Practice, Pirates and Coast Guards: the grand narrative of Somali piracy

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ABSTRACT   *In this article I develop a practice–theoretical account to provide the first systematic investigation of the justification of Somali piracy. Arguing for an understanding of piracy as a 'community of practice', I show how this community is organised by a 'grand narrative' that projects piracy as a quasi-state practice of the protection of sovereignty against foreign intruders. Paying attention to narrative provides an explanation for the persistence of piracy and assists us in understanding the phenomenon. Relying on publicly available interviews with pirates, I deconstruct this grand narrative and detail the different functions of the narrative in the light of situations in which it is told. The article develops an alternative perspective on piracy based on the study of practice, narrative and situation that provides new avenues for the study of clandestine, illicit or violent practices.*

In what was one of the most prolific early incidents of Somali piracy—the September 2008 hijacking of the *MV Faina*, an Ukrainian freighter loaded with weapons—pirate spokesperson Sugule Ali offered a 45-minute interview with the *New York Times*' correspondent. He gave a rationale for the hijacking and was cited as follows:

> Q. Are you going to sell the weapons to insurgents?
> A. No. We don't want these weapons to go to anyone in Somalia. Somalia has suffered from many years of destruction because of all these weapons. We don't want that suffering and chaos to continue. We are not going to offload the weapons. We just want the money.
> Q. Have the pirates been misunderstood?
>
> A. We don't consider ourselves sea bandits ['sea bandit' is one way Somalis translate the English word pirate]. We consider sea bandits those who illegally fish in

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our seas and dump waste in our seas and carry weapons in our seas. We are simply patrolling our seas. Think of us like a coast guard.[1]

It was mainly two passages of the above interview that made it into the headlines. Ali's claim 'we just want money' became a major headline and the projection of piracy as a form of coast guard was widely referenced. The interview impressed even public relations professionals. *PR Weekly* commented:

> Time and time again, PR pros wax poetic about engaging with audiences openly. Here, pirate Ali shows the way to being an able, available, and transparent spokesman, and readers find themselves feeling sympathetic toward the pirates who might be arrested for acting on their pirate instincts.[2]

Ali's account, according to which Somali pirates act to protect their waters from illegal foreign intruders, is a frequently told story. Somali pirates have been everything but media shy. In TV documentaries, press interviews or court rooms a similar story has been told by self-proclaimed, suspected or convicted pirates. These stories have a considerable narrative consistency. Piracy is cast as a normal practice of protection against environmental crime, resource robbery or the violation of borders, and as contributing to the economic development of Somali regions. Although the dynamics of piracy have changed since 2008—including the implementation of international naval patrolling, extensive criminal persecution programmes and pressure on Somali elites to act[3]—the core plot of the narrative remains stable over time. Given these features, the 'coast guard narrative' can be considered as the 'grand narrative' or the 'master story' of Somali piracy.

In this article I argue that the coastguard narrative has two core functions. It first provides coherence to the Somali piracy practice across time and space and is a source of meaning for those participating in it. Phrased otherwise, the narrative provides identity. Telling the narrative has, second, strategic purposes: it renders piracy more effective and attempts to produce legitimacy and recognition for piracy as a practice that has socio-political objectives. My argument is based on a practice–theoretical perspective as outlined in organisational theory and as debated in International Relations as the 'practice turn'.[4] It claims to study piracy as a practice, that is, an organised activity of multiple people constituted by doings, sayings, objects and shared practical understandings. Narrative is a central component of the organisation of a practice.

Such a perspective on practice and narrative provides a major alternative framework to the increasingly unproductive debate within piracy studies and the study of illicit actors. In this debate piracy is projected either in economic terms, or as a wider socio-political phenomenon to be explained by the study of root causes. Ali's interview is worth citing at length since it points to the two major interpretations of piracy. The first is an understanding of piracy as a predominately illicit economic activity that can be described by basic economic principles. In short, piracy is then indeed only about 'we just want money'. The second interpretation understands piracy as a wider socio-political phenomenon embedded in a distinct cultural context. In this case piracy is about more than

money and is interpreted as a form of alternative development, resistance to globalisation or protection against external influences.

