

SINGING THIEVES: HISTORY AND PRACTICE
IN NIGERIAN POPULAR JUSTICE*

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Within the ‘new geographies of governmentality’ associated with globalization the appropriation of the means of governance by non-governmental groups has led to a crisis of ‘redundancy’ for the nation state.¹ In the African context Mbembe has noted the pluralization of regulatory authorities and an abrupt collapse of notions of the post-colonial state’s public good. The resulting rise in the privatization of lawful violence is not a negative indicator of chaos, Mbembe states, but contains its own positivity as a sign of struggles aimed at establishing new forms of legitimate domination that restructure the existing formulas of authority.² One of the central features of this trend, he argues, is the ‘... direct link that now exists between, on the one hand, deregulation and the primacy of the market and, on the other, the rise of violence and the creation of private military, paramilitary, or jurisdictional organizations.’³ The fracturing of the state, the increasing privatization of lawful violence and the creation of alternative jurisdictional organizations are especially pronounced features of contemporary Nigeria.

1 * NAE citations refer to the Nigerian National Archive, Enugu. My thanks to the ESRC, the British Academy and the Nuffield Foundation for their support of research initiatives that have contributed to this study.

Appadurai, 2002, p. 24.

2 Mbembe, 2001, p. 76.

3 Ibid., pp. 78-9.

Nigerian vigilantism concerns a range of local and global dynamics beyond informal justice. By the late 1980s, in the aftermath of structural adjustment policies which saw economic opportunities dwindle at the same time as crime rates rose, the federal government encouraged local government bye-laws which legalized vigilante groups. Beyond fighting crime, these groups have spearheaded contemporary political contests between the politics of identity and citizenship, and represent divergent aspirations for Nigeria's future including Islamic reform, ethnic nationalism, and a re-calibration of the federal government structure. The return to democratic rule since 1999 has witnessed the emergence of the Bakassi Boys in the eastern states,⁴ *shari'a* implementation committees (*bisba*) across the north,⁵ and the maturation of the O'odua People's Congress (OPC) in the Yoruba-speaking south-west.⁶

Each of these high-profile instances points to ways in which the legitimation of vigilante activity, in its various forms, has extended beyond dissatisfaction with levels of law and order and the failings of the police. The rise to prominence of the O'odua People's Congress (OPC) in the south-west of Nigeria from the early 1990s, for instance, highlights an enduring feature of contemporary Nigerian vigilantism, the relationship between social mobilization and the politics of belonging. OPC, while operating localized vigilante operations, also champions a Yoruba 'ethnic nationalism'. Not only does this link vigilantism into national debates about ethnic marginalization, it also implicates vigilantism into local discourses, practices and con-

4 Baker, 2002; Ukiwo, 2002; Human Rights Watch, May 2002; Harnischfeger, 2003; Smith, 2004.

5 Human Rights Watch, September 2004; Casey, forthcoming; Last, forthcoming; Adamu, forthcoming.

6 Akinyele, 2001; Human Rights Watch, February 2003; Nolte, 2004. The federal government, in response, has attempted to criminalize those groups who have promoted their own or their sponsors' political agendas. The OPC was banned in 1999 and the Federal Government sought to disband the Bakassi Boys in 2002.

HISTORY AND PRACTICE IN NIGERIAN POPULAR PRACTICE

flicts of 'indigeneity' or 'autochthony'.⁷ Since 1999 opportunities for trade, employment and accommodation in Nigeria's cities have been increasingly determined by questions of identity and the practices of closure.⁸ The re-implementation of *shari'a* law across the northern states of Nigeria in 1999 and 2000, and the associated rise of *shari'a* implementation committees (*hisba*), has similarly challenged both the sovereignty and scope of federal law and how it is policed. The impetus to extend the criminal law to the jurisdiction of *shari'a* courts in the northern states has lost momentum since 2002, but the differential impact of legal codes and policing practices has nevertheless given rise to a patchwork of jurisdictional authority. And the legal sanctioning of the Bakassi Boys by south-eastern state governors from 1999 onwards has also posed fundamental questions about the constitution of the Nigerian federal state, relating to the federal or state basis for the Nigeria Police Force, with state governors arguing that the federal police are unable to police local conflicts. The federal constitution retains police authority at the centre as a form of brake on the expansion of regional or state powers, and many have seen the sponsorship of vigilante groups by the governors as a form of substitute for autonomous state-level police forces.⁹

As this brief overview suggests, it is possible to link contemporary Nigerian vigilantism to a range of regional and national-level political imperatives, and to map vigilantism onto a fracturing of the religious, ethnic, and constitutional fabric of the country. Such an analytical perspective, however, would not fully capture the historically contingent and culturally specific logics of what being a vigilante means. First, accounts that relate vigilantism to political fragmentation ignore the way in which it is a practice by which people actively insinuate themselves into networks of surveillance.¹⁰ Second,

7 Meyer and Geschiere, 1999; Geschiere and Nyamnjoh, 2000.

8 Human Rights Watch, April 2006.

9 Human Rights Watch, July 2005.

10 De Certeau, 1984, p. 96.

to understand vigilantism as a mode of collective violence it is also necessary to take account of the moral imperatives to violence.

This chapter argues that vigilante groups and practices in Nigeria do not constitute a reflection of global trends, or a reflection of Nigeria's fractured politics; they are not entirely or satisfactorily explained as a response to crime, and as such they cannot be neatly understood as civic associations in the vanguard of popular movements to reassert autonomy and power in the face of the state. The focus here, instead, is on the cultural construction of violence, though this is not to underplay the significance of police under-resourcing and corruption or the way these factors contribute materially to the emergence and continuing legitimacy of vigilantes as they provide protection from the 'life-choking dangers' of armed robbers and thieves.¹¹ While vigilantes provide a compelling but interpretively layered script within popular Nigerian discourse, their practices need to be related to cultural logics and social imperatives as both counterpoint and complement to the 'police-failure' thesis.

