies applications. Those found guilty are punishable by fine, imprisonment, or both. In addition, the TCRA opened a hotline for the public to report any messages posted on social media platforms that contradicted approved COVID-19 information (Karashani 2020).

As we shall see, this plea for the public to report such messages aligns with the Twitter users' debunking of 'fake news' and their calls for state figures and agencies to intervene. Because it is related to health, the fake-talk around COVID-19 emanating from both those calling the reports 'fake news' and those who were concerned that the virus was being downplayed for political effect, conveyed a sense of emergency. Claims about the virus being under control or having a lower death toll than that reported were met with criticism by those urging greater prevention and mitigation measures; at the same time, those very calls for intervention and correct information were passionately decried by others as being fake and intended to harm and undermine the sovereignty of the country.

'Wait until they can't bear it': Debating the state of COVID-19 in Tanzania

Tanzania reported its first case of COVID-19 on 15 March 2020 (Tarimo and Wu 2020), five days after COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) (Ali 2020, 376; Lone and Alimad 2020, 1300). The next day, the country implemented some of the precautionary measures recommended by the WHO, which included lockdowns, travel restrictions and bans, tracing contacts, wearing masks, and social distancing (Baerendtsen and Lichtenstein 2020). The government announced the closure of schools and universities (Mules 2020) and a ban on all social activities except religious ones. On 12 April 2020, the country's international borders closed for flights, although its land and water borders remained open (Kell 2020). However, Dar es Salaam, the country's economic hub, was not put under lockdown (The Citizen 2020a). When the government started loosening its regulations a short time later, in May, some people protested against these decisions. Their protests drew a lot of international attention and made Tanzania's response to COVID-19 a topic of discussion and debate in the national and international media (Kombe 2020).

From the outset, president Magufuli had disapproved of lockdowns as a method for dealing with COVID-19, particularly in Dar es Salaam. On 22 April 2020, during

a joint meeting of heads of defence and security in his hometown, Chato, he noted that:

There are those who have suggested that we lockdown Dar es Salaam. This is not possible ... Dar es Salaam is the only centre where we collect almost 80 percent of the country's revenue. We can continue taking all measures to curb the virus but not by locking down Dar es Salaam (The Citizen 2020a).

He cast this decision of not establishing lockdown measures as being in line with Tanzania's independence: 'Our founding father [Julius Nyerere] was not someone to be directed to be told what to do ... Those who devise these kinds of rules are used to making these directives that our founding father refused' (BBC News 2021a).

In March 2020, weeks after the first confirmed case in Tanzania was announced, Magufuli referred to religion as a pillar that could help the country overcome the virus. He appeared at a church in the capital city, Dodoma, where he encouraged parishioners to keep attending religious services (Chahali 2020; News24 2020) and urged them to pray the 'satanic' virus away (Beaumont 2020). By the end of April, the government had reported 509 cases and 21 COVID-19-related deaths in the country (Ashly 2020). After that point, COVID-19 statistics were no longer published, publicly announced or shared with the WHO (Dahir 2020). That changed almost a year later, after the inauguration of the new president, Suluhu Hassan, on 19 March 2021 (Africa News and AFP 2021).

In May 2020, Magufuli assured a congregation in his hometown, Chato, that the country's hospitals showed a growing trend in recoveries. He announced that should the trend continue more public places, including schools and universities, would be reopened in the following weeks (Africa News 2020; Ashly 2020) and that football games would once again be permitted (The Citizen 2020b). On 18 May 2020, international flight borders in Tanzania were reopened (Kell 2020). Then, on 7 June 2020, Magufuli declared Tanzania COVID-19-free (BBC News 2020).

All this occurred during a time when there was much information circulating about COVID-19. On digital media platforms like Twitter, people aired their uncertainties, sought clarification, and offered provocative opinions. For example, on 16 November 2020 a Twitter user named Rickman Manrick 'mentioned' (as in, he included the Twitter usernames of)³ supranational organisations and others in an

3 By including a Twitter handle (using the symbol '@') in a tweet, that post can be directed to the person holding that account (Murthy 2012, 1061–4). The account holder will receive a notification of it when they next log on to Twitter.

apparent attempt to question COVID-19's impact in parts of Africa including Tanzania:

Rickman Manrick (16 Nov 2020, @WHO, @UN, @BBCAfrica, @_AfricanUnion): No extreme measures taken in most parts of Africa and still no high covid 19 patients numbers. Something fishy about this. Take a look at Tanzania and Nigeria. What are you not telling Africans. Are Africans less prone to corona virus?⁴

Magufuli's decisions added to ongoing disputes, both locally and internationally. The exchanges in the following Twitter posts and responses demonstrate users' differing views on COVID-19, its impact in Tanzania, and their government's response.