The coast guard narrative is one of the core issues in the debate between these two 'paradigms of piracy'. The economic understanding rejects the narrative and considers it to be a (strategic) lie; the holistic understanding embraces it, or parts of it, and uses it as a clue to the 'root causes' of piracy. The perspectives disagree about the truth value of the narrative and cast the analysis of it as an 'epistemic' question. Yet identifying evidence for either side is difficult. Collecting evidence in a war-shattered country is problematic, facts are difficult to establish and attempts to depoliticise the debate have largely failed. The epistemic controversy is unproductive. The practice–theoretical perspective redirects the debate from an epistemic to a phronetic evaluation.[5] Such a type of analysis seeks out the functionality of the narrative and the practical effects that it produces for the organisation of piracy and its environments. 'Stories have functions. They do particular kind of work.'[6] I hence argue that the coast guard narrative should be treated as an integral part of piracy practice and as a meaningful fiction that has observable organisational and political effects.

The remainder of the article is organised as follows. The next section briefly reviews the discussion of piracy studies. I argue for avoiding reductionism and for the need to combine insights from different perspectives. I proceed by outlining a practice–theoretical perspective of piracy and discuss the role of narrative. The third section deconstructs the coast guard narrative and investigates its elements. Then I study a range of episodes in which the narrative has been told, in order to unravel its effects in different situations. The final section concludes and sketches the importance of such a form of analysis for understanding the practices of other illicit actors in an ethnographically sensitive way.

Theorising piracy

A growing literature analyses the phenomenon of contemporary maritime piracy.[7] The primary focus has been on the conditions that give rise to piracy, and the tempo-spatial variations and different types of piracy. Cross-regional studies using large-n analysis, as well as a range of case studies, have provided insights on the conditions under which piracy flourishes.[8] These include:

1. geography—proximity to a major sea lane and maritime trafficking, as well as hideouts close-by;
2. weak law enforcement structures;
3. collaboration by officials and administrations (corruption);
4. a degree of infrastructure, such as ports, markets or roads needed for the logistics of running a piracy operation;
5. the presence of a populace which can be recruited for piracy and which supports operations with logistics;
6. skills and experience necessary to run an operations (eg navigation skills);

7. a degree of cultural acceptability of piracy, which renders it a legitimate activity;
8. high levels of poverty and a lack of sources of income.

Two 'paradigms' can be identified in the debate, which provide quite different interpretations of piracy: an 'economic' one, and a 'holistic socio-political' one. While all these factors arguably matter, the paradigms disagree over their significance and the causal mechanisms they entail. Economic approaches exclusively focus on factors two (weak law enforcement) and eight (poverty). The suggested mechanism draws on a rational-choice logic and the emergence of piracy is related to an individual's calculation of the costs and benefits of participating in piracy. Hallwood and Miceli, for instance, suggest that pirates are 'rational maximizers'.[9] As they argue, 'since the primary motivation for maritime pirates is material gain, whether derived from the confiscation of cargo or the seeking of ransom for hostages, it seems reasonable to suppose that they too are acting in a rational way'.[10] In this line of reasoning there are two relevant calculations. The first is an individual calculation weighing the benefits of piracy (a share of the booty or ransom) against its costs (the risk of death, persecution and penalisation). The core factor emphasised is the risk of getting caught (the law enforcement factor). The second calculation draws primarily on the poverty factor, and is one in which an individual weighs the costs and benefits of piracy against other sources of income. From such a perspective the broader range of factors listed above is of secondary relevance in as far as these may (or may not) affect these calculations. The shortcomings of the economic understanding lie mainly in their exclusive focus on the individual and his decision on whether to join a piracy operation. Collective cultural dynamics are largely neglected. In arguing at the level of a generic, rational logic, there is a tendency to side-line contextual and situation-specific factors, and to downplay the symbolic and normative side of piracy (eg the aspect of cultural acceptability).

The second paradigm develops a broader, more holistic understanding of piracy. The focus is on the whole set of factors, with emphasis placed on factors two, three, five, six and seven.[11] The mechanism by which these are considered significant are crucially different from the economic paradigm. While the economic understanding focuses on the individual's calculation, the holistic one emphasises structures. The sums of the factors are interpreted as (causal) structures that produce piracy. In interpreting piracy in the light of Somalia's state failure, economic deficits and weak coastal resource management, the argument is that piracy is a reaction to these structures and, indeed, a form of response or resistance to it. Hence, while economic understandings overemphasise individuals and their calculations, holistic accounts tend to overstate structure and neglect individual agency.

