

THE “RUGGED LIFE”: YOUTH AND VIOLENCE IN SOUTHERN NIGERIA

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INTRODUCTION

Across the African continent the widespread mobilization of youth in violence and civil disorder is often articulated as a politics of insurgency. Militia groups in Nigeria have been precisely located in the militarization of patronage networks that have become an endemic feature stretching from the Guinea Coast to the oil-rich Niger Delta (Reno, 2002; Agbu, 2004). Nigerian militant youth movements capture divergent imaginings of and provide popular counter-narratives to the legitimacy of the Nigerian nation state. These groups represent pro-Sharia interests in the North, ethnic nationalism in the West, state-sponsored vigilante movements in the East, and autonomous resource control in the oil-producing Niger Delta region of the South. In southern Nigeria the scale of recent violence to which these groups are linked is indicated in three recent reports. Security consultants recently reported that with over 1,000 fatalities a year, the level of violence in the Niger Delta region of southern Nigeria is currently ranked alongside that of Chechnya and Colombia (WAC Global Services, 2003). Violence during 2004 in the oil-producing areas of the Niger Delta

between rival armed groups, was cited as a key factor in sharp increases in global oil prices. And, amid concern at the Pentagon about emerging terror threats in what have been called “the ungoverned areas of Africa” the US Navy deployed an aircraft carrier fleet to the off-shore oil fields of the Gulf of Guinea as part of “Operation Summer Pulse 04.”¹

A distinctive feature of these West African militias is the links that they articulate between youth, secret societies and contemporary conflict. In West Africa, notably in the conflicts in Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Cote d’Ivoire we are reminded of the ways in which the past plays out in the post-colonial present, and the way in which hunter militias on the Guinea coast have re-emerged as combatants in the fragmented spaces of west Africa’s collapsed states (Leach, 2004; Bassett, 2003; Richards, 1996; Ellis, 1999). In this context masquerades and warrior cults have become rich repositories of idioms of youth initiation, modes of collective covert action, and of the aesthetics of violence. The various movements of protest and resistance to the oil companies and the national government in the Niger Delta area have captured something of this process in the emergence of the Egbesu “secret cult” which provides local youth with a collective means of organization that cuts across the complex mosaic of identities found in the Delta. Egbesu is a resistance movement through which youth define an identity that challenges the state and the oil companies.² Consequently the Egbesu Boys have been branded as “pirates” by state authorities because of their alliances and activities. Commentators have argued, however, that this recourse to the past in the present therefore provides a key context for situating counter-narratives to economic marginalization and environmental exploitation. The choice of representing claims to a pre-colonial legitimacy over rights to land and resource ownership in this form and

in opposition to the state is significant. Egbesu constructs a moral community, it is argued, with the physical and spiritual security that this entails, and hence it determines when there is a just cause to use the force of the Egbesu deity for “the good and protection of the community.”³

Egbesu forms part of a political landscape in the southern Delta region that in recent years has witnessed a marked increase in violence linked to various street gangs and militias. These insurgent campaigns have most recently been led by Mujahid Dokubo-Asari’s Niger Delta Volunteer Force who claimed to have launched an “all-out war on the Nigerian state” and the multinationals.⁴ Ijaw nationalism and the resource control agenda have figured prominently in this movement among a range of other issues.⁵ In particular, the tensions of political patronage have also fuelled recent violence. Various gangs and militia groups were mobilized, hired and armed by political candidates for the 2003 elections. The link between electoral politics and violence in the so-called “south-south” zone of Nigeria is principally a result of a shift in the internal political economy of Nigeria’s federation since the return to democracy in 1999 and to the associated re-distribution of oil revenues.⁶ With increasing proportions of high oil prices being directed at the middle tier of Nigerian government, the federal states, governors in the oil-producing states of Akwa Ibom, Rivers, Delta and Bayelsa have, and can expect, considerably more revenue than ever before. These zero-sum politics for access to these resources gave rise to the arming of street gangs in political campaigns during 2003, and the violence of September and October 2004 represented a falling out among the gangs and between the gangs and their former political sponsors over the failure of patrons to redistribute the spoils of office.

Rather than re-distribute, in fact, their response has been to take a stronger line against their former supporters. This clamp down has taken two forms. First, in Rivers State, for instance, the governor banned 103 secret cult groups. The Secret Cult and Similar Activities (Prohibition) bill was passed by the Rivers State House of Assembly and outlaws the Vikings, Buccaneers (Sea Lords), the Amazons, The National Association of Seadogs, Black Axe, New-black Movement, Eiye or Air Lords Fraternity, The National Association of Adventurers, the Icelanders and the KKK Confraternity. Secondly, the governor demanded the return of illegal weapons that were thought to have been used for the elections. Significant arms caches were claimed; at one press conference 130 AK 47s were said to have been “voluntarily surrendered.”

Violence in the Delta region and its hinterland primarily concerns these youth gangs and militia that have been armed by political patrons (Human Rights Watch, 2003, 2005b). Overall, it is suggested that there are around 100 gangs in the oil city of Port Harcourt whose members are said to represent “a standing army of the dispossessed” (Africa Confidential, 10 September 2004; Concannon & Newsom, 2004). Amnesty International claimed that up to 500 civilians were killed in fighting in and around the city during the widely reported violence of 2004. Among these various gangs, cults and societies is a group called *agaba*.