Comparatively, contemporary vigilantism across Nigeria represents the articulation of claims to a set of rights based on the historical and spiritual legitimacy of young powerful men, 'sons of the soil', defending the community under local religious injunction and protection. Throughout the country, vigilantes draw upon familiar modes of social action in which young men of the community protect and punish. In this context vigilantism is as much a set of practices concerning the symbolic construction of community as it is a question of combating criminality. In northern Nigerian states these groups represent a grassroots response to the failures of the judicial system and to the inequalities experienced by young men who invoke piety as a political act and join vigilante groups to enforce the *shari'a* code. Last, for instance, points to the way in which vigilant-

11 Ekeh, A Review of HRWS and Cleen's Report 'The Bakassi Boys: The Legitimization of Murder and Torture' on State Sponsored Vigilante Groups in Nigeria, http://www.africaresource.com/index2.php?option=com_content&do_pdf=1&id=35, Date accessed: 31 May 2006.

ism forms part of a quest for modes of citizenship beyond that of the nation.¹² In this reading the rationale for vigilantism in northern Nigeria is linked to a widespread anxiety over the identity and activities of strangers within the Muslim community (*jama'a*), which has provided the groundswell for an impulse and imperative of 'renewal'. The enforcement of *shari'a* and the role of *hisba* are therefore the result of a 'new piety' in which the proper order of public interaction among Muslims is reconstituted.

In a parallel recent example Nolte's analysis of youth politics in the Yoruba-speaking southwest illustrates that the mobilization and vigilantism of Nigerian youth draw on a repertoire of practices and cultural logics linked to the ideology and practices of pre-colonial initiatory societies.¹³ Once charged with executing criminals and protecting against witchcraft, the Oro society's responsibilities also included punishing those who challenged town unity. This role proved of particular political salience during the nationalist period and was manifest in violent attacks on northern migrants during the 1950s and 1960s. The legitimacy of vigilante groups formed from the 1980s onwards was derived, in part, from the close association between young men disenfranchised and disempowered by the post-oil boom economic downturn and the Oro society. As Nolte describes, 'While vigilante and Oro groups did not become identical, many young men were either members of both organisations or were content to cooperate with the other group. Thus, many of the young men involved in vigilante activities used charms of Oro origin for their spiritual protection.'¹⁴ These appropriated Oro practices, including a secret language unintelligible to non-initiates, were taken up by members of the Oodua People's Congress which was formed in 1994, in the light of the annulled 1993 election, to protect Yoruba ethnic interests through lobbying support for traditional

12 Last, forthcoming and echoed in Casey's chapter in this volume.

13 Nolte, 2004.

14 Ibid., p. 71.

authorities, ‘protecting’ community interests against non-indigenes, and night patrols.

In both these examples the historical understanding of the ideology and practices associated with Nigerian vigilantism and its legitimation are central. This chapter similarly argues for the historically contingent and culturally specific logics of what being an Annang vigilante means in south-eastern Nigeria, and points to the need to take account of the moral imperatives to violence.¹⁵ Two main points are argued. First, that vigilantism should be perceived historically as a contested site of judicial authority which captures a broad range of economic and political strategies, especially for the political category of youth. Second, that vigilantism should be seen in the context of the semiotic frameworks and conceptions of personhood that shape it.

From secret societies to vigilantes

This first section traces a historical trajectory from secret societies to vigilantes and outlines the ways in which contemporary vigilantes occupy a familiar, if contested, space within the Annang social fabric. Within this decentralized political economy there has always been a plurality of judicial fora in which hierarchies of chieftaincy power (of the patrilineal clan, the village and the lineage itself) combined with the seasonally shifting roles, rights and responsibilities of initiatory secret societies. In this setting judging cases was always an index of power and a contested resource.

Perhaps the most direct historical trajectory in community security is the link between pre-colonial night-guards (*ufok usung*) and contemporary vigilantes. Surveillance (*ukpeme idung*, to watch the village) was organized by lineage heads who picked small groups of young men to monitor paths and plots from palm-leaf constructed hides (*ufok usung*—road house). In Annang the protection of produce

¹⁵ The ethnography discussed here is based in Annang-speaking communities in Ukanafun Local Government Area, Akwa Ibom State. During the colonial period this region fell under the Abak District of Calabar Province.

was paramount,¹⁶ and the theft of seed yams or cassava stems—for the following year's harvest—was considered abhorrent. These guards would parade thieves they had caught around the village and the market (*etak ino*—to parade a thief). In addition to courts (*esop*) held by lineage, village and clan heads, the Annang political landscape was differentiated by the men's secret societies: *awie orwo* (*ekong*), the warrior cult, *ekpo*, the ancestral masquerade, and *ekpe*, the leopard society.¹⁷ In the southern Annang area *ekpe* was the executive arm of village government and implemented judicial decisions in tandem with lineage heads and village chiefs. Any thief who was caught would be paraded through the market, beaten and either sold or killed at the execution grove (*ukang ino*—place, thief). The fate of those executed was related to their relatives by the phrase the leopard had 'eaten' them (*ekpe omum enye ata*—'leopard caught person chew'). Combined with their rights to recover debts and catch and kill stray livestock on crop land, the lucrative privileges of status that membership of the leopard society conferred led to the saying that 'the leopard is food' (*ekpe edi udiu*).

