

The Power of the Pulpit: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Selected *Assalat* Sermons in Kaduna Metropolis

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Abstract

This research presents a critical investigation into the linguistic and thematic strategies employed in the sermons of three prominent *Assalat* groups in Kaduna, Nigeria: the Ansar-ud-Deen Society of Nigeria (AUD), the Movement for Islamic Culture and Awareness (MICA), and Nasrul-lahi-li Fathi Society of Nigeria (NASFAT). Utilizing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), specifically Fairclough's three-dimensional model and van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach, the study explores how religious language is used to construct ideologies, enact social identities, and maintain hegemonic structures. The analysis reveals that these groups utilize a sophisticated blend of thematic resources—ranging from moral guidance and anger management to public health ethics—and linguistic devices such as metaphors, code-switching, and intertextuality to persuade congregants and reinforce group cohesion. The findings suggest that while these sermons serve didactic purposes, they also function as sites of ideological work where power is negotiated through the manufacturing of consent.

Introduction

Language is fundamentally discursive, serving as a primary tool for discovering and maintaining social relationships through the lens of power, ideology, and shared values. In human society, language does more than facilitate communication; it provides the authority to control the environment and influence human cognition. In religious contexts, language is the vehicle through which beliefs and ideologies are inculcated. van Dijk (1998:18) defines ideology as "the overall, abstract mental systems that organize the socially shared attitudes" of a group. These attitudes, when disseminated through religious discourse, can influence an audience's worldview and social behaviors both positively and negatively.

In Nigeria, the relationship between language and ideology is vividly manifested in religious practice. Religion is often used to form homogeneous communities where adherents are united around common cultural principles through persuasive linguistic devices. The *Assalat*

groups in the Kaduna metropolis represent a significant portion of this religious landscape. These groups—AUD, MICA, and NASFAT—have evolved from educational initiatives to modern platforms for spiritual engagement, each contributing to the religious environment through distinct discursive practices.

The Evolution of Assalat Groups in Nigeria

The evolution of these groups reflects a dynamic response to the socio-religious needs of the Muslim community. The Ansar-ud-Deen Society (AUD), founded in 1923, began as a non-sectarian educational association aimed at enhancing the moral and social development of Muslims in Lagos and later across Nigeria. Its mission was to provide Western education alongside Islamic reform, eventually expanding to Kaduna in 1941.

The Movement for Islamic Culture and Awareness (MICA), established in 1994, targets young Muslim professionals and graduates, acting as an "antidote" to contemporary socio-cultural problems in the corporate world. Nasrul-lahi-li Fathi Society (NASFAT), emerging in the mid-1980s and formalized in 1995, is often characterized as a "Muslim Pentecostal" group due to its focus on inclusive prayer fairs and socio-economic empowerment. It established its Kaduna branch in 2001.

Conceptual and Theoretical Review

Discourse is a multifaceted term encompassing speech, writing, and communication that follows specific rules and shared meanings within a community. **Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)** is an interdisciplinary movement that studies how social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted or resisted through text and talk. As **van Dijk (2015)** explains, CDA takes an explicit stance to comprehend, reveal, and challenge social inequalities.

This study adopts an eclectic approach, integrating:

1. **Fairclough's (1989) Three-Dimensional Model:** This model analyzes discourse at the levels of **text (micro)**, **discursive practice (meso)**, and **social practice (macro)**. Fairclough (1989) argues that discursive practices can produce unequal power relations between social classes and groups.
2. **Hwang's (2005) Multi-Expository Sermon (MXS) Model:** This model provides a framework for analyzing the structure and delivery of sermons, focusing on how multiple themes are connected to maintain a coherent message. According to Hwang

(2005), effective preaching often involves the exploration of a sermon text from multiple thematic perspectives.

Ideology, Power, and Hegemony

In CDA, ideology is seen as a way of thinking and experiencing that is inscribed in discourse (Abaya 2016). Hegemony, a concept derived from Gramsci, is viewed as leadership and control achieved through consensus and the construction of alliances rather than through overt coercion. Preachers, recognized as "servants of Allah," occupy a higher plane of authority, making their words appear divine and final to their followers.

Language and Identity

Identity is defined by Norton (2013) as "how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is structured across time and space". In Assalat groups, linguistic and social identities are built through interaction and shared history. Bourdieu (1977) introduced the concept of *habitus*, referring to historically grounded, socially constituted knowledge and beliefs that predispose individuals to act and feel in specific way.

The Language of Religion and the Post-Secular

Habermas (2006) explains that religious traditions perform the function of articulating awareness of what is lacking in modern life. He uses the term "post-secular" to describe a shift in consciousness where secular societies come to terms with the continued existence of religious voices in the public sphere. Assalat sermons fill this gap by providing meaning and moral leverage in a complex societal landscape.

Methodology

This research utilizes a qualitative research design. The study area is Kaduna Metropolis, a hub of economic and socio-cultural activities characterized by heterogeneous demographics. Purposive sampling was used to select nine sermons (three from each group) to represent a spectrum of orientations. The analysis follows a structured procedure: identifying thematic resources, evaluating linguistic devices (metaphor, personification, code-switching), and categorizing how discourse enacts socially situated identities.

Data Presentation and Thematic Analysis

The analyzed sermons reveal diverse thematic strands used to address spiritual, moral, and social issues using a highly structured pattern to persuade and exhort hearers towards thinking and acting in accordance with religious dictates (Adedun and Mekiliuwa 2010).