Towards a narrative/practice approach

I propose to understand piracy as a practice, and Somali pirates as a loose community of practice. Such an understanding has several benefits. It offers an understanding that can integrate core ideas and results from the economic and socio-political paradigms. It offers an alternative to the narrow agency model of the economic understanding and acknowledges the importance of structures in conditioning the behaviour of the piracy collective, as well as developing an understanding of piracy as a socially organised practical activity. It directs attention to the question of how piracy works and on which material and symbolic resources it draws. Most importantly it is a perspective that gives us an explicit framework for the role of narrative and provides insights into the effects of the coast guard narrative.

Practice theories have been formulated in recent years against the background of a set of shared assumptions drawn from cultural or interpretive (linguistic turn) theorising.[12] Practices can be understood as a 'type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one other: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, "things" and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge'.[13] Practices are socially recognised forms of activity, in sum related to distinct social communities. A social practice is a regular bodily activity held together by a socially standardised way of understanding and knowing.

From such a perspective piracy is a practice comprised of various elements. It includes *activities*, such as going out to sea and targeting vessels, boarding vessels, stealing valuables, taking hostages, steering vessels, safeguarding hostages and vessels, negotiating ransoms, releasing vessels and crews, and distributing ransom income. It requires supporting activities, including the procurement of equipment and weapons or food deliveries during a hostage period. It relies on organising roles in hijacking or during the hostage period or sharing ransoms. A range of *objects* is required to perform the practice, including skiffs, weapons, navigation devices, or ladders for boarding. To perform the practice, moreover, a range of *skills and practical know-how* is necessary, including navigation skills, knowledge of how to board vessels, to handle hostages, negotiate or organise ransom deliveries. Hence the practice of piracy draws on an extensive repertoire of activities and objects and on various types of skill and practical knowledge.

Many of the skills necessary to perform piracy are widespread in Somalia and form part of a traditional cultural repertoire. Instances include the navigation skills of fishermen and dhow traders, or the negotiation skills provided by a society governed by customary law and informal governance processes.[14] Skills such as the handling of weapons have been learned in decades of civil war; others, such as the handling of navigation devices or boarding skills, have been acquired during attempts at setting up coast guards.[15] In addition, (land-based) kidnap and ransom taking had become a widespread practice in Somalia before the rise of piracy, hence skills and experience transferred to piracy practice.[16] In this sense the practice of piracy is primarily a realignment of pre-existing skills.

Foregrounding these skills demonstrates that an individual cannot simply decide to become a pirate. To participate in piracy one either already possesses a

range of needed skills (such as navigation skills) and learns through engagement with others how to use them for piracy, or has to learn from scratch the various skills required to perform piracy. Moreover, to engage in piracy one has to collaborate with others and organise a collective enterprise. Practices are social in the sense that they are shared and performed by a distinct collective. In this sense we can speak about Somali pirates forming a 'community of practice': they perform the practice of piracy together. Various evidence points to Somali pirates operating in gangs or syndicates.[17] Estimates suggest numbers between five and 12 of such groups. Although these groups operate independently from each other, they do cooperate in sharing supplies or information.[18] The concept of a community of practice shows that, although these groups might be formally independent from each other, participants in piracy are nonetheless engaged in a common project. The community of piracy practice is constituted, first, by mutual engagement, that is, people working together, talking to each other and exchanging information; second, as a joint enterprise whose meaning is negotiated among members of the community; and, third, as a shared repertoire used in practice, including the elements mentioned above.[19] Such a repertoire, however, is also comprised of symbols and gestures, language tools and concepts, as well as stories and narratives.

In what way are narratives important for communities of practices? Narratives are crucial for the repertoire constituting a practice and providing coherence to it. They are the outcome as well as representative of the constant negotiation of a common enterprise. Telling and re-telling stories is a core activity in any practice. As Wagenaar puts it 'storytelling is what being a competent member of a particular community is about'.[20] Neumann points to two functions of narratives: an orchestration function stabilising an existing practice and its hierarchies and power relations; and a creative function opening up the possibilities for new practices and providing the source for a creative change or adjustment to situations.[21] Narratives often

> go in a procession ahead of social practices in order to open a field for them […] Storytelling […] authorise an unprecedented practice. Order is constituted, subject positions created and these and other phenomena named so that a new practice may take shape in a relevant context.[22]