Contemporary vigilantes claim, or have assumed, many of the functions of pre-colonial *ufok usung* and the secret societies like *ekpe*. Parallels are evident in the opportunities they offer for social recognition outside the lineage, especially to younger men, and in continuities of social practices ranging from oaths of secrecy and innocence, singing shaming songs, and modes of parading and punishing thieves. Pre-colonial modes of youth mobilization and initiatory societies therefore offer not only a model of organization, but also modes for the transmission of social practice. To illustrate the continuities in vigilante practice, however, it is necessary not only to identify inflections of the past in current practice but also to trace a narrative history of the relationship between alternative judicial fora, chieftaincy and the state as shaped through the colonial and post-colonial periods.

16 Cf. Austen, 1986 p.385.

17 Messenger, 1957; Offiong, 1984; Ottenberg and Knudsen, 1985.

In many senses the history of colonial law in south-eastern Nigeria can be read as a series of tactics designed to subvert the formal impositions of a colonial judiciary. Popular reaction to the unfamiliar prominence accorded to the chiefs during this period with the institution of the Warrant Chief and Native Courts was met with overt and covert responses from the elders of the secret societies, which included imitating colonial paraphernalia in the establishment of 'parallel' warrant chiefs, the continued sittings of illegal weekly village tribunals, and the 'revival' of secret societies and their powers of punishment over thieves.¹⁸ Evidence of secret society activities during the First World War years, for example, illustrates that they were inspired by particular grievances with the Native Court system. Reports appeared in 1916, for instance, that *ekpe* societies throughout Ikot Ekpene Division, including the Annang villages of Abak District, had revived its former judicial functions. In January, representatives of the *ekpe* society had been called to meet at Obo market.¹⁹ There they agreed to revive the rule that intruders should be apprehended and killed by the society. The witness statement of Akpan Ekoreko living at Ikot Ama, given during the ensuing investigation, exposes the clandestine details of its activities:

The first meetings of the Ekpe Society in connection with the new law was at Ikot Akpan Essiet in the compound of Chief Ebok Idiag (Ikot Ama Court). There an oath was sworn that no one should report what was arranged to the DO [District Officer]. It was then arranged that any[one] caught stealing should be killed and not taken to the DO. Another meeting was held at Ntaw Akpa Oko in the compound of Akpan Nwoko (Ikot Ama Court). Mbiam was again sworn and the same law proclaimed. An order was passed that every town should give their Court Member a goat and 100 manillas because it was their business to get the matter settled if the DO came to hear of it. After that there was a big general meeting at Edet Akpan Efiang. At this meeting 1200 manillas was subscribed to act as a fund to bribe the police if any one should be killed, and if the family tried to complain to the DO they were to be flogged and turned back. Their townspeople

¹⁸ Afigbo, 1972; Pratten, forthcoming.

¹⁹ DO Ikot Ekpene to Resident, Calabar Province, 25 August 1916, NAE: CALPROF 4/5/42.

HISTORY AND PRACTICE IN NIGERIAN POPULAR PRACTICE

would then deal with them. ... Since then several people have been killed under this law. About 9 days ago a man stole 1 manilla in Etim market and he was seized by the Ekpe people. I can't say if he has been killed, but the matter was not reported to any of the Courts. This law was made because the Native Court could not give them sufficient punishment. This law could never have been made without the Native Court Chiefs who were all present at the meetings.²⁰

The Native Courts were unpopular because of their procedures and their punishments. The courts lacked effective sanctions in calling witnesses, judges were frequently bribed and the review process collapsed under the weight of demand. Reinterpretations of customary law during the early colonial period outlawed 'repugnant' practices, so that recourse to oaths (*mbiam*) and ordeals (*ukang*) was made illegal and investigative procedures, oath-swearing on testimony in the Native Courts, became a parody of traditional practice. In addition, Native Court punishments were insufficient to act as deterrents. Punishment for theft became a standing grievance, especially when the penalty was reduced from two years' to six months' imprisonment in 1914. Imprisonment was roundly rejected since it carried less social stigma than being publicly shamed in a market. Secret societies and village tribunals, in contrast, had many merits which were absent in the Native Courts since there was little or no delay, there was no writ of summons, no journey to a distant venue, no fear of adjournment, less fear of bribery, and parties were guaranteed to be heard out in full.²¹

While such 'revivals' continued during the 1930s and 1940s, these decades were characterized by a concern over another form of subversion—clandestine courts. There was a rapid multiplication of formal courts after the introduction of reforms in 1933, but the popularity of the justice they offered, as indicated by litigation rates, declined sharply. In part the decline was linked to the cash crisis during the depression, but the unpopularity of the government-approved courts

20 Statement of Akpan Ekereke of Ikot Esukpon, 25 June 1916, NAE: CALPROF 4/5/42.

21 . Nigeria, 1953 p.12.

in civil matters also led litigants back to alternative village tribunals, and it was claimed that 'The extraordinary low figures point to the setting up of one or more illegal courts.'²² The question of illegal courts was extensively revisited during the 1930s since it was apparent that courts representing various constituencies were being held clandestinely:²³

Clan courts not recognised by Government still assemble from time to time in some areas. Their proceedings are kept in the dark, because the fines and fees which they collect are the perquisites of the judges.²⁴

Ironically, it was also recognized that the clandestine courts, along with a broad range of informal tribunals at lineage, village and clan level and among the initiatory societies, were essential to the operation of the colonial legal system. They acted as an effective filtre so that most civil matters appearing before the Native Courts were, in effect, appeals arising from decisions given by village elders.²⁵ Without pre-screening of cases the already overloaded system would collapse:

Without such multitudinous and sometimes petty societies with their heads and their powers of trying certain cases the village or Native Courts would be full to overflowing with trivial cases; in fact, without them, life would be impossible.²⁶

The 1940s and 1950s witnessed various forms of secret society revival, and debates over customary forms of dealing with crime. Various apparent incitements to mob violence came on top of instances in Abak and Ikot Ekpene Districts in which communities resorted to vigilante justice:

22 . 'Annual Report, Abak Division', 1930, NAE: CALPROF 2/11/10.