MICA: Self-Desire, Greed, and Self-Awareness MICA's sermons frequently center on the struggle against the self (*Hawaa*) and the devil.

- i. **The Concept of *Hawaa* (Self-Desire):** Preachers frame *Hawaa* as the opponent of "good" and "intellect". Succumbing to it is equated with being "worse than an animal," while overcoming it elevates one to an angelic status.
- ii. **Greed and Arrogance:** These are identified as "traps of Shaitan". Greed is described as a psychological state where personality is preferred over spirituality, leading to "perdition". Sincerity (*Ikhlaas*) is offered as the primary weapon to conquer these traits.
- iii. **Anxiety and Restlessness:** MICA addresses contemporary psychological struggles, characterizing anxiety as the "vehicle in which Shaytan transports man through seas of illusion".

NASFAT: Practical Guidance and Social Management NASFAT sermons lean toward practical living and emotional management.

- i. **Anger Management:** A major theme is the positive management of anger (*Sarrafa Fushi*). Preachers provide "ten beautiful tips," such as "thinking before speaking," "taking a time out," and "using eye statements".
- ii. **The Ingredients of Forgiveness:** Forgiveness is presented as conditional upon desisting from sin. It is characterized as a "powerful tool" that benefits the forgiver as much as the forgiven.
- iii. **Taqwa (Piety):** Piety is described as having "two feathers": fear of Allah and obedience to Him. True *Taqwa* must reside in the mind and heart, manifesting in attitudes of humility and justice.

AUD: Theological Education and Public Health Ethics

AUD focuses on doctrinal adherence and responding to contemporary crises.

- i. **COVID-19 Perspectives:** During the pandemic, AUD sermons provided an Islamic viewpoint, portraying the virus as a "trial and tribulation". Preachers juxtaposed health guidelines (handwashing, quarantine) with existing Islamic ethics such as the "ritual of purity" (*ablution*) and the *Sunat* of the Prophet.
- ii. **The Importance of Prayer:** Sermons emphasize the "importance of prayer" (*Pataki Adua*) as the tool through which believers seek assistance and goodness from Allah.

Discursive Strategies and Linguistic Devices

Assalat groups employ diverse figurative expressions. Longacre (1996) classifies sermonic discourse as "hortatory," aiming to influence conduct through commands and motivation.

1. Metaphor and Personification

- i. **Metaphor:** Prevalent across all groups. MICA uses "circle of knowledge" to represent unity. NASFAT compares words to "eggs" that cannot be retrieved once broken. AUD refers to ablution as a "daily ritual of purity".
- ii. **Personification:** Abstract concepts are given agency. MICA states *Hawaa* "wards off good". NASFAT warns that "death will announce to you when it is coming". AUD notes that "Islam has already found a solution" to problems.

2. Code-Switching and Code-Mixing The strategic use of Arabic alongside English is a significant convention. Switching to Arabic for religious salutations (e.g., *Assalamualaikumwaramatullhiwabarakatu*) and prayers adds authenticity and reinforces the preacher's authority. Code-mixing occurs when terms like *Jihad*, *Shariah*, and *Taqwa* are integrated into English discourse to strengthen the group's Islamic identity.

3. Layers of Quotation and Intertextuality

Preachers utilize complex layers of quotation to ground their messages in divine authority. A sermon might involve the preacher quoting a scholar, who quotes the Prophet, who in turn quotes Allah from the Quran. This multi-voiced structure makes the message appear incontestable.

4. Personal Pronouns and In-group Dynamics

The frequent use of inclusive pronouns ("we," "us," "our") creates an in-group dynamic, positioning the audience as part of a shared ideological community. Conversely, the use of "they" or "them" when referring to external forces like "Shaitan" or "disbelieving folk" reinforces boundaries between the righteous community and perceived threats.

Discussion

Generic Conventions and Social Action The analysis reveals that Assalat sermons are not merely religious instruction but a form of social action. As noted by Wodak and Meyer (2009), CDA is fundamentally concerned with analyzing structural relationships of dominance manifested in discourse. In these sermons, hegemony is exercised through directives and instructions. By using phrases like "Man must choose," leaders superimpose their views on congregants who naturally submit due to the vast knowledge the preachers are believed to possess.

Socially Situated Identities

The discourse enacts specific identities for members:

- i. **Profession of Faith:** Adherents are positioned as servants of "The Almighty Allah" and "The Lord of the Universe".
- ii. **Prophetic Status Recognition:** Constant reference to "our noble Prophet Mohammad" establishes a hierarchy of knowledge and a model for behaviour.
- iii. **Entrenchment of Principles:** Identities are shaped through faith-based principles like *Ikhlāas* (sincerity), *contentment*, and *humility*.
- iv. **Identification of Brotherhood:** Phrases like "Ansar-ud-Deen Family" and "My dear brothers and sisters in Islam" promote communal belonging and solidarity.

Conclusion

This critical discourse analysis demonstrates that the language used in *Assalat* sermons in Kaduna is not neutral but is thoroughly charged with ideology and hegemonic intent. Preachers utilize a sophisticated range of thematic resources and linguistic devices—such as metaphors, code-switching, and layered quotations—to persuade their audiences, shape their cognitive reasoning, and maintain social cohesion. While the specific strategies differ among AUD, MICA, and NASFAT, they all share the goal of making their ideologies "live" within their followers

from generation to generation. Ultimately, the power-laden talk of the pulpit ensures the continuity of the *Assalat* groups' founding principles within the complex and dynamic socio-cultural landscape of contemporary Nigeria.

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