In addition to its association with forms of urban and political violence, *agaba* is popularly known for its drumming and dancing. As an urban dance society *agaba* expresses the “adaptive” properties found in Beni societies across East Africa

(Ranger, 1975), the Kalela dance on the Copperbelt (Mitchell, 1956) and the Goumbe dances in Ivory Coast (Rouch, 1961). It encompasses a search for personal power familiar in Hauka in Ghana (Stoller, 1997), and Ode lay in Sierra Leone (Nunley, 1987). It is configured in an explicit relationship with state violence like youth masquerades in Cameroon (Argenti, 1998). It is about the rediscovery of tradition in the context of masquerades that, for their young initiates, can be a situation of resource access like the *egigun* in south-western Nigeria (Rea, 1998). Its diffusion across south-eastern Nigeria traces a relationship with the global capitalist economy like the Senegalese Kumpo (De Jong, 1999). And, *agaba* provides a commentary and critique of the Nigerian postcolony and represents humorous masks containing serious politics (Ottenberg, 1972).

In focusing on *agaba* performance this paper sets out to contrast macro analyses of the rise of militia-style “war machines”⁷ in Africa with an ethnographic account of the situated knowledge and internal imperatives of *agaba* members. At this level the relationship between youth and violence in Africa may be better represented not as a reflex to state disintegration or global political trends, but rather as a culturally informed response to the challenges of everyday life in the post-colony. In the context of *agaba* performance it is important to recall the need to highlight links between dance form as performance, and the shifting contingencies of everyday life and of political structures (Ranger, 1975; see also James, 2000: 140). It is from this angle that we may better understand the choice of young men to invest their time, money and creative energies into particular forms of cultural performance and social fellowship that are otherwise maligned and criminalized. And, from this perspective it is possible to move beyond the discursive labeling of youth associations and the

politics of youth as a discursive category and to consider the ways in which such labels are tactically employed.

Such an approach, it is argued, also serves to collapse a common dichotomy in the analysis of the relationship between youth and violence. The political tactics of youth in contemporary Africa, we are told, reflect not merely their role as “vandals” but also as “vanguards” and not only as “makers” but as “breakers” (Cruise O'Brien, 1996; Abbink & Kessel, 2004; Honwana & Boeck, 2005). This dual character is derived in large part from the very ambiguity of youth as a category (Durham, 2000), and from the marginal position of youth in the making of patrimonial modes of governance - at once innovative and creative and yet subject to cooption as clients by patrons (Gore & Pratten, 2003). What is less evident are the ways in which this duality itself contains a political strategy. In many instances across the continent, from street gangs, secret cults, masquerade clubs and vigilante groups, the collective mobilization of youth concerns ways in which the marginalized deploy their very marginality to their own advantage. The association of difference with negativity invokes twin dynamics which are crucial in understanding how any form of marginality, disadvantage or divergence from a supposed norm can produce a political tension. These dynamics are composed of an inscribed hierarchy and a critical potential. The critical potentiality of difference is therefore manifested as a multiplicity of perspectives that decenters authority. If marginality is defined negatively, then it is this very negativity that injects a perturbing (and potentially transforming) impulse into the system. This double displacement makes an analysis of the dynamics of marginality more than just the study of abstract hierarchy or heterogeneity, and specifically establishes it as the register of material politics. The processes by which the marginalized enact and

perform their very marginality serves as social critique and “hollows out” other spaces within hegemony. It is precisely by presenting the violent potentiality of social disadvantage that African youth demand to be and are accommodated and taken account of. In this way youth are able to project an epistemological advantage onto disadvantage itself (De Certeau, 1986; De Certeau & Giard, 1997; Terdiman, 2001). And it is in this understanding of difference that the dualities of youth as vanguards and vandals are fused.

AGABA

The activities of the various gangs and militia groups in Port Harcourt and the Niger Delta form a central part of the backdrop to this study of youth and youth organizations and in Annang villages in Akwa Ibom State. Young men’s experience of gangs and cults as well as the violence they have witnessed and have engaged in over recent years is the “rugged” life to which they refer. The focus of this chapter is a youth group known as *agaba*. Since the late 1990s *agaba* members have been variously framed as “masqueraders,” as “area boys,” and as “local militia.” The various labels applied to *agaba* have overlapped and are constantly shifting, which is in itself illustrative of a widespread discursive process of categorization concerning young men’s organizations in Nigeria. The primary categories are identified as “area boys” (urban street gangs), secret cults (often associated with university campus life), militia (promoting ethnic agendas), and various types of vigilante group. While they each follow their own local and historical trajectory, most of these types of group are in fact very similar. They are all associated with the initiation of young men,

identification with a particular location, invocations of spiritual power and with physical violence.

The public discourse on *agaba* and similar youth cults and gangs associates its members with wanton violence, and as a threat to the moral fabric of communities in southern Nigeria that are imagined in predominantly Christian idioms. In public discourse *agaba* is a subversive, criminal, demonic and deviant force of disorder. The following newspaper cuttings illustrate something of the electoral and urban violence in which *agaba* has been engaged, with each report labeling *agaba* differently. In this incident, which took place close to where I conduct my fieldwork, *agaba* was identified with masquerade performance:

A number of suspects have been arrested in connection with the alleged attempt to kill the Chairman of Etim Ekpo local government (Barrister Emmanuel Eno Idem), plus the past chairman of the council and the House of Assembly member-elect. The three were attacked by Agaba masqueraders at Ikot Esu in Ika LGA who blocked their vehicle. The chairman was stabbed. Two key suspects fled to Port Harcourt where they reside.