Thus the coast guard narrative can be interpreted as preceding the practice of Somali piracy and having a core function in establishing the practice in Somalia. Wagenaar outlines further core features of narratives: by giving meaning to action, narratives give coherence to a practice, provide a connection between the past, present and future, and they offer an interpretative template for adjusting to new situations. They 'create some kind of meaningful cohesion in a situation that doesn't necessarily have that cohesion by itself'.[23] Narratives tend to present reality as more coherent and more meaningful than it is. People 'are constantly faced with the task of not only figuring out what to do, but also of how to account for whatever they did'.[24] Narratives provide a representation of this process. They are, moreover, a way of reducing complexity by giving a general outline of how things hang together. 'They provide the actor with suggestions for acting, and they

give the actor a certain measure of provisional certainty that allows him to act at all.'[25] Because of this, stories are stubborn and resist change even in the face of contradictory empirical data. Crucial to narratives is the fact that they provide a moral compass useful for making practical judgements or negotiating moral dilemmas. Narratives tend to create a system of moral positions, and stories are about the intentions of actors, their actions as well as their consequences.

In summary, narratives 'provide actors with the reasons for acting and with intimations about the course of action that are more adequate in a given situation'.[26] Seen in such a light the coast guard narrative is an important part of Somali piracy practice and analysing the narrative in depth offers major insights for understanding piracy. In the next section I reconstruct the coast guard narrative and discuss it in relation to the different situations in which it is uttered.

Reconstructing the coast guard narrative

A good story deals in possibilities, not certainties.[27]

In this section I analyse the coast guard narrative in two analytical steps. First, I reconstruct the content of the narrative by investigating its constituent elements. I draw on sequences from print and video interviews that journalists have conducted with pirates. These sequences can be considered as 'antenarratives',[28] that is, *in situ* stories told by individuals, which, if analysed together, provide a view of the larger grand narrative. Second, I scrutinise the functionality of the narrative in relation to the piracy community of practice as well as the different audiences which are part of its environment. This is to recognise that narratives work relationally and that 'the meaning of a story is not locked up in the constituent elements of the text, but is constructed—actively, dynamically—in a continuous interaction among the storyteller, the elements of the story, his audience, and the environment they share'.[29] Phrased otherwise, the coast guard narrative has different effects in different situations and in relation to difference audiences. I adopt a strategy of zooming out by first looking at the community of piracy practice, then its immediate periphery and then the broader environment.

Core elements of the coast guard narrative

Central to the coast guard narrative is a vocabulary of law and order. The purpose of the practice is described as protection from threats. Piracy practice is presented as the performance of quasi-state functions, and as orderly and rule-based. The core signifier used to describe the activity is that of a 'coast guard'. This is reflected in the fact that pirate groups have given themselves names that include the term 'coast guard', like the 'Kismayo Volunteer Coastguards', the 'Somalia Marines for Hobyo and Haradheere' or 'National Volunteer Coastguard'.[30] This understanding is further reflected in self-descriptions such as the following two:

> I, as do most pirates, consider myself as having been performing the duties of a coastguard.[31]

> We had to defend ourselves. We became watchmen of our coasts and took up our duty to protect the country. Don't call us pirates. We are protectors.[32]

Note that both statements indicate that the practice is shared ('most pirates', 'we') and that the activity is not considered to be a form of work or employment, but as the performance of a 'duty' which serves higher purposes than merely gaining income. The second statement describes the practice as one of 'protection'. The reference object requiring protection is described as 'our coasts' and 'the country'. In other statements we also find references to 'our seas',[33] or to 'our waters'.[34]

What does the term 'our' refer to? The use of 'the country' as reference object indicates that the frame of reference is not that of property (a territory considered to be 'owned'), but that of sovereignty: the 'our' refers to a form of legitimate authority over territory. Such a link becomes strengthened if we consider the frequent use of references to principles of legality. The threatening actors from which the territory requires protection are, for instance, described as 'those who illegally fish in our seas and dump waste in our seas'.[35]

Throughout the statements of pirates there are recurrent references to legality and the term 'illegal' is employed to describe the activities that are the object of the practice. By adopting the work description of a 'coast guard' and describing the practice as a form of protecting sovereignty and addressing illegal activities, the coast guard narrative projects the community of piracy practice as one that performs state-like functions. It is a practice of restoring and maintaining good order at sea. In other words, the practice is considered as a form of 'alternative maritime security governance' and as a rule-based activity which ensures compliance with legal standards. The following sequence goes even further in claiming that there is nothing extraordinary about the conduct of pirates. The activities are normalised and presented as a routine task: 'We are patrolling our seas. This is a normal thing for people to do in their region'.[36]