In a tweet that acted as a caption for a photo of Magufuli and other government officials, one user wrote:

*Wanjiku Mugane (22 Jul 2020):*⁵ This is President Magufuli of the Republic of Tanzania yesterday during swearing in of various officials. No mask, No social distancing, No any serious sickness or death reported so far. Does this mean Tanzania is a covid-19 Free Nation? #250NotJustANumber⁶

Kelvin Kariku (22 Jul 2020, replying to Wanjiku Mugane): Wait until they can't bear it⁷

Teddy Nelson (22 Jul 2020, replying to Kelvin Kariku): It's been four months now. If there was anything to bear, it would be blowing out now

Sir_Rawlings (22 Jul 2020, replying to Wanjiku Mugane): It means he [Magufuli] was right from the word go. Covid is a cold just like any other. Eat well and exercise

Tracy (22 Jul 2020, replying to Sir_Rawlings): [confused face emoji] Seriously? Ignorance is bliss

On 13 November 2020, multi-billionaire Elon Musk tweeted about his own suspicions concerning COVID-19 test kits. On the same day, a user named danyManumbu responded to Musk's tweet. Showing some sympathy with Musk's

4 See <https://twitter.com/RickmanManrick/status/1328393064583491586>

5 The Twitter account that posted this tweet has since been suspended for violating Twitter rules.

6 See <https://twitter.com/kuriasolomonK/status/1285771334400827392>. This hashtag may be a reference to the number of COVID-19 deaths at that time in Kenya, suggesting that this tweet was posted in support of increasing precautions and measures.

7 See https://twitter.com/Karis_Kelvin/status/1285788813617500160.

stance, he offered an explanation for Magufuli's much-criticised decision to go 'back to normal life':

Elon Musk (13 Nov 2020): Something extremely bogus is going on. Was tested for covid four times today. Two tests came back negative, two came back positive. Same machine, same test, same nurse. Rapid antigen test from BD⁸

danyManumbu (replying to Elon Mask): Our scientist president in Tanzania Dr Magufuli did the same by testing fruits and animal samples which some of them tested positive. From that day Mr president changed his mind on covid 19 and made a tough decision to fall back to normal life with necessary precations Plus God

In response to claims that the COVID-19 situation was bad in Tanzania, a Twitter user named Andrew claimed it was being exaggerated by the media for the sake of profits. He advised people living outside Tanzania to be wary of such stories, and positioned people living in the country, such as him, as a better source of information:

Andrew (3 May 2020): To all outsiders reading this on the media about the #COVID-19 situation in #Tanzania, the situation isn't as bad as being reported. Yes we have cases but the deaths are NOT as many being reported. The media looking to sell but we the people living in the country know the reality⁹

Thadus Mokomba (3 May 2020, replying to Andrew): Continue knowing, continue going to church, continue listening to Magufuli you will die

While some users like Thadus Mokomba argued that Magufuli would mislead people into death, Andrew's response, as short and delayed as it was, made for a strong rebuttal:

Andrew (responding to Thadus Mokomba five months later, on 19 Oct 2020): We still living.

'We should not be used as guinea pigs': Magufuli's outlook on COVID-19

In addition to promoting prayer, eating well, and exercising as preventative measures against COVID-19, President Magufuli endorsed traditional remedies and steam inhalation. Just two months before his passing in January 2021, he shared his doubts about COVID-19 vaccines, warning the Tanzania Ministry of Health against using 'dangerous' vaccines and encouraging both the Ministry and

8 See <https://twitter.com/elonmusk/status/1327125840040169472>.

9 See <https://twitter.com/AGR9000/status/1256782263817244672>.

the public to use traditional remedies and steam inhalation instead (Reuters 2021; VOA News 2021):

Vaccinations are dangerous. If the white man was able to come up with vaccinations he should have found a vaccination for AIDS, cancer and TB by now ... The ministry of health should be careful, they should not hurry to try these vaccines without doing research ... We should be careful ... We should not be used as guinea pigs (BBC News 2021b).