23 . Report on the Eastern Provinces by the Secretary for Native Affairs (S. M. Grier), 1922, RH: 723.12.v.43 (12).

24 . 'Annual Report, Calabar Province', 1930, NAE: CSE 1/86/188.

25 . Ibid.

26 . Marshall, 1932. 'Obong Village Group, Abak District', NAE: CSE 1/85/4905A.

HISTORY AND PRACTICE IN NIGERIAN POPULAR PRACTICE

I constantly receive complaints from persons who have been assaulted and even made to dance in markets without trial on allegations that they are thieves. They are frequently persons who have been seized by the gangs of men appointed to guard farms. I am of the opinion that these gangs often seize innocent persons with the intention of extorting money by threats. ... A case has just been reported of a woman who hanged herself after being publicly disgraced by being paraded openly in markets as a thief. Lawless elements are taking part in organised blackmail ...²⁷

These organized gangs who were appointed to catch thieves were the *ufok usung*, men chosen by lineage or village heads to mount road-blocks and act as night guards. As with the secret societies during this period, the government opposed the *ufok usung* on the grounds that they had '... developed into an organisation for demanding money with menaces.'²⁸ It was believed that the use of the guards proved a fruitful source of revenue for village chiefs who held illegal trials in which persons arrested by the *ufok usung* were forced to confess their crimes. Sometimes, after the thief had been shamed by being rubbed with charcoal and paraded around the market they were taken to the Native Court, tried and sentenced again.²⁹ As a result of similar reports *ufok usung* were banned in certain Annang communities³⁰

In the light of new crime threats in the 1950s, however, calls for official recognition of night guards (*ufok usung*) re-emerged, and in 1951 the Ikot Ekpene County Council argued that the continued activities of the *ufok usung* patrols demonstrated a genuine need for more protection than was being provided by the Nigeria Police.³¹ Despite the long-running government opposition to the night watchmen the state-sanctioning of vigilante patrols saw their fortunes reversed in 1952:

27 . D.O. Abak to Resident, Calabar, 1941, CALPROF 3/1/1956.

28 . Acting Resident, Calabar to Secretary, Eastern Provinces, 1941-57, CALPROF 3/1/1957.

29 . Ibid.

30 . Native Authority Ordinance (No. 43), 1933, CALPROF 3/1/1957.

31 . Secretary, Eastern Provinces to Chairman, Ikot Ekpene County Council, 14 August 1951, NAE: CALPROF 3/1/1957

DAVID PRATTEN

An interesting development in the Ikot Ekpene Division has been the establishment of a system of Rural Police Patrols. Small, uniformed bicycle patrols now visit outlying villages at regular intervals in order to collect information and to maintain contact with the people. Side by side with these patrols there exists the traditional system of village guards which again became active during the crime wave which was reported in 1951. With a view to regulating these institutions, and to co-ordinate their activities with those of the Nigerian Police, an embryo 'Watch Committee' has been set up consisting of representatives of the County Council and the Local Police Authority. It is an informal body.³²

By the 1960s and early 1970s, with extensive migration of young men to the cities and the debilitating effects of the civil war, *ufok usung* declined. Shortly after the civil war, however, as a result of unemployment and demobilization Nigeria witnessed a rapid increase in armed robbery incidents. Armed robbery, known as '*amauke!*' ('your money or your life!') had first been reported in this region as an outbreak as the 'menace of a secret society of criminals' in Uyo in 1959.³³ In response the federal government of Gen. Gowon promulgated the Armed Robbery and Firearms Decree of 1971. Locally such measures had limited effect and the mode of popular justice in *Ibibio*-speaking communities continued. In *Nsit Atai* during 1979, for instance, a celebrated armed robber 'disappeared' on the order of *ekpo ndem isong*, the *ekpo*-led village council whose judgements were carried out clandestinely.³⁴ Indeed, vigilante action, based directly on secret society revivals or drawing indirectly upon the idiom of the secret society, has been a common response to crime since the Civil War.

More recent trends of devolved and privatized security have to be seen within the context of moves on the part of the Federal Government in the 1980s to improve the image of the police, to respond to the notorious *Anini* case,³⁵ and to embrace policies of 'community

32 Annual Report, Calabar Province, (C.J. Mayne), 1952, RH: MSS Afr. S.1505.6.

33 Udoma, 1987, p. 495.

34 Offiong, 1989, p. 45.

35 Marenin, 1987.

HISTORY AND PRACTICE IN NIGERIAN POPULAR PRACTICE

policing' which were promoted internationally.³⁶ From that point until today there has been an official tolerance and, at times, promotion of vigilante groups, especially during the well-publicized 'crime-waves' of the 1990s. In 1991 the Divisional Police Officer in Ukanafun called on villages to form vigilante groups before the Christmas rush. This request echoed that of the Paramount Ruler of Ukanafun Local Government who had proposed a resolution in the Traditional Rulers' Council in August 1996 that each village should be responsible for the formation of a vigilante committee.³⁷ The Akwa Ibom State Administrator's concern at the increasing rate of armed robbery in the state led him to remind traditional rulers in April 1997 to report any suspected criminals or 'strange faces' in their domains,³⁸ and as a result of renewed 'underworld activity' in 1998, the State Police Commissioner criticized local government councils for failing to fund the local police effectively, and called on communities to mount vigilante patrols.³⁹

Vigilantes like the youth association Mboho Ade Uforo Ikot Akpa Nkuk (MUKAN—'Unity for progress') in the Annang village of Ikot Akpa Nkuk formed security patrols called 'vanguards' to counter a rise in armed robbery from the late 1980s onwards. MUKAN imposed an all-night curfew and mounted roadblocks on the bush paths leading to the village. Their responsibilities were defined as follows:

1. Every member of the Association is empowered to arrest and interrogate anybody caught stealing or suspected to have stolen and report them straight to the Police.
2. Mount routine patrols at markets to check for suspects and stolen goods.
3. Those caught buying stolen goods will be reported to the village council and to the Police.