This motive of piracy activity as a normal routine task and form of quasi-governmental activity is also observable if descriptions of the purpose of taking ransoms are analysed. Consider the following two statements:

> The ransom they pay is somehow a punishment for their illegal activity in the Somali water, especially in the era without government.[37]

> We don't see the hijacking as a criminal act but as a road tax because we have no central government that can control our sea.[38]

Both sequences argue that the need for ransoms arises because of the absence of an efficient government. They suggest that ransom taking is a form of normal quasi-state taxation. The narrative identifies two main threats that the coast guards are supposed to protect from, namely, 'illegal fishing' and 'toxic waste dumping' (or 'to dump poison'). Both threats provide different frames of

reference in terms of what is protected. Illegal fishing threatens a form of livelihood and a distinct source of income and hence refers to an economic and professional frame.

> I agreed to engage in piracy because we wanted to get back at the illegal foreign vessels that were fishing in our waters, denying us a livelihood. We targeted foreign cargo vessels for that reason.[39]

This statement is not only revealing for demonstrating that narratives do not necessarily follow a logical sequence, but also shows that what is at stake is a livelihood. The second threat of toxic waste or poison dumping adds additional dimensions to the narrative. While fishing requires specialised fishing vessels, any ship, including cargo ships, can dump toxic waste and, hence, become a potential justified target. This threat adds a further sense of urgency to the narrative. The 'duty to protect' becomes not only an issue of illegality, the violation of sovereignty, or an issue of income and livelihood. It is now directly linked to health and the physical survival of coastal populations. Finally, compared to fishing, waste dumping is also a much more diffuse threat, since its cause–effect relations are less visible and traceable.

Narratives provide a system of moral positions in so far as they describe the motives of actors and consequences. They provide a compass to navigate through complex moral dilemmas. The coast guard narrative provides a compass first by describing piracy as a reaction to and consequence of the behaviour of others. Consider the following two statements:

> reacting to the toxic waste that has been continually dumped on the shores of our country for nearly 20 years […] The Somali coastline has been destroyed and we believe this money is nothing compared to the devastation that we have seen on the seas.[40]

> We did not bring this problem; this problem was brought to us […] I believe the title of pirates should be given to those who come to our waters illegally […] Fishermen in Eyl first hijacked trawlers to levy an informal tax and to punish them for stealing their fish. Later they targeted cargo ships.[41]

As we can see from these statements, the narrative has a temporal sequence and describes piracy practice as a reaction or response to the activities of others. The problem is presented as brought about by external forces, and piracy practice is a consequence to outside actions. Hence a relation is established in which responsibility for violence is moved to external actors. The quote also points to another dimension of the narrative, namely, the way it negotiates the meaning of the concept of 'piracy' or, as it is translated from Somali, 'sea banditry'. Within the narrative the concept of piracy refers to those who are acting illegally. A clear moral standard is hence provided, which is maybe most vividly expressed in the following passage:

> If you hold hostage innocent people, that's a crime. If you hold hostage people who are doing illegal activities that is not a crime.[42]

How the narrative is used as a moral compass to interpret events and situations of uncertainty can be seen in the following passage. It is based on the observations of a Somali journalist and details how the narrative is used to interpret the naval counter-piracy missions launched in 2008.

> According to numerous conversations I have had with Somalis they tend to present a different version. According to these Somalis countries such as Spain and France whom Somalis perceive to be the biggest fish-pirates in the Somali waters use the Security Council, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and coalitions of friendly countries in sending warships to Somalia for the protection of their fishing trawlers. As a result a number of innocent countries such as UK, Norway and Denmark to just name a few have joined the band wagon. These countries naively think that they are fighting pirates while the reality is that they are protecting the interests of France and Spain.[43]

This example shows how the narrative leads to a distinction between innocent and criminal countries. It also documents how it is used to interpret a new situation—the presence of naval forces in the Gulf of Aden.

Narrative, situations and audiences

Through the study of several sequences from interviews with pirates we have gained an understanding of the core elements of the coast guard narrative. The narrative projects piracy as a rule-based, quasi-state practice of protection against threats to the economic and physical survival of Somali, and as a 'normal' practice of patrolling or taxation. The narrative has a strong moral dimension and draws heavily on the concept of legality. Narratives do different kinds of work and they perform different functions. To get closer to these functions and the practical value of the narrative, story-telling needs to be studied in relation to different situations and audiences.