Magufuli's standpoint challenged and contradicted global scientific consensus and advice from the WHO. And one might well ask why a president with a PhD in chemistry would question the science (The Citizen 2021). One answer is that Magufuli had a deep distrust of 'Western' scientific hegemony and its relationship with Africa, a reaction explained as an outcome of a colonial legacy (see also Sember 2008, 62; Kowalenko 2015).

Africa has a bitter history with 'Western' science and medicine. Both are viewed as tools of suppression (and for domination), while recollections of violent medical campaigns, ineffective treatments (Lyons 1992, 5), and historical events involving colonial regimes that treated the continent as a 'living laboratory' (Tilley 2011) have fostered a postcolonial distrust of 'Western' biomedical science. During the HIV/AIDS outbreak in the continent, some African leaders (Thabo Mbeki) rejected the rollout of antiretroviral drugs (ARVs) for similar reasons, condemning 'pharmaceutical imperialism' and the use of the African population for medical experimentation (Martin-Tuite 2011; Sember 2008, 58; 6). James and Lees (2022, 512) express it eloquently when they write that 'contemporary concerns about Africa being used as the world's guinea pigs therefore draw on collective memories of unregulated and coercive medical campaigns during the colonial era'.

Magufuli's stance on COVID-19, can be understood as an expression of pan-Africanism solutions and alternative viewpoints in a context of already existing doubts about face masks, COVID-19 test kits, and vaccines (Goodman forthcoming). His reaction in terms of policies and ideologies transpired as an exercise in therapeutic sovereignty and medical self-determination (Tilley 2020, 163, Hunter 2013, 273), but could be described as being inspired by Tanzania's own post-independence policies and ideologies of socioeconomic and political sovereignty founded on *Ujamaa*. Meaning 'familyhood' in Kiswahili, *Ujamaa* is a socialist government policy that was instituted in 1967 by Nyerere and the Chama Cha Mapinduzi party's predecessor, the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU) (Nguyahambi et al. 2020, 73, 84; Hunter 2008, 472). As a societal project, it combined nation-building policies with socioeconomic development, based on the idea that development could be best attained under the country's self-reliance (Fouéré 2014, 3; Lal 2012, 212). It made nation-building an obligation of

citizenship, encouraging citizens to work together towards the development of the country (Ngayahambi et al. 2020, 76; Cross 2014, 524; Hunter 2015, 56; Hunter 2013, 273). As a result, those who did not participate gave the impression of being traitors (Ngayahambi et al. 2020, 77, 85).

The success of *Ujamaa* as a development strategy has been contested, especially given its association with economic shortcomings and state failures in the 1970s and early 1980s (Nurse-Bray 1980; Ngayahambi et al. 2020, 79). Nevertheless, as an ideology it remained influential. It became a moral fabric of society and, as I aim to show, still is in contemporary Tanzania. *Ujamaa* has shaped a set of beliefs and characteristics about nationhood (e.g., self-determination, self-reliance) and citizenship (e.g., civic responsibility, unity) (Fouéré 2014, 3; Ngayahambi et al. 2020, 76; Cross 2014, 524; Hunter 2015), which Magufuli promoted and which people today still live by (Paget 2020). During the pandemic, much fake-talk that appeared simply to question the accuracy of COVID-19 news, was rather, as I will discuss in the next section, performative acts of citizenship ideologies imbedded in *Ujamaa* philosophies. That is, the fake-talk was an embodiment and enactment of characteristics tied to citizenship in Tanzania concerning civic responsibility and 'a spirit of togetherness'.