Punch, 13 January 1998.

In violence during 2001 in the city centre of Calabar, the label applied to *agaba* is broadened with the suggestion that the masquerade is really an “area boys” street gang responsible for looting shops:

Residents of Calabar now live in fear as people suspected to be “area boys” have taken law into their hands unleashing mayhem on the innocent citizens of the city. A weeklong act of terrorism came to a head at the weekend with three

people feared dead. The major cause of the crisis is unknown but may be linked to a conflict between two “area boys” fighting to control the structure of government within the state capital. The action of the “area boys” under the aegis of “*agaba* masquerades” completely paralyzed economic and social activities in the ancient city as markets and shops were forced to close, roads blocked while mass destruction, looting and vandalization of shops and vehicles were the order of the day. The boys moved in groups of more than 50 along the major streets and held dangerous weapons, such as machetes, iron rods, sticks, bottles, hammers, guns etc. to attack law abiding citizens and loot stores. They chanted war songs. ThisDay checks reveal that the present crisis in the city lasted so long because some people in government have hands in it. This is the second time in eight months that “area boys” have held the residents of Calabar hostage.

ThisDay, 1 July 2001.

And finally, the following report from 2001, in which *agaba* is labelled a “militia group,” signaled the beginning of the worst violence that groups calling themselves *agaba* have yet been involved in. During later outbreaks of this political conflict in Ogu/Bolu in 2002 the *agaba* boys were reported to have used AK-45s, pump action shot-guns, and local pistols in their attacks on rival factions. By February 2003, just before the national elections, two sites set up in Port Harcourt were still hosting hundreds of displaced persons from Ogu:

The All People’s Party at a press briefing in Abuja yesterday addressed by National Secretary, Chief George Moghalu accused Mr. George Sekibo, the Special Adviser to Governor Peter Odili of masterminding the killing of an aide to the Ugu/Bolo council chairman. Moghalu alleged that the government’s

aide Mr. George Sekibo in concert with a local militia group “Agaba Boys” under his payroll was responsible for the burning of the residences of party stalwarts in the area.

ThisDay, 2 May 2001.

In general, militant Nigerian youth organizations, area boys, vigilantes and secret cults have each emerged from or were transformed by the post-structural adjustment economic crisis. *Agaba*'s origins, however, are rather obscure. *Agaba* is associated with well-established though undocumented Igbo masquerades, but the groups discussed here do not recall or relate that connection. Rather they begin within the past decade in the industrial centre of Bonny's oil depots. Here a female water spirit, *agaba*, presented herself to a young man who would be recalled later in *agaba*'s songs as Papa Lucky. Since this revelation young men have initiated new lodges of the society in the towns and villages of south-eastern Nigeria and *agaba* has extended from Bonny through the rivers of the Niger Delta to the major cities of the region, Port Harcourt and Calabar. In Calabar the *agaba* groups are known as the Bayside Boys and the School Boys; and in Port Harcourt as the Millennium Boys, 007 and Diobu United. From these centers the groups have spread to Ibibio, Ogoni, and Igbo villages across the hinterland including the Annang village of Ikot Akpa Nkuk where the *agaba* group with whom this fieldwork was conducted is known as the Ukanafun Base Boys. This regional, cross-ethnic dispersal is noteworthy when set against a context of apparently ever-deepening cleavages wrought by the politics of identity and belonging in democratic Nigeria. In fact the pattern of diffusion echoes that of protective cults⁸ and pre-colonial secret societies, especially the leopard society (*ekpe*), itself constituted by the violence of the slave trade.⁹

The dominant idioms that *agaba* plays within are those related to masquerade and cult performances, ambiguously sited and in terms of styles, language, performance and action they construct and represents particular ideas of masculinity and the ruggedness of life. In unpicking the historical genealogy of the cult the *agaba* players actively draw on a range of registers, including the idiom of secret societies, urban cowboys and on varsity cults.

Agaba, and the violence it is associated with, is conceived in similar terms to that of the secret societies, *ekpo* in particular, which have been proscribed and constrained in their performances since the 1950s because of their violent assaults on non-members. *Ekpo* is the ancestral Annang and Ibibio masquerade society and has always been in conflict with state authorities and churches.¹⁰ Over the past decade even chiefs in Annang Local Governments have condemned the *ekpo* masquerades, and have banned the play because of its associations with armed robbery, rape and violence. As a result, what was once the “government” of Annang communities, secret societies are now threats to village security. Those plays that do perform do so in a doubly secret manner. Not only are the identities of the masqueraders disguised and audience prohibitions upheld, but the masqueraders rarely gain official permits to perform and therefore play clandestinely.

It was at these *ekpo* performances that I first met some of the *agaba* members among the spectators, and many of the *agaba* players were initiated and played *ekpo* and other societies when they were younger before the local bans were introduced. Not only are the careers of *agaba* boys linked to these plays but the idea of a “traditional masquerade” is also invoked in discourse on the legitimacy of the *agaba* cult. This is

evident in the way in which the players represent their bodies and the connection between the charcoal and palm oil that is smeared onto the *ekpo* players, with the *agaba* uniform of “black on black,” black shirts, trousers and caps. The link between *ekpo* and *agaba* is also resonant because of the way masculinity is realized and represented in Annang society. Initiation into *ekpo* was a key phase in a man’s life since it was part of the way in which a small boy (*eyen*) graduates to a youth (*mkparawa*), it defined him as a member of the community, and legitimized the use of violence by men. More generally then it could be argued that the way in which *agaba*, as an “outsider” masquerade, has been brought into this local context allows young men to escape the control of elders who would otherwise hold authority over performances and fees.

When forms of traditional masquerade were taken to the expanding colonial cities from the 1920s onwards they were immediately linked to disordering violence. During the Second World War years, for instance, youth gangs and performances in Nigerian cities, especially those that performed at Christmas-time and New Year, were perceived as a menace to colonial law and order leading to the introduction of a new offence known as “masquerade hooliganism.” One of the most noteworthy types of group, which was popular all over Africa in the late 1940s and 1950s, was the “Cowboy” cult. After watching Cowboy movies urban gangs clad in cowboy clothes, riding bicycles rather than steers, called themselves the “Bills” after Buffalo Bill (La Hausse, 1990; Burton, 2001).¹¹ More recent urban cults in Nigeria are those linked to the burgeoning university student populations.

The most proximate register that *agaba* plays on, then, is the “secret cult” especially campus cults which have been both demonized and criminalized in recent years. On the university campuses there have been long standing associations of students like the Palm Wine Club (known as the Kegites) along with those organized as another American import, student confraternities. It was Wole Soyinka, who on his return to Nigeria, is credited with forming the Pyrates aka the National Association of Seadogs at the University of Ibadan in the 1960s. It is from these cults, the Kegites and the “Fra Men” of the confraternities that *agaba* has appropriated much of the style, songs, slang, (*jarassis*) present in their activities and performances. Prominent confraternities are male dominated and have a reputation for toughness accentuated by their initiations and pledges of secrecy. Today campuses play host to the Buccaneers, Black Axe, Vikings, and Hooded Scorpions and a host of others each of which utilizes an idiom of secrecy as its basis for organization. They act to protect members’ interests and have been active and violent in challenging university malpractices (Gore & Pratten, 2003). The pattern of grievances they articulate is obscured, however, in the widespread discourse on their association with vendetta attacks, ritual killings and their supposed association with armed robbery (Bastian, 2001; Kalu, 2001).

In their songs, speech and in internet chat rooms members of these fraternities call themselves “rugged” men. Importantly these groups cross-cut identities based on the politics of ethnicity and represent themselves in the use of secret slang based on pidgin or “broken” English. The symbolic content of these groups shares two main themes - maritime and mafia. The Pyrates go “sailing” when they have a meeting, their groups call themselves “decks” and they are led by a “Cap’n” or “Capone.” The Family Confraternity are commonly known as the “Mafia” or the “Mob” under the

leadership of a “don” and “capos.” And the Buccaneers founded in the early 1970s are identified as “Sealords” and are led by a “Grand Eye” or a “Frigate Captain.”

PERFORMANCE AND POWER

These registers of urban, performative, internationalized, rugged masculinity are the key features manifest in *agaba* performance and concern the coding of youth as a political category. Young men actively manipulate the categories of cult and cultural play that are so fiercely contested in popular discourse, and how better to express the potency, the potential, the latent hostility of a marginalized group than in membership and participation of such a banned cult in which the marginalized can deploy their very marginality to their own advantage.

Agaba performance focuses on a shrine. The *agaba* shrine in Ikot Akpa Nkuk is about a mile out of the village along the stream road where people collect water and bathe and where the vigilantes execute armed robbers. The shrine is the home of the *agaba* spirit which the members explain by analogy, and say that it is like *mami wata*, a complex of beliefs and practices involving water spirits that bestow good fortune and protection or wreak personal disaster in return for maintaining a relationship, sometimes expressed as marriage with the spirit (Salmons, 1977; Gore & Nevadomsky, 1997; Drewal, 1988). During most *agaba* performances one or two individual players, core and long-standing members, become possessed by the spirit. This is neither a curative nor an initiatory form of possession. It concerns, rather, an enriching of the relationship with *agaba*. As a protective cult *agaba* draws on the power of the spirit and the rules of group solidarity for protection. In the secrets of the group it is important to note those such as the injunction, “You must not harm; or

betray fellow members.” This is a rule that is tested by players running anti-clockwise (by the left hand-side) around the singers during their performances and which is confirmed in “commensal solidarity” when players share schnapps from the same cup (see Gutmann, 1997: 393).

The *agaba* performance, at Christmas and Easter, parades along the federal highway and through neighboring villages before stopping at a village square to sing, dance and later to drink. The drumming troupe parades behind a single masquerade figure. Dressed in black, the dancer carries a large wooden face “hired” from the headquarters of *agaba* in Port Harcourt. It not a locally carved mask and none of the boys know where it came from originally or what the various characters depicted on it are supposed to be or represent. The members are therefore able to re-configure the meanings associated with the mask so that a male figure on the mask is a soldier; a woman is the *mami wata* spirit and a snake, leopard and antelope, all powerful figures associated with the wild, combine to portray and project power. It was suggested that purchase of the mask was simply a way of disguising the secret cult as a “cultural play” and hence as a way of legitimating the group in the garb of traditional, harmless street performance. Such a ploy would be consistent with various other tactics aimed at concealing the identity of the *agaba* cult which include registering the group as a social club with the Akwa Ibom state authorities, and changing the group’s name from *agaba* to Ukanafun Base Boys.

At weekly rehearsals and less frequent “outings” the dance forms distinguish *agaba* from other masquerades. The aesthetic of *agaba* dance forms are illustrative of the social construction of masculinity. The dance performances are competitive and

improvisational involving individual dancers approaching the main bank of seated drummers where they combine intricate steps with flashing swipes of unsheathed machetes and swords. One such improvisation is especially striking. Routinely at *agaba* performances a young *agaba* member dances on his tiptoes and swaying his hips he imitates a female form in a style the boys call *achawo* or prostitute. The apparent contradiction here of a “rugged” young man dancing as a woman, points to the ways in which the hyper-masculinity of West African young men is sometimes constructed by the conflation of gender categories. The form of performance may constitute, as Moran argues in the case of Liberian rebels, an attempt to retrieve the power of the indigenous warrior. Here playing with gender identity concerns drawing power from the deliberate conflation of categories, to demonstrate that qualities of courage, strength, and supernatural prowess are not limited by biological endowment (Moran, 1995: 80). Cross-dressing, in fact, was a common performative feature for young male and female members of Annang initiatory societies (Van Allen, 1972; Ifeka-Moller, 1975; Salmons, 1985). One of the crucial aspects in this context was that cross-dressing coincided with a transgression of boundaries. For instance, while male warriors (*ekon*) dressed as women when they blessed a fattened bride (*mbobo*) with fertility, so the women’s forum (*ison* *ibaan*) dressed as men when they brought war to a man’s compound. Hence, just as Liberian combatants often embodied a female other the key interpretative clue to this *agaba* dance is its figurative link to power. It is commonly held that women sap or “cool down” the power of men, especially if their own powers are derived from the wearing of charms or the consumption of medicine (*ibok*). The antidote to male medicinal power therefore is sex with women. The prostitute dance is a statement, therefore, that *agaba* boys possess and project sources of power that transcend their gendered embodiment.

Like *odelay* and the distinction Nunley (1987) identifies between fierce and fancy costumes, so the *agaba* uniforms, which involve mufti for peace, black for an outing and red for violence, represent intention in aesthetic. Unlike the youth masks Argenti (1998) writes about in Cameroon which he says mimic the state violence of security forces in their uniforms, the *agaba* boys, by wearing black on black are not mimicking but deliberately confronting state security forces by assuming the garb associated with banned cults and armed robbers. These aesthetic distinctions of peace and violence, offence and defense, of aggression and protection are further rehearsed in *agaba*'s songs, and in a repertoire that combines calls to arms along with laconic sketches of misfortune and helplessness.

Like the Freetown *Odelay* masquerades of the 1970s that John Nunley describes, *agaba* performances have to be dangerous, they are a test. Successful masking is determined by overcoming the physical and metaphysical hurdles that may impede their progress. Hence encountering other masquerades or gangs or confronting the police, is common to the ways in which successful masking is conceived (especially though not exclusively in the city at Christmas time). During their performance *agaba* members therefore sing:

Make you no run eh,

Make you no run away

If you jam egbesu boys

Make you no run

This song urges *agaba* members that if you “jam” or clash with another gang such as the Egbesu Boys along the road then stand and fight. In order to empower the mask, and to prevent malevolent spirits entering the performer and scattering the performance players smash raw eggs onto the face of the mask, they spit and spray schnapps onto the mask and the head of the group touches the mask with a matchet.

SINGING THE “RUGGED LIFE”

Like its dance performance the *agaba* song repertoire is largely improvised though it derives a core group of drum rhythms and lyrics from the palm wine drinking clubs (“Palmet”) that many *agaba* members joined school and at college. The majority of the songs are in pidgin, though vocabulary from local languages, Ijaw and Igbo particularly, are freely borrowed. In terms of genre there are various styles. The diversity of the subjects, sources, languages and genres of the *agaba* songs captures the cross-ethnic diversity of *agaba*’s own geographical diffusion along the coastline of south-eastern Nigeria. The most common forms are praise songs and songs of remembrance for the founders of the *agaba* masquerade itself and other prominent personalities. Songs also include chants, like “*Ekut Ama – Ekpa Ama*” (“I love axe-proof – I love matchet proof”) reminiscent of those rehearsed by the “traditional” secret societies to remind initiates of the rules, and non-initiates to be wary.

As Mitchell said of Kalela, it is the songs that are the primary attraction. Despite the vigorous, noisy and empowered context of the songs’ performance, and despite the often boastful attitude of most of the members concerning their own powers and conquests, the songs themselves reveal a surprising frankness about personal insecurities. The songs are rich in an irony that undercuts a stereotypical image of

these young men's societies as sinister and violent groups of hoodlums, miscreants and street urchins. As the songs are performed, and as the power of the *agaba* spirit urges the performers on to ever more vigorous dancing displays the songs themselves reveal their own powerlessness in the face of the arbitrariness of urban rugged life. While the image of young men's cults is based on lawlessness and violence, the songs reveal an internal impetus to seeking support and solace in the company of cohorts. In a similar way to gang performance around the world, whether it concerns spirit possession, dance or singing, these events open up social spaces "where tenderness, humor, hope and solidarity intermingle with everyday tragedy" (Ferrándiz, 2004: 126).

The songs performed by the *agaba* masquerade speak to the daily concerns of young men with precarious livelihoods in the towns and villages of southern Nigeria. Their focus is on personal security, on solidarity between members, and on sex and drugs. This song, "Dis rugged life" captures many of the themes common to the repertoire:

Dis rugged life

I wan fash e oh

Some people rugged

Sute lose their life – eh

Notorious BIG follow kill Tupac - oh

Tupac boys dey still de sail – oh

Some people rugged sute buy Mercedes - oh

As for me I go buy Pafinda

If no Pafinda na warrant I dey face – oh

Tupac boys still de sail – oh

Amo boy notin go happen

The “rugged” life of this song is a life that the *agaba* boys want to leave (*fash* – *Scottish* to trouble or bother.). The rugged life is akin, as *agaba* members see it, to that portrayed in the music and videos of American “gangster rappers.” This is not a glamorized interpretation, however, since Tupac the singer mentioned in the song was a victim himself.¹² As young men do, the youth of this song muses on what type of car he might buy if he became rich. He would choose a Nissan Pathfinder jeep (“Pafinda,”) a car associated with the *nouveaux riches* over the Mercedes brand of the old breed elites. Yet, with a note of resignation, he recognizes that in reality his “rugged” life will more likely end on a police charge (“warrant”) than driving an expensive car. Like many of the songs the chorus line, the line that is repeated by all the dancers, lifts the song with a note of affirmation and reassurance. “Amo boy” my man, my friend, it says, you need not worry about these things, nothing calamitous will happen to you when you have us to help you. This is a characteristic feature of *agaba* songs, a call to members to be assured that *agaba* will be there to protect its members and confront their enemies. Many songs call on *agaba* members to resign themselves to their fate, they urge them to “jazz down” in the face of their plight even if they should die:

Agaba don't you worry

Agaba don't you worry

When you happens to die

In a worsky land

Never mind, chase dem people out.

“Worsky” here is *agaba* slang and is another way of describing the “rugged life” war-like arbitrariness. In Annang the idea of the rugged life is captured in the phrase *anam mkpo ntime ntime* (something troublesome), or *mkpo akeme itipe* (anything can happen). Life in the city for a young man is arbitrary, unpredictable. Many of the *agaba* boys have lived or currently live in the “down-below” shanty settlements, and work as commercial motorcycle taxi divers in the Diobu area of Port Harcourt. The worsky, rugged life of current gang-related urban violence in Port Harcourt, forms a central part of these songs, such as this one, which relates a gang fight in Diobu:

Dese cult boys

Dey're stabbing a war

I tink I tell you

Dey stab you

Trouble go burst e oh

If e dey matchet you na rugged na your own

Dese cult boys dem don come again

Dey scatter sute reach at Akpe house amo boy

Dem tink say Diobu no go know oh

When dem know say Diobu boys don know

Dem know say trouble don burst

A trouble go burst e oh

I tell you

Somebody got wound eh eh

Body got wound

Na burial be dat oh oh

We no dey pity person oh

One of the key factors in the turf wars in Port Harcourt has been drugs, and this song “No cocktail” pinpoints the shanty settlements of Abonnema Wharf and Elechi waterside as the centre of the hard drug trade, referred to here as the “gold line:”

No cocktail, no cocktail oh

No cocktail, Na bad drug oh

No cocktail, no cocktail oh

No cocktail, Na bad drug oh

Na for Issaka somebody tell me say

Make I no dey like cocktail oh

Na for Issaka somebody tell me say

Make I no dey like cocktail

After dem tell me

I still go buy gold line am

I tink say na heaven I dey oh

A me no know say na my money dey burn so

I tink say na heaven I dey

Abonnema Wharf boys na dem be my drug pushers

Anywhere dey must find and reach oh

Elechi boys oh na dem be my drug pushers

Anywhere dey must find and reach

Fit na to swear, me I go swear say

Dat cocktail for stress my life oh

Fit na to swear, me I go swear say

Dat cocktail for stress my life

Babo cocktail!

While there is a momentary high and he thinks he has reached heaven (*I tink na heaven I dey*), there is a frankness to how the *agaba* boy loses his money (*my money dey burn*) and messes up his life (*dat cocktail for stress my life*). Many *agaba* songs also relate stories of harassment from the police for possession and use of marijuana, or *kuma* as it is called in this song:

Police, eh wetin I do eh?

Police, eh wetin I do eh?

You carry Luger follow me

Say I blow kuma

You carry Luger follow me

Say I blow kuma

The police, here portrayed chasing the *agaba* members with their Luger pistols, in fact figure as one of the central characters in *agaba* songs. The arbitrary, random, vindictive, extractive character of the police whom *agaba* members struggle to evade in their daily lives is often rehearsed in *agaba* songs (Human Rights Watch, 2005a). The police are configured in a concept in the pidgin language of the songs as “winchy,” a word that comes from witch and wicked. Former members of *agaba* that

have died at the hands of the “winchy” security forces are remembered in the songs. They include, for instance, an Okrikan whose nickname or “guy name” was “Gowon” and who was killed by the police as a suspected armed robber:

Gowon – eh

Gowon no be thief –eh

Gowon no be robber

Na rugged Gowon rugged

Na winchy people gettin’ money

Fire Gowon die – eh

Italian no vex-oh

This song recalls the “rugged,” hard life of boys like “Gowon,” along with the inequities of justice faced by the poor when the winchy people, the security forces can be manipulated by local elites. The reference in the chorus line to Italians, conjures ideas of mafia gangs. There is also an ironic humor, however, in the *agaba*’s relationship with the police. On the subject of guns, of who has one and of what sort, young men might be expected to express a note of boastfulness. Yet as the following song illustrates, sometimes the reverse is the case:

I take my money

go buy Luger

never use am for one day

I see OP Flush

Alelele lelele Bamule

Just as soon as he bought a pistol (“Luger”) and before he could use it, the *agaba* boy is caught by the Rivers State Police Operation Flush (“OP Flush”) which is a well-armed anti-crime squad. In addition to the police, the *dramatis personae* of the *agaba* song repertoire recalls, in the form of praise songs, many prominent national and international figures. Nationalist heroes Azikiwe and Awolowo feature in the songs and *agaba* members also identify themselves with minority rights activists. The songs feature Ken Saro-Wiwa, the Ogoni rights activist and Dele Giwa, the *Newswatch* editor, who both died at the hands of General Abacha’s regime in the 1990s:

Saro-Wiwa na de only son of Ogoni – eh oh

Saro-Wiwa na de only son of Ogoni – eh oh

My mama like you, my papa like you eh oh

My brother like you, my sister like you eh oh

Nobody for this life abi I like – oh

Nobody for this life abi I like – oh

Na bin true?

Eh oh na true oh, eh oh

Na bin lie I talk ?

Eh oh na true oh, eh oh

In standing up to the Abacha regime Saro-Wiwa is more than a folk hero. He is also a tough, hard, rugged, powerful man. One of the more contemporary references to powerful men in the *agaba* songs includes a praise song for Osama Bin Laden:

Osama Bin Laden – eh

Osama Bin Laden – eh

Osama Bin Laden – na powerful man - eh

Osama Bin Laden – na powerful man –eh

O mami answer your man

“We like ‘hardened guys’” the members say, “and Osama ‘fire America’ so we must sing him.” Annang and Ibibio cultural representations have a history of portraying otherwise universally vilified figures.¹³ What these praise songs are relating is a particular set of ideas about power that resonate in Annang’s performative concept of the powerful man, *ockposong owo*. “Performance makes a person strong,” Annang say, and so the powerful men that *agaba* represent in the songs are those who have been tested, someone who has been able to suppress a rivals powers.

While the songs highlight the plight of Nigerian youth in relation to state violence, urban gang conflict the underlying economic inequalities and inequities are never far from the surface. Here, *agaba* has use the shared regional symbol of illegitimate wealth, the vulture, in a story of a man who turned into a vulture in Port Harcourt in a pact to secure wealth as a way of reflecting on the illegitimacy of wealth in the city (Bastian, 2001).

Oh Igbo man turn to vulture, because of money

Igbo man turn to vulture, because of money oh

Igbo man turn to vulture, because of money

Amo boy see more wey dem get im never satisfied

I say a more wey im get e never satisfied

Just as women are enacted in *agaba*'s dances, so the images of women and self-representations of *agaba*'s hyper-masculinity figure in their songs. The most common female figure that appears in *agaba*'s songs is the prostitute, *achawo* or *okpongidi*. Those songs that refer to commercial sex workers draw out themes of misfortune and the risk, and although HIV has yet to appear in the songs other sexually transmitted diseases have:

Achawo no give me gonorrhoea

Achawo no give me gonorrhoea

I be senior man, no give me gonorrhoea

I be small boy, no give me gonorrhoea

Agaba members are young men of course and many are of marriageable age but do not have the support from parents or their own money to pay brideprice. In general the songs are about loss and misfortune.

I want to marry one girl

Mi Mama no gree me oh

A beg am, a beg am, I tire

De girl turn to achawo for Abonnema

If you see Polly, If you see Polly

If you see Polly, Tell her say I de look for her

Polly write a letter, Polly put her picture

Polly picture do whatever she for do for me

Polly picture romance me, Polly picture kiss me

Polly picture do whatever she for do for me

The sense here and in other songs is to bemoan the trials and misfortunes associated with the rugged life which of course has to be set against an imagined normalcy, a projected future of marriage, of a job transfer, of a getting a job with Shell. The biographies of the *agaba* boys do not always bear this out as a career trajectory, of course. Some of the older members are leaving, but the underlying sense is that opportunities to escape the rugged life are defined by the same sense of arbitrariness and chance.

CONCLUSION

The invocation of secret societies in contemporary violence would appear to confirm Bayart's (1999) comments on the social capital of the felonious state. Lineage-based societies, he argues, are peculiarly adaptive to new bureaucratic, economic and criminal environments, and those "sodalities of initiates" represent countervailing centers of power which echo the shadow structures through which national political power is popularly thought to be exercised. The comparative evidence for these assertions is usually drawn from links between shape-shifting secret societies and contemporary conflict on the Guinea Coast. Within these trajectories of terror, secret societies are rich repositories of idioms of youth initiation, modes of collective covert action and of the aesthetics of violence. Yet the historical link tends to be more

implied than documented and more dependent on embodied than discursive memories (Ferme, 2001; Shaw, 2002). In south-eastern Nigeria there is both a dynamic, contingent history of secret societies to trace and an active, discursive use of the past in the present.

Agaba, primarily concerns two features. First, the quest for power and protection among young men, and of ideas of masculinity based on being tested and of proving oneself. It is here that the secret cult provides an appropriate idiom for the organization and protection of marginalized young men from the inequities of the rugged life and the violence associated with militant groups in the Niger Delta, the gangs in Port Harcourt, the cults on university campuses and the state's security forces. Second, *agaba* concerns the coding of youth as a political category. Young men are actively manipulating the categories of cult and cultural play that are so fiercely contested in popular discourse, and how better to express, to represent the potency, the potential, the latent hostility of a marginalized group than in the form of cult groups that are banned. It is here, as young men inside *agaba* show themselves to be powerful and to be available as potential clients, that *agaba* is central to the contemporary politics of youth. Overall, while the *agaba* aesthetics and performance capture an unsettling, decentring and violent potential, so *agaba* songs define the marginality of youth as a category that is socially disadvantaged, hounded by the police, excluded from normal reproductive relations, as drug users, and supporters of radical political figures. Combined, *agaba* performance points to a specific self-realization of marginalization and of the blockages that prevent youth from participating in the social exchanges that constitute Nigeria's politics. Rather than identifying the dual possibilities of such youth as "makers" and "breakers," it is

important to recognize that their critical and violent potentiality is configured in precisely the creative forms by which they represent themselves as marginal. The critique of the Nigerian social fabric which *agaba* presents is powerful precisely because it arises from the projection and performance of disadvantage and disempowerment.

Agaba, then, is a social network of non-ethnic expression. It is not mimetic of modern culture like Beni Ngoma, Kalela or Hauka were, but of a familiar, traditional form within which iconic elements from the outside, gangster rappers and Osama bin Laden, are refigured and resignified in a vernacular popular imagination. The continued salience of the use of the secret society in *agaba* performance lies not in the mere invocation of “tradition,” but in the manipulation of the ambiguous properties of power with which it is linked. The stress here is on historical trajectories and contingencies as opposed to reductionist explanations of “re-traditionalization.” This paper, therefore, is about how masculinities and youth in West Africa engage with a crisis of patrimonialism through an aesthetic of violence and through quests for selfhood configured in the creative ambiguities of indigenous notions of power – of toughness and testing.

It is necessary to take account of these moral imperatives to violence and forms of organization configured in violence if the anthropology of violence is to map the different moral and aesthetic evaluations people in different contexts make of their actions on the bodies of others (Spencer, 2003: 1568). Diffused in crowds and mobs and concentrated in groups and gangs, “popular” violence tends to obey moral imperatives and is often structured in terms of “legitimate” targets and appropriate

punishments. These various moral communities produce notions of justice and law with different kinds of imaginaries from those available in the official sites and representations of justice and law (Das & Poole, 2004: 22). Their views of justice are often “retrospective vision[s] of a world restored to its proper order” (Spencer, 2003: 1570), but this is not to say that they are based on unchanging notions of cultural norms and practice. Rather, the complexity of lived experience inflects both past and imagined futures into an ambiguous, dynamic and very powerful notion of the moral order and of the routines by which it should be upheld.

NOTES

1. Gordon England, Secretary of the Navy (VOANews.com, 31 May 2004).
2. Along with the Ijaw National Congress, the Ijaw Youth Congress and others the Egbesu Boys issued the Kaiama Declaration on 11 December 1998 which demanded the withdrawal from Ijawland of all military forces of occupation.
3. Comments by Prof. E.J. Alagoa in *Survival* (Newspaper of Chikoko Movement), 2 October 1999.
4. The Niger Delta Volunteer Force takes its name from the movement that led a short-lived secession movement in 1966, just prior to the Nigerian civil war. Alhaji Asari Dokobu is the son of a High Court judge, a convert to Islam and an admirer of Osama Bin Laden and Nelson Mandela.
5. Oil theft from the sabotage of oil pipelines, a practice known as bunkering, also plays an important role as a source of funding for weapons. Overall,

stolen crude sold to unscrupulous foreign refineries may account for a third of Nigeria's total output *Africa Confidential*, 10 September 2004.

6. The figures are problematic but the principles and trends are not. Since 1999 the amount shared between the three tiers of government – federal, state and local – has moved in favour of the states, specifically the oil-producing states. On average the states received around 11-12 per cent under the military rule (pre-1999), which has jumped to over 20 per cent since President Obasanjo came to power. This may rise to nearly 33 per cent because of a supreme court ruling on the allocation of off-shore oil revenues. In real terms this represents a jump from \$120 million in 1999 to US \$ 1 billion in 2001.
7. For an Africanist reading of Deleuze and Guattari's "war-machine" hypothesis see (Mbembe 2003).
8. The protective cult of *anim ekim*, for instance, entered southern Annang communities through the trading rivers and was founded by Opobo merchants who had settled at Annang waterside markets. The cult provided protection against the predations of malevolent ancestral spirits (*idiok* or *afai ekpo*). It was not expensive to join, but it placed exacting demands upon initiates who, on pain of death, had to commit to a series of rules which included a charge of not harming (or even thinking about harming) another person.
9. On diffusion of cults regional cults in Cameroon and south-eastern Nigeria see (Roeschenthaler 2004).
10. On *ekpo* see (Offiong 1984); (Pratten forthcoming). On *ekpe* see (Ottenberg and Knudsen 1985).
11. This social phenomenon, "Billism", sprang up in Kinshasa's working-class neighbourhoods around 1952 among idle young dropouts who, to stave off

boredom, saturated themselves with westerns and identified with the actors - complete with its own codes, language (Hindubill), slogans (“live fast and die,” “whatever belongs to the people is mine”) and its own references. They renamed their gangs, their leaders, and their neighbourhoods.

12. Tupac Shakur was pronounced dead on 13 September 1996 after a drive by shooting 6 days earlier.
13. In 1952, a concrete tombstone was erected for the late chief of an Ibibio village that depicted a sculpted and painted image of Hitler in military uniform including swastika and Iron Cross (Animageddi 1953).

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