The coast guard narrative and the community of piracy practice. The coast guard narrative has at least two functions for the community of piracy practice. First, it provides a symbolic resource; second, it serves instrumental purposes. Narratives create a sense of belonging to a common enterprise. They provide a source of meaning for making sense of everyday activities and add purpose to activities to serve a collective project. Phrased otherwise, narratives create a mutual identity. The coast guard narrative gives a sense of piracy practice as serving higher and worthwhile goals. The coast guard narrative then creates a collective identity for Somali pirates. One of the effects of a collective identity is that it strengthens a culture of cooperation and collaboration. In this sense the narrative is a constitutive element of the community of practice and a core resource for identifying a shared enterprise. As noted above, pirates operate in a structure of dispersed organisational units. They are organised in different gangs

or syndicates and operate from different bases. Although units are scattered, there is a degree of cooperation. Observers suggest that the units cooperate with each other in sharing information, logistics or supplies. Others point to frequent meetings of leaders of units in a form of assembly.[44] According to reports, cross-gang violence is relatively low. The narrative provides a mediator in the sense that pirate gangs recognise each other as being engaged in a common project. One of the effects of the coast guard narrative can hence be seen as contributing to internal coherence and collaboration within the community of piracy practice.

The coast guard narrative provides a particular type of identity. It presents piracy as a rule-based practice in which participants have duties, work in the frame of legality and engage in acts such as taxation. Such an understanding is in line with observations that piracy organisations are heavily rule-based. This includes rules for sharing ransom profits, but also behavioural rules punishing violence against other pirates, robbery on vessels, or the mistreatment of hostages.[45] Indeed, the degree of rule following has surprised external as well as Somali observers. A French naval commander has been cited as saying that 'They are very well organized, have good communication systems and rules of engagement'.[46] An elder in the Eyl region observed: 'I have never seen gangs that have rules like these. They avoid many of the things that are all too common with other militias.'[47]

The coast guard narrative can be seen, on the one side, as a *representation* of this degree of rule following. On the other side, the narrative is also *productive* of this behaviour and a symbolic resource by which compliance is achieved. Serving in a coast guard that has the duty to protect implies much more disciplined behaviour compared with serving for instance in a militia. As Leeson has argued, rules are instrumental for a successful and efficient pirate organisation.[48] In the absence of governmental regulation, pirates require a rule-based system of checks and balances to prevent internal predation, minimise crew conflict, and maximise the pirates' profit. As he suggests, 'organized criminals are as interested in creating order among themselves as noncriminals. They, too, have an incentive to develop solutions to obstacles that otherwise prevent them from cooperating for mutual gain.'[49]

Leeson's instrumental perspective on piracy also points us to a third important function of the coast guard narrative, namely that of rendering piracy more efficient. As he shows in drawing on the case of historical piracy, symbolic resources are important for cultivating a 'particular type of reputation'.[50] The coast guard narrative emphasises the orderly and calculable character of pirates. Such a reputation is instrumental for the core of the piracy business: the negotiation of ransoms. Presenting oneself as rational and calculable is instrumental in a negotiation process for at least two reasons. First, ransom payment is built on a relationship of trust, implying that the ransom seeker appears credible and releases the hostages and vessels after payment. Second, an orderly and organised reputation makes the ransom seeker appear less vulnerable and hence reduces the likelihood of rescue attempts and the use of force. Storytelling is thus a part of negotiation processes. Pirates are especially media active in critical cases of negotiation. Several of the passages discussed above were part of critical negotiation processes. For example, the interview with Sugule Ali, presented in

the introduction, was part of the negotiations over the release of the MV *Faina*, a critical case, since the vessel was carrying a high-value load of weapons, including tanks. Seen in the situation of negotiations the coast guard narrative has the function of making negotiation more efficient by creating the appearance of a reliable negotiation partner and ensuring that no lethal forces is used.