Performativity and citizenship in Tanzania

On 15 August 2020, journalist, writer, and curator Onyango-Obbo—with more than 500,000 followers on Twitter—shared a *Yahoo! News* article titled “‘Dead Bodies Everywhere’: A Nation’s Secret Coronavirus Crisis’ on his Twitter timeline. The article told of alleged night-time burials of people who had died of COVID-19, just two months after the government had declared the country free of the virus. The article even provided footage of the night burials as proof. Onyango-Obbo’s tweet¹⁰ attracted a lot of attention from users that day, including many Tanzanians who were very displeased with the news article, who referred to the content as ‘fake news’ and ‘propaganda’:

Khabiba Janette (15 Aug 2020): AS A TANZANIAN I CAN CONFIRM, FAKE FAKE FAKE FAKE FAKE FAKE NEWS

Mangi 2019 (15 Aug 2020): Come to Tanzania ana show us this mass burials.... Tanzania us safe ... #Kenyan show boom for propaganda failure...

Mwangera Imhotep (15 Aug 2020): White enemy attacks people by creating FALSE FEARS in mind when he cannot attack by BOWS n ARROWS

10 See <https://twitter.com/cobbo3/status/1294545673573081088>.

Bobzepha (15 Aug 2020): This story has a lot of problems! “dead bodies everywhere”! really! [face with rolling eyes emoji]. Yaani ni Zaidi ya [It is more than] fake news

Dominique (15 Aug 2020): Let's be honest here ... this is not news it's propaganda. And you see Tanzanians liking and retweeting? This world has gone mad

These instances of fake-talk, aimed at exposing 'fake news' and criticising those who promote it, do more than seek an 'accurate account of a real event based on truth' (Tandoc Jr, Lim, and Ling 2018, 4). They are socially and politically imbued and motivated, and by calling for unity and exhibiting a devotion to protecting one's country they are perhaps best understood as practices that demonstrate 'righteous' citizenship. Issued at a time when Tanzania's COVID-19 response was being questioned and, at least in the minds of some, its authority undermined, the commenters here use fake-talk to take a moral and legal stand against both the information in the news article and those behind it, both of which are seen as weapons against Tanzania.

Some Tanzanians have argued that there has since been a decline in *Ujamaa*; that is, a decline in their communities' unity or spirit of togetherness whereby 'everyone was responsible for the protection of people' and 'all community members would feel concerned and voluntarily assume responsibility for whatever was happening in and around their respective communities' (Moshi et al. 2017, 5). What makes the fake-talk around COVID-19 so powerful in this regard is that it seems to re-energise this feeling of togetherness and responsibility, allowing people to display what it means to be Tanzanian and to remind others who appear to have forgotten. Let us now turn to other online conversations, to observe how fake-talk was used not only to expose fake news as a weapon against Tanzania but also to defend the country.

Fake-talk: In defence of Tanzania

Early on in the pandemic, on 19 May 2020, a Twitter user by the name of Bin Hussen 65, (whose Twitter handle also includes a Tanzanian flag) expressed concern about the spread of fake news in the country and the efforts that people in Tanzania were taking to combat it:

Bin Hussen 65 (19 May 2020): In Tanzania young people also are involved in social media fact checking, due to a lot of fake news that is spreading about this pandemic. And sometimes use memes on their posts to spread awareness

#Vijana[youth]AgainstCovid19¹¹

A day earlier, on 18 May 2020, an online news article (Chahali 2020) had been published in *African Arguments*, a pan-African news, investigation, and opinion platform. The article's author, who is also a political analyst, media commentator, and blogger based in Scotland, criticised Magufuli for invoking religion as the solution to COVID-19 and for refusing to close the country's borders as Tanzania's neighbours had done. He also questioned the official numbers being reported by the government:

A cursory glance at Tanzania's official statistics might suggest this strategy is working. As of 18 May [2020], it had just 509 confirmed cases and 21 deaths. But a closer look reveals the country has only conducted 652 tests. Furthermore, health workers have claimed that despite the figures, hundreds of people have in fact succumbed to the virus, while videos have emerged on social media of mysterious night-burials (Chahali 2020).

Similar 'fact-checking' efforts can be identified in the comments the article received. When I first accessed the article in August 2020 it had garnered 38 comments from readers, most of which were in support of the late president. In their fake-talk, they criticised Chahali (2020) for spreading what they considered false, uninformed, and negative information, and included patriotic remarks expressing loyalty to Tanzania and Magufuli. A selection of comments shows the backlash against the article's message (Chahali 2020):

Richard (19 May 2020): ... and how long will your "sponsors" strategy to weaken our president through "fake news" hold... Sellout!