³⁶ Fourchard, forthcoming.

³⁷ Minutes of the Ukanafun Traditional Rulers Council meeting, 20 September 1996.

³⁸ *Punch*, 28 April 1997.

³⁹ *Post Express*, 3 November 1998

4. Mount roadblocks at night in some streets in the village to trap thieves.⁴⁰

By 1997 MUKAN recorded 23 cases of apprehending and parading thieves, and 18 cases in which suspects caught by the vigilante group were later convicted in the Magistrates' Court. When it was first formed the vigilante force constituted around a dozen night guards each of whom was a powerful man (*okposong owo*), a local category of person defined by an ability to suppress a rival's power. This exclusive basis for recruitment to the vigilante group shifted to an inclusive principle in response to a crime wave in 2000. Then any young man who had lived in the village for at least two years had to register as a youth/vigilante group member. As a result the vigilante group grew substantially with up to one hundred vigilantes guarding the village each night. Active membership of the vigilante group therefore came to constitute both a marker of youth and the basis of local citizenship.

Despite public statements in their support the Police and the local chieftaincy tend to reach rather uneasy accommodations with local vigilante groups in practice. The provision of effective justice constitutes an overriding performative criteria for contemporary Annang village chiefs. Chiefs are under pressure by youths to endorse vigilante patrols and are frequently subjected to accusations of complicity with criminals, especially of releasing thieves on receipt of bribes. During the 1990s therefore, as chieftaincy underwent a national crisis of legitimacy under successive military regimes, chiefs co-operated with vigilantes so that they might gain respect from both the Police and their villages for handing over thieves to the authorities, thereby increasing their authority by gaining influence over a clandestine police force.⁴¹ Chiefs who apparently fail to fulfil these judicial responsibilities face considerable opposition. The nomination of the village head of Ikot Akpan Ebo in Adat Ifang clan was revoked, for example,

⁴⁰ Mukan Memorandum, 9 December 1988.

⁴¹ Comparatively see Heald, 1986a.

HISTORY AND PRACTICE IN NIGERIAN POPULAR PRACTICE

when it emerged that the chosen candidate was unable to handle the village's 'crime-wave'.⁴²

Relations with the Nigeria Police have been similarly fraught. When the vigilantes in Ikot Akpa Nkuk first took thieves to the Police the officers demanded bribes for taking the cases. While there is considerable everyday cooperation between vigilantes and police, the former nevertheless occupy a precarious legal position. This was exposed in June 2004 when the vigilante group leaders were arrested for being in possession of illegal weapons. A local politician intervened to release the vigilantes on bail and an arrangement was subsequently brokered by which the vigilantes were able to retain weapons effectively licensed to them by the village council, and were issued with ID cards authorized by the Police who kept a register of vigilante members.

In addition to inserting themselves into these judicial niches, contemporary vigilante groups should also be located within a broad range of economic and political strategies. The following press report illustrates something of the range of expectations which contemporary vigilantes confront:

Vigilante group responsibilities include: checking the anti-social behaviour of hoodlums, protection of community-based projects; and preventing the vandalization of public infrastructure and social amenities. It also includes guarding against border clashes, communal hostilities and infiltration of those considered security risks.⁴³

As this list indicates Nigerian vigilantism and the actions of youth associations more generally have to be configured in a wider mode of 'civic vigilance' or 'civic vigilanteism'.⁴⁴ Annang youth groups contest power through complex and ambiguous conceptions of accountability. Youth-led vigilante groups draw on a rhetoric of public accountability that is based upon localized understandings of the

42 Minutes of the Ukanafun Traditional Rulers Council meeting, 28 February 1992.

43 *The Pioneer*, 29 March 1999.

44 Pratten, 2006; Watts, 2004.

rights and roles of youth and how an Annang youth (*akparawa*) is distinguished by representing community interests (*atang iko otu*—to speak words in public). These young men maintain a vigilance towards community affairs covering a range of issues including judging cases, intervening in domestic affairs and claiming rights on behalf of the community. Positions within the vigilante associations have therefore become important career paths within the local political hierarchy. Youth leaders have graduated to take up places alongside the lineage elders on the village council, and in Ikot Akpa Nkuk, for instance, the former youth chairman sits on the village council, while the current secretary of the vigilante group is clerk to the village council and the current youth chairman sits as chairman of his lineage assembly.