The narrative has further instrumental functions. It is valuable as a legal defence strategy. Uttering it has utility in the event that a pirate is arrested and prosecuted, either in anticipation of such an event (as preventive strategy) or in the actual case. The narrative can be used to ensure milder forms of punishment, such as shorter prison sentences. As Leeson remarks:

> Pirates, like other people, are not passive responders to the law. As (or if) the law becomes an important constraint on pirates' behavior, they will seek to offset its effects. Pirates will manipulate the law as the law manipulates them.[51]

While this is not the place to address the legal dimension of piracy, the coast guard narrative has been used in courts around the world to make the case for lower sentences or even innocence, and has hence demonstrated its usefulness in courtroom situations. A further function of the narrative is that it opens up an exit strategy. This follows the simple logic that the main solution to piracy is to establish effective coast guards. Through the representation of piracy as reliable, state-resembling practice, and through the use of the term coast guards, the narrative creates the possibility for the retired pirate to actually serve in such a coast guard. Pirates have explicitly made this offer, claiming that they would disengage from piracy, if they could get employment in an official government-sponsored coastguard. Through the representation of the coast guard narrative, and given that pirates possess many of the skills and experience that is required for working in a coast guard, employing them appears a natural step. Such a strategy has already proven to be successful and retired pirates have started to work as counter-piracy advisors for the Puntland government and international organisations.[52]

In summary, the coast guard narrative performs different functions within the community of piracy practice; it establishes a common identity, enables a cooperative culture, ensures compliance with rules, is an integral part of negotiations, and provides legal and exit strategies. Some of these narrative functions are more symbolic, others more instrumental. The key question is, however, not whether pirates tell the coastguard narrative because they believe in it, or because of expected benefits. Telling the coast guard story is part of being a member of the community of piracy practice. The narrative is powerful because it is multifunctional. So far we have primarily investigated the internal functions of the narrative for practising piracy. Scrutinising how the narrative is used in handling the relationship with audiences at the peripheries of the community of counter-piracy reveals further functions.

The narrative and local audiences. At the periphery of the community of piracy the narrative has a crucial role in relation to at least three audiences: prospective recruits, coastal communities and local elites and officials. The narrative has a

function in recruitment. Recruitment in piracy operations is competitive, since a significant pool of young Somalis is readily available to participate. The narrative is, first, a tool for ensuring that this pool remains large and, second, a means of recruiting the specialists required for performing the practice, notably individuals possessing naval skills and those with language skills who can act as negotiators. Two elements of the coast guard narrative make it especially valuable for recruitment: the way it addresses the concerns of coastal populations and hence attracts individuals with naval skills, and the way it frames the practice as one of serving the higher purposes of protecting the country. Indeed, it is notably the heroic element of the narrative which gives it recruitment potential. Several observers have pointed out the status of pirates as local heroes.[53] As a pirate put it, 'we consider ourselves heroes'.[54] An observer suggests that 'membership of "the Coast Guards" family is regarded as a prestigious badge of honour among many in Somalia'.[55] The narrative is effective in creating this status of pirates as heroes defending their country. Through the narrative piracy becomes culturally acceptable.

The cultural acceptability created through the narrative is not only functional for recruitment, but also for ensuring the support of local populations. Piracy operations are to a large degree dependent on coastal communities. Coastal communities provide shelter and are part of the logistics of a piracy operation. Especially in cases of extended hostage periods, local communities are required to provide food, water and other basic goods for the hostages and guards, as well as for the members of a piracy gang waiting for ransom delivery. The fact that the narrative projects piracy as defending the interests of coastal communities is important in this regard. Visits by journalists to villages supporting piracy have observed that coastal communities also rely on the narrative to justify their support for piracy gangs. A senior resident of the village of Eyl, for instance, is quoted as saying:

> I don't call them pirates. They are our marines. They are protecting our resources from those looting them. They are not criminals.[56]

His statement was accompanied by applause from a small surrounding audience.[57] The narrative helps to ensure local support, especially since not all members of local populations support the pirates. Indeed, there is also a considerable local counter-piracy movement. A survey sponsored by the NGO Norwegian Church Aid even suggested that 95% of the local populations was opposed to pirates.[58] As observed by Gettleman, 'the pirates are increasingly viewed as stains on the devoutly Muslim, nomadic culture, blamed for introducing big-city evils like drugs, alcohol, street brawling and AIDS'.[59]

Indeed, the stronger the success of local counter-piracy campaigns and the more that piracy is associated with introducing problems, the more important is the recurrent telling of the coastguard narrative. For instance, interviewed in the light of a report which suggested increasing piracy induced violence against local populations, a pirate is quoted as saying:

we are not creating insecurity in our country, we are keeping our seas secure from the foreign enemy, those who are fishing illegally as well as those using our seas to dump poisons. We will continue hijacking their vessels until they are gone from our waters.[60]