Benini Gabo (20 May 2020): Ancient grudges breaks to a new mutiny, and its Covid-19. U have failed so many time to defeat JPM [Magufuli] by your unjustified propaganda, manoeuvre and innuedos. Now tirelessly, you blood full convinced that holding so hard and manipulative on Covid-19 would give you a new wave to defeat the JPM ...

Hassen (20 May 2020): This is negative negative negative rumours to Tanzania, Tanzania has self determination, self defence and precaution from COVID 19 we don't depend ideas or measures to be taken from fuck outside countries like other Africa countries do....

Mboya Bazil (20 May 2020): This is nonsense i ever seen. Let me start with the question to you, what will we do with lock down? Does lockdown a real measure toward the pandemic? And if yes, why the number of pandemic in

11 See <https://twitter.com/Shabanhusein2/status/1259051672086687745>.

USA is keeping up despite lockdown.?. The last question, how long will you be a puppet political analyst?. Tanzania is a free State, we have our own way of handling the pandemic, and our survival and we trust our president. We don't rely on external decision as long as we have our own sovereign State

These statements fervently accuse the author of having his own agenda, be it propaganda or serving the interests of others against Tanzania. Moreover, they clearly show, returning to Copeman's (2018, 63) formulation, that 'when fakes are exposed, they also expose something'. Here, fake-talk is a way of defending the nation. The people making these statements are attempting, in their view righteously, to defend Magufuli and Tanzania's sovereignty in light of what they see as attacks on both. Another commenter calls out this defensive impulse:

Giorgio Pisano (24 May 2020): All the comments I read (about half of the total) attack the author personally. None of them show (evidence) where his statement is incorrect. I am in Canada, visit Tanzania often, and I have been interested what people think. What I see is hatred of a journalist who criticize your president. (Chahali 2020).

Both versions of the 'calling out' of 'fake news'—whether to criticise negative reports or to uphold them—can be understood as enactments of civic responsibility. They are an extension to online spaces of practices for preserving law and order in society, such as '*ulinzi shirikishi*' (participatory or community policing) (Cross 2014, 518; Walwa 2017, 105). The Tanzania Police Force introduced *Ulinzi shirikishi* in the mid-2000s as a community-led security management system. It is sustained by voluntary and compulsory contributions from community members based on the assumption that citizens should be actively involved in keeping their neighbourhoods safe by, among other things, conducting patrols in neighbourhoods at night, and reporting any suspicious behaviour to the police (Cross 2014, 520, 527; Walwa 2017, 101). As mentioned earlier, the Tanzanian government encouraged the public to do something similar during the pandemic by asking them to report any social media messages that contradicted approved COVID-19 information (Karashani 2020). The next section extends our understanding of fake-talk as a tool for embodying and enacting citizenship, showing how fake-talk was wielded by people who sought to personify what it means to be a 'good' citizen.

Being 'good citizens': Dismissing 'fake news', encouraging unity

'I advice you don't listen to them'

On Twitter on 13 May 2020, the news platform *Al Jazeera English* tweeted a quote from Tanzanian politician Zitto Kabwe: 'The government is hiding the number of deaths, this is 100 percent proven. How many [they're hiding] is more difficult to say'. Following the quote, *Al Jazeera* asked readers whether Kabwe's statement was indeed true.¹² Many users responded, including Musa, who on 14 May 2020 wrote:

Tanzania is not hiding the number of covid ... 19 that is politician propaganda they promote fake information worldwide in order to minimise our government. this is not good citizens we have to understand our government and no one can underestimate it. I advice you don't listen to them¹³

Such fake-talk shows digital media to be a space in which people can enact their patriotism. Musa's fake-talk does not only function to expose and discredit the 'fake news'; it also links 'understand[ing] our government' to being a citizen who adheres to the moral principles of *Ujamaa* (Ngayahambi et al. 2020, 84; Fouéré 2014, 1) and its philosophy of '*umoja ni nguvu*', or unity is strength. When it seemed that 'fake news' was being used to create public disorder, Twitter user Musa countered by using fake-talk to encourage unity among Tanzanians. As he reminds others of what it means to be a good citizen, he portrays himself as being one already. The usefulness of fake-talk to promote national unity, especially when that nation is perceived to be under attack by an 'enemy' armed with disinformation, is further substantiated by the claims of fakeness that arose after it was reported on social media that Magufuli was sick with (and later had passed on due to) COVID-19.

Unpatriotic Tanzanians spreading 'fake news'

Speculation about Magufuli's health began in March 2021, after he had not been seen in public since 27 February 2021 (e.g., SABC News 2021). On Twitter, media outlets and ordinary users claimed that Magufuli had fallen ill from COVID-19, hence his absence from the public eye. On 12 March 2021, a radio station in South Africa, SA FM, posted the following on its Twitter account:

State media in Tanzania reports that President John Magufuli is healthy and working amid some claims Magufuli was in a coma and critically ill with COVID

12 See <https://twitter.com/AJEnglish/status/1260604490694213634>.

13 See <https://twitter.com/Musa01959306/status/1260796103064276992>.

19. The reports quote Prime Minister Kassim Majaliwa who urged people to ignore fake news. #sabcnews¹⁴

In an online article by SABC News published on the same day, the prime minister of Tanzania, Kassim Majaliwa, criticised citizens for spreading a story that the president was sick with COVID-19. He assured Tanzanians that they 'should be at peace' because '[y]our president is around, healthy and working hard. To spread rumours that he is sick is just an outcome of hate' (SABC News 2021).

About two weeks after Magufuli's passing on 17 March 2021, SABC News reported 'Breaking news' on its Twitter account to the effect that Tanzania had identified a new COVID-19 variant in the country.¹⁵ Bravo_tz, whose Twitter handle carries Tanzania's country abbreviation (TZ), was among those who responded to this post, accusing unpatriotic Tanzanians of spreading fake news:

Bravo_tz (30 March 2021): Where the hell is this news from? Am in Tanzania and I haven't heard such news you guys don't fake news and try to tell the world we Tanzanians are brainless just b'cz our late President died. We know the're few Tanzanians not patriotic to our country spreading these fake news.¹⁶

These examples of fake-talk seek to define what citizenship should entail in Tanzania (Yuval-Davis 2007, 562; Levinson 2011, 280). They do more than expose 'fake news': they cast debunking fake news as a social and political practice of good citizenship. To call out news as fake news is, therefore, a way of standing by the government when its official information is questioned and challenged. It is a way of encouraging unity in times of disruption. As the Ebola crisis did in some parts of Africa (Enria and Lees 2018, 41), so the COVID-19 pandemic in Tanzania provided the platform and opportunity to define appropriate behaviour for citizens. These instances therefore demonstrate what fake-talk 'does' (Hornberger and Hodges, this issue). To conclude, these practices of citizenship reveal another interesting aspect of what fake-talk can do: rather than rendering something meaningless, fake-talk can instead create a new meaning for the 'fake'—rather than the 'fake' becoming diminished, it can turn into a spectacle.

Conclusion: Fake news as a problem that matters

One might expect fake-talk, or claims of fake-ness, to discredit the object of its suspicion. However, fake-talk is also constructive: calling something 'fake' changes its significance, rather than just devaluing it. As we have seen, fake-talk made the news it referred to matter in a different way, drawing more attention—in

14 See <https://twitter.com/SAfmnews/status/1370370506579394573>.

15 See <https://twitter.com/SABCNews/status/1375772765429>.

16 See <https://twitter.com/bravotz4/status/1376725258821115908>.

the form of comments, exchanges, and calls for intervention—to it. It shone a spotlight on the content and, rather than making it disappear, turned the 'fake' into a spectacle, increasing its visibility in the public domain (Obadare 2020; Wynn 2021; Reyes 2016; Makley 2015).

In Tanzania, the temporal and contextual implications attached to 'fake news' amplified the attention such claims received, causing them to register as a form of moral and legal concern. The tweet by Onyango-Obbo publicising a news item about night burials, Chahali's article criticising Magufuli for downplaying the threat of COVID-19, Mwafyuma's irritation at the 'fake and sinful informant', and Bin Hussien 65's tweet about young Tanzanians being involved in fact-checking data posted on social media—all are examples of how fake-talk amplified the attention given to the 'fake news' claimed to be deliberately fabricated and spread to cause harm, disorder and undermine the country's sovereignty. When something is charged with being fake news, it is unlikely that it will simply be ignored and die out because the cry of 'fake news' demands attention and response. Indeed, in some of the cases discussed in this article, people were subsequently arrested for spreading or publishing 'fake news' (The Citizen 2020c; Africa News and AP 2021).

As illustrated in the tweet by Rickman Manrick, Twitter users sometimes used the 'mention' function to call upon officials to intervene against 'fake news'. As one of the largest and most popular social media websites in the world (Murthy 2012 1061–2), Twitter is a powerful platform for publicising information and calling upon leaders or other powerful bodies to act, due to the number of users it has and the audience it offers (idem, 1069). On 10 March 2021, when rumours were circulating on social media that Magufuli was sick with COVID-19, a Twitter user called Jacqueline posted a photo of Magufuli in public and mentioned his Twitter account, saying:

There is President @Magufuli he will appear in public even though fellow Tanzanians, our brothers, have continued to kill him on social media. God is for us all, do not think his desires are your desires. The president is very dedicated to Tanzania. Let us honour him, he is a TUNU [TANU]^{17,18}

People who replied to this tweet then 'mentioned' nine other Twitter accounts of authoritative figures, trying to draw them into a conversation:

17 See <https://twitter.com/MwanaMorogoro/status/1369482053415301121>. In the original Kiswahili: 'Pale Rais @MagufuliJP atakavyipitokeza hadharani ilihali kuna watanania wenzetu, ndugu zetu wameendelea kumua kwenye mitandao ya kijamii. Mungu ni wetu sote usidhani matamano yako ni matamano yake. Rais huyu amejitoa sana kwa ajili ya Tanzania, tumpe heshima, ni TUNU'. The translation into English is my own.

18 Here perhaps she meant TANU, the abbreviation for the Tanganyika African National Union.

*Joseph (replying to @MagufuliJP; @MwanaMorogoro; @ikulumawasliano; @IkuluTanzania; @wabungeccmTZ; @TCRA_Tz; TBConlineTZ; @serikalikazini; @ikuluTanzania; @ikuluczanzibar, 10 March 2021):*¹⁹

Hatred and cunning and a lack of patriotism make some western commuters pollute leaders and countries. They will be severely defeated, our President will remain strong and our country will continue to be stronger than yesterday and today

Jacqueline (10 March 2021): He has other tasks to do other than coming to the media to explain the nonsense, lies and fabrication engineered by some foreigners and some fools in Tanzania. What you should know is that our President @MagufuliJP is okay and performing his duties as usual

Later in the conversation, Twitter user Nana Kouyate also condemned those accused of 'spreading lies and rumours about Tanzania', tagging others to the list:

Nana Kouyate (10 March 2021) It is the always the same group of people spreading lies and rumours about Tanzania. Opposition figures in Tanzania, journalist from Kenya, Twitter accounts in Kenya and so called activists in the west, always the same group of people.

When people tweet, retweet, and mention others in order to rebut 'fake news' and to invite others to join in, such news items are likely to become more visible to people and to attract more attention. Once a tweet is retweeted, for example, it can reach a mean audience size of 1,000 (Murthy 2012, 1069) regardless of the number of followers the original Twitter user has. The massiveness of this platform and the potential reach it offers both purveyors and debunkers of 'fake news', in addition to the fake-talk accompanying it, all play an important role in creating a spectacle of what some would prefer to bury. If we examine these instances of performativity and spectacle on social media in relation to other similar criticisms of 'Western' biomedical interventions in Africa (James and Lees 2022; Kowalenko 2015; Robins 2004), then we can see that they do more than embody and display characteristics of good citizenship in Tanzania: they assert Tanzania's place in the world. The performativity expresses a specific form of postcolonial citizenship that is part of the struggle, processes, and practices of decoloniality to reclaim agency from colonial power and knowledge in Africa. And, as we have seen, the urgency of COVID-19 as a health-related problem sets a prime stage for such performativity.

19 See <https://twitter.com/sylva87/status/1369514307818504193>. In the original Swahili: 'Chuki na hila na kukosa uzalendo kunawafanya baadhi ya makuadi wa magharibi kuchafua viongozi na nchi. Watashindwa pakubwa, Rais wetu ataendelea kuwa imara na nchi yetu itaendelea kuwa imara zaidi ya jana na leo'. The translation into English is my own.

Authorship statement

I am the sole author of this article.

Ethics statement

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