Vigilantes not only bring criminals to book but also deal with domestic matters. In establishing themselves as informal tribunals they hear minor cases and domestic disputes. Meeting most evenings after work the youth tribunal in the village of Ikot Akpa Nkuk has become a popular forum for the settlement of cases and hears accusations of witchcraft, land disputes, and physical assault. Their judgements are quick and decisive, their costs minimal, and their authority widely recognized. Often vigilante group members are also called upon by parents to discipline stubborn children (*nchong iwuo*—strong head) by ‘strokes of the cane’ (for persistent truancy, for example) in similar ways to secret societies, *ekpo* in particular, who were ‘hired’ to intimidate disobedient children. Youth-led vigilante groups also contest and enforce economic rights. In Ikot Akpa Nkuk a new taskforce was established in 2002 whose main function was to seize goats that strayed into people’s farmland. The owner of the goat would then pay the vigilantes a N1,200 fine to release the animal. Indeed, the current vigilante group has developed an effective debt-collection system by which items of property are seized from debtors on behalf of those owed. Though precursors of these animal husbandry and debt recovery practices are not explicitly recalled, these initiatives

HISTORY AND PRACTICE IN NIGERIAN POPULAR PRACTICE

are remarkably reminiscent of the roles assumed by Annang secret societies.

Vigilance towards the state and business interests takes two main forms—accountability and extraversion. Regarding the first, a discourse on corruption is apparent in the trajectories of Annang collective action during the twentieth century in which improvement unions and their elite leaders have sought ethical probity in public office-holders. In the second instance, modes of extraversion and brokerage are employed to assert rights over scarce inward investments. Within the Niger Delta these overlapping discourses give rise to a now well-established tension between oil companies, youth and chiefs.⁴⁵ Elsewhere the youth associations ‘welcome’ contractors to their communities with demands for ‘settlement’. Here, for instance, the Ikot Akpa Nkuk vigilante group outlined its demands to a contractor who was erecting a mobile telephone mast on the site of local government headquarters:

To the Contractor

Site II, Ikot Akpa Nkuk

Ukanafun LGA

2 July 2003

Dear Contractor

Youth Demands

We, the Vigilantic group of Ikot Akpa Nkuk in Ukanafun LGA welcomes you into our community mostly for giving us the due recognition by making yourself available in our midst, once again we say—you are welcome.

For your information sir, with due respect, we are demanding that the following positions be sub-contracted to us in order to make the work easier for you.

⁴⁵ Human Rights Watch, 1999; Watts, 2003.

DAVID PRATTEN

They are:

1. All supplying of sand and gravel
2. Excavation for fencing
3. Employment of labourers
4. Moulding of Blocks
5. Building/Dressing of the fence
6. Consultation fee of N50,000.00

Sir, we are fully ready to co-operate with you here till the work is over if you are with us. We wish you a job well done.

Thanks.

Signed

Evidence from contemporary Annang vigilantes suggests that in these circumstances justice at the margins of the state is not simply a matter of 'folk' notions of law and justice versus state sanctioned ideas of justice—rather, that they are enmeshed in one another. Hence, while vigilantes may claim to be based outside and in opposition to an ineffectual state, they are nevertheless engaged in practices and discourses presented within 'languages of stateness'.⁴⁶ The vigilante groups discussed here therefore need to be set against a broader regional dynamic that considers how a rhetoric of accountability is dispersed throughout southern Nigeria. As Mbembe suggests, areas below the state sphere are where new forms of belonging and social incorporation gestate.⁴⁷ These are not necessarily overtly political movements but they do constitute visible, if ambiguous, sites where new normative systems, new common languages, and the constitu-

⁴⁶ Hansen and Stepputat, 2001.

⁴⁷ Mbembe, 2001, p. 93.

tion of new regimes of governance are being negotiated. This section has illustrated that these contemporary regimes of governance are however still informed and inflected by a long historical trajectory of popular justice and its modes of social mobilization organisation, especially initiatory societies and, as the following section outlines, by notions of practice and personhood with which they are associated.

Singing thieves

'Popular' violence tends to obey moral imperatives and is often structured in terms of 'legitimate' targets and appropriate punishments. These imperatives produce notions of justice and law with different kinds of imaginaries from those available in the official sites and representations of justice and law.⁴⁸ These views of justice are often 'retrospective vision[s] of a world restored to its proper order', but this is not to say that they are based on unchanging notions of cultural norms and practice.⁴⁹ 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.

Annang vigilance concerns the making of cognitive, temporal and spatial boundaries. This section explores the ways in which vigilante practices are shaped by cultural values and the representation of deviant types. Contrary to a thesis which stresses the current salience of flexible categorisations of the person necessitated by the economic precautions of neo-liberalism,⁵⁰ this evidence points to an inherent inflexibility concerning the concept of the thief and an imperative to punishment. Crime in this context means not simply the commission of any single offence but also being a 'bad lot', a moral evaluation of character often seen as a set of dispositional attributes that

48 Das and Poole, 2004, p. 22.

49 Spencer, 2003, p. 1570.

50 Goldstein, forthcoming.

are 'inherent, unalterable and irremedial'.⁵¹ Annang conceptions of criminals, thieves in particular, are delineated, with a petty thief (or 'cassava' thief) considered less menacing than an armed robber whose status is on a par with murderers and the most malevolent of witches. The diabolization of the category of 'armed robber' is both a local and national register. This press report relating to the crime trends in Akwa Ibom State gives a broad sense of the awe with which armed robbers are perceived:

There was a period in 2000 when rural areas were passing through very terrible conditions of insecurity. People slept in the bush or in churches. The armed robbers usually wrote to villagers giving the date and time they would strike. Now there is a resurgence. Armed robbers are engaging in house to house operations. Some villagers have risen to the challenge by setting up vigilante groups to ward off robber attacks. ... The bandits have generally disregarded the efforts of the vigilante groups in view of their superior guns and dangerous weapons. Some people have suggested the introduction of the Bakassi Boys to help rid Akwa Ibom of these robbers. ... The police should permit vigilante groups formed by villages or neighbourhoods to be properly armed with guns to be able to tackle armed robbers.⁵²

Brazen 'house to house' operations which 'disregarded' vigilante responses must be read not only in terms of arrogance and armaments, but also as an interpretation of their spiritual power and protection. To foretell a robbery in the way described here, by writing to warn villagers of the date and time of their arrival, indicates an ability to prognosticate and threaten common to practices of ritual murder. Witches are believed to determine a victim's exact date and time of death, and writing down the name of an enemy along with the date and time for their murder is a key element in the manufacturing of both a ritual murder and the zombification of a victim who enriches their attacker by vomiting money (*afia ifot*—white witch).⁵³ The armed robber is therefore conceived in Annang society in ways analogous to familiar representations of malevolent forces, non-hu-

⁵¹ Heald, 1986b, p. 76.