The coastguard narrative is a stable feature of Somali piracy. It is, however, useful for rallying support not only among local populations, but also among Somali elites and officials. The narrative is instrumental in forging alliances with these elites in that it suggests a common interest. To provide one example: when the Somali parliament in Mogadishu debated a national counter-piracy law there were significant voices supportive of pirates.[61] Some members of parliament described pirates as 'heroes for keeping foreign fishing fleets away from Somali shores, and said they were acting as unofficial coastguards'.[62] One member is quoted as saying that 'The pirates are...fighting the foreign ships that are plundering our fish and other marine resources'.[63]

In summary, the coastguard narrative is also vital if seen in the light of the relations between the community of piracy practice and its periphery. It is instrumental in recruitment, notably of those possessing navigation and language skills. It ensures support from coastal communities providing shelter and supplies and forges alliances with local elites and officials. If we step even further out from the community of piracy practice and follow how the narrative is used in international arenas, we would be able to identify even further functionalities of the narrative. Part of the narrative is that it internationalises piracy, since it is a reaction to other international actors.

The coast guard narrative is an integrative feature for the practice of Somali piracy. It is a powerful frame for sense-making and has considerable instrumental value. Investigating how the narrative is used in different contexts has revealed a number of its different functions, ranging from enhancing internal collaboration, efficiency of piracy operations, to handling the relations at the periphery of the piracy community of practice and in its broader environment.

Conclusion

This article has developed an alternative perspective on contemporary piracy by understanding piracy as a practice and its organisational form as a community of practice. This alternative framework puts us in the position for conducting a phronetic evaluation of the grand narrative of Somali piracy. Rather than addressing the narrative on an epistemic level, and asking whether its claims are true or not, we have seen how promising it is to ask why a narrative is told in the first place and what effects it has. Instead of being concerned about facts or whether anyone actually believes in the narratives or not, we can treat the narrative as a meaningful fiction which gives coherence to the practice of piracy and produces different effects. Scrutinising the practical value of the narrative has shown us why it is so sticky and why it is persistently told. Simply put, the narrative is of high practical utility for different people in different situations. It is a tool for sense-making, for understand one's place in the world and interpreting new situations. It is also of instrumental value in improving the efficiency of piracy operations.

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The analysis also has policy implications. International counter-piracy actors have increasingly recognised that it is important not to side-line the concerns (about over-fishing and toxic waste dumping) expressed in the coast guard narrative too quickly. Indeed, there is a growing willingness to pay attention to these problems. More attention has been paid recently to counter-piracy campaigns which aim to de-legitimise piracy by pointing to its negative effects.[64] As the analysis has shown, narratives are persistent. The coastguard narrative is sticky and will even continue to be told in the light of counter-evidence. It is important that de-justification narratives are carefully designed and respond to the concerns expressed within the coast guard narrative. So far the main counter-narratives being told are faith-based.[65] Arguably this needs to be rethought and the types of messages disseminated need to respond to concerns such as the protection of resources, the creation of order and new levels of trust in state officials. It is important to keep in mind that the narrative will also provide a powerful resource for the renaissance of Somali piracy at any time. Even though since 2012 pirate activity has been significantly lower, as long as the narrative continues to be told there is a pertinent risk of the return of large-scale piracy in Somalia.

While the benefits of such a discussion to academic piracy studies and counter-piracy policies are immediately apparent, the approach developed is also useful in the larger context of the study of armed groups and organised crime. Taking practice as the core unit of analysis first allows for a form of analysis which is impartial towards questions of the (political) status of a violent group and its organisational form. No *a priori* claim is necessary regarding whether the group pursues only financial gains or also political objectives. Second, although practices are ideally understood through immersion in the action, participant observation is not always feasible in the context of war and insecurity. This does not, however, imply that the ethnographic methodological apparatus is useless. Quite the contrary: the analysis of narratives presented here demonstrates that, even under conditions where analysis is undertaken from distance (the metaphorical armchair), ethnographic sensitivity provides a revealing instrument. In that sense the methodological strategy developed in this article will also be promising in other fields, and for understanding practices which are difficult to access directly through field research, participant observation or interviews.

Notes

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