⁵² *The Pioneer*, 4 February 2002.

⁵³ See also Smith, 2001, p. 818.

HISTORY AND PRACTICE IN NIGERIAN POPULAR PRACTICE

man ancestral spirits and witches,⁵⁴ and the imperative to combat the scourge of armed robbery as expressed clearly here extends to a widespread legitimacy of vigilantes as evidenced in the popular regional legitimacy of the notorious Bakassi Boys.

Annang concepts of personhood and evaluations of a thief's character are captured in the routine performances of contemporary vigilantes when they catch a thief. Once apprehended, or found guilty by an ordeal or by the vigilante's tribunal, the thief is stripped and rubbed with a mixture of charcoal and palm oil. The thief is then tied at the waist with the rope of a palm-wine tapper and paraded around the village, usually to the market and the village head's compound. On the way both the thief and the gathered crowd will sing.

ino adat ino aka udia, ino adat ino aka udua

thief, take thief to market

woooo ino

shame you thief

wooo ino adia nnok

the thief is eating shame.

The thief carries an item on their head to demonstrate what they have stolen. In this song the thief carries a basket of cassava on their head:

iwa ayaya-o, iwa ayaya-o, iwa ayaya-o, sa ama oduk idem

cassava is good, cassava is good, cassava is good, because it has produced big ones.

For their part the thief will be made to sing verses of remorse such as this:

naka isinam abah ob-ob

⁵⁴ For the police too, it is reported that for those individuals labelled 'armed robbers' there is often an automatic presumption of guilt which, human rights observers and others suggest, has served as a justification for unlawful detention, torture and execution (Human Rights Watch, July 2005).

I will not do it again

After ‘turning him around the village’ and ‘playing for the chief’ a thief is taken to the Police or to his father’s compound (in less serious cases).

Shaming through this public performance should be seen against a range of social control mechanisms, oath-taking and songs, which are associated with the secret societies. Societies and masquerades, known generically by a single term (*obobom*), shared a repertoire of songs.⁵⁵ These performances resonate with the symbolic oppositions of cleanliness and impurity. These oppositions are especially clear in the performance of the women’s ‘yam’ society, *ebre*. *Ebre* played an important role in the public attribution of character within the village by parading and singing shaming songs (*ikuo owo*—to sing person). These songs were directed against thieves (*ino*), prostitutes (*akpara*), murderers (*awot owo*) and witches and poisoners (*ifot*). The main *ebre* performance on *ofion* market day involved dancing around a yam basket (*akpan ebre*). The dancers rotated by the right-hand side to demonstrate that they were women of straight and true character (*nnen nnen owo anwaan*). This performance was an ordeal for the audience and various deviant categories—including thieves, men who had not been initiated into *ekpo*, and women who had had an abortion—who were apprehended, paraded and shamed if caught watching. *Ebre* songs shaming thieves included:

akohe udebe ino kat ubok ise

if you are not a thief, open your hand and let us see

and:

Anwan Akpan Akpe ade okporoko nisok ntie afot iba nkop eneye ita nkwoho aba

Anwan Akpan Akpe is a stockfish thief in the market. I will sit down with both buttocks and hear her. I have sung myself, because I sing with the mouth of the truth

⁵⁵ Jeffreys, 1951 Messenger, 1962; Scheinberg, 1977

Vigilantes are also linked to a range of practices and ordeals that establish truth and character. In the Adat Ifang clan, on *Obo* market day wives prepare food, invite their parents and friends from their natal villages, and dance for the vigilantes. This is the ordeal of cleanliness (*ukay akee sana*) and is held to test and celebrate the character of women married into the village. The type of food a woman produces proves that she works hard in the farm and has no reason to steal. The woman's innocence, cleanliness and beauty are designated by wearing a palm frond (*eyei*) on her right hand. She will sing '*mmenyong ukay, ukay akee sana*'—'I went to ordeal, ordeal found me clean'. Here again the concept of cleanliness (*sana*) is an idea of personhood and character which contrasts with the dirty or ugly character (*mbubiam ilo*).

Key elements of these performances are not only informed by a long historical trajectory of parading and shaming thieves, they are also clues to the legitimacy of vigilante action. Both types of thief, cassava thieves and armed robbers, are coded within a common semiotic framework. The visual representation of the thief in the village parade re-embodies the symbolism of masquerade performance. The aesthetic representation of Annang personhood is captured at its most figurative in the ancestral masquerade (*ekpo*) and in its use of beautiful and ugly masks. At harvest time each year the ancestors return to their lineages in the form of the *ekpo* masquerade. *Ekpo* is indigenous to the Ibibio-speaking language cluster and in its simulation of ancestral presence represents Annang cosmology writ large. Members of the society wear carved wooden masks which become possessed by the spirits of the ancestors. Beautiful masks are worn in the opening and closing performances of the masquerade in the market, and are painted white or yellow to represent good spirits (*mfon ekpo*). Beautiful masks portray the face in a human form and stress fertility, often with a series of smaller, children's faces carved upon the forehead. Ugly masks, in contrast, are darkly painted with exaggerated and distorted features representing malevolent, wandering spirits (*idiok ekpo*). They are usually smaller with non-human

features such as jagged teeth and sometimes represent disfigurement and diseases such as gangosa.⁵⁶

Malevolent ancestral spirits, those invoked by enemies or provoked by disregard, are potent, dangerous and unpredictable. During the *ekpo* performance there is, consequently, a strong emphasis on the control of the fiercest spirits represented by the masks. The most awesome and dangerous of the masks is that of the spirit of the ghosts (*ekpo ndem*). Wearing this mask is a form of ordeal and only a descendant of the society's founder can don it without suffering misfortune. Its highly ambiguous source of power contributes to *ekpo ndem's* status. The initiate who wears the *ekpo ndem* mask sleeps for seven nights in the forest (*akai*) where he must not eat food cooked by a woman. He will pour libations on the graves of seven 'wicked' people (*idiok ilo*—ugly character), and he will consume roots known as *adung abasi* (root of god) that make him feel like he is flying. His seclusion, invocations and consumptions each contribute to an enhanced state of malignant possession which is demonstrated in various symbolic forms, including the way the masked performer is tied at the waist with palm-tapper rope to prevent him from attacking onlookers, and the way he circulates around the market clockwise, by the left-hand side thereby demonstrating his malicious intent.

Like malevolent spirits thieves are paraded with a rope at the waist and are painted black with charcoal and oil. The use of palm oil, in fact, is a common signifier of transformation—of raw into cooked and of nature into culture—in Annang society.⁵⁷ For both men and women palm oil was symbolically associated with an aesthetic of health and beauty, but significantly the embodiment of oil's symbolic values was associated with key moments of transforming the self, especially in rites of initiation. The use of palm oil on the thief similarly designates the shift of status from human to non-human. Overall, therefore, these aesthetics of alterity captured in vigilante performance exaggerate difference on the basis of symbolic opposi-

⁵⁶ Simmons, 1957. See also Messenger, 1973, pp. 121-3.

⁵⁷ Pratten, forthcoming.

HISTORY AND PRACTICE IN NIGERIAN POPULAR PRACTICE

tions: thief/vigilante; dirty/clean; left/right; lie/truth; ugly/beautiful; sterile/fertile; and guilty/innocent. These oppositions map onto conceptions of the person which distinguish between those of good spirits (*eti owo*) and those of bad (*idiok owo*), and in turn between those whose infractions can be forgiven and reformed, and those who are 'natural blood criminals', whose crimes demand retribution. 'We don't regard a bad soul' one vigilante told me, 'When we catch a criminal like that we tell them that they are a dead somebody, look very well, as of now you are a dead somebody because we will kill you out.' Within this cultural construction of vigilante violence the classifications of purity and impurity, good and bad, are constituted by cosmology:

It is concerned with the ordering and reordering of social and political categories, with the defining of self in distinction to other, with good and evil. ... concerned with the reconstitution of a moral order of the world.⁵⁸

This is not to reduce violence to a bodily and spatial symbolic repertoire. These embodied practices do not represent or memorize the past, they enact the past, bringing it back to life.⁵⁹

Indeed, this interpretation of the logics of vigilante violence is based on an ongoing internal discourse over the proper way in which to handle thieves. From 1989 to 1997 20 men and three women were paraded by MUKAN (a precursor of the current vigilante group in Ikot Akpa Nkuk village). While these practices inscribe signs of power and deviance on the body, the link with masquerade performance is both embodied and discursive. Throughout this period, and until today, there has been a lively debate about whether the practice should be continued. A former vigilante leader, for instance, stated that the MUKAN group almost stopped this method of crime prevention 'because it looked outdated and primitive.' While the Police disapproved of the practice, so did some of the village elders who drew attention to the particularly rough treatment of a woman who

58 Malkki, 1995, pp. 55-6.

59 Bourdieu, 1990, p.73.

was stripped naked, beaten and hauled through the market bound by a rope. By 1997, the MUKAN vigilantes were under pressure from the chieftaincy to counteract excesses and take a thief to the village head before proceeding to parade and shame them. This discourse echoes current debate about the continued salience of the practice and a concern with whether the shaming of thieves in this manner looks like ‘playing masquerade’. In 2004 members of the vigilante group said that ‘Ekpo are the ones to use [charcoal] ashes—they mix it with oil. We decided to stop rubbing thieves—because it resembles masquerade—it is somehow playful. If you happen to paint criminal now it is a masquerade, it means we are playing masquerade.’ Vigilantes, therefore, recognized that their coding of a thief was like ‘playing masquerade’, and the practice continues despite the critical voices of those who think it undermines their standing because it associates the forces of order and progress with something playful and traditional that is banned by the authorities.⁶⁰

Conclusion

In Annang-speaking communities of southern Nigeria youth are organizing around idioms which draw on longstanding traditions of solidarity such as initiatory and masquerade cults which are rich repositories of ideas of initiation, modes of collective covert action, and the aesthetics of violence. Unlike recent studies, the purpose of this chapter is however not to expose a hidden, non-discursive history of pre-colonial practice in the post-colonial present, but rather to trace a historical trajectory from secret societies to vigilantes in discourse and practice.⁶¹ Like the emergent Mande hunter associations along the Guinea coast in West Africa, Nigerian vigilante movements also have an ambiguous relationship with the state—while they sometimes (in their state-sponsored guise) defend against insurgency, they are also actively part of these insurgent processes. In both com-

⁶⁰ Comparatively on the ambivalence of the concept of ‘playing’ masquerade in the context of violence see Moran, 1995, p. 80.

⁶¹ Shaw, 2002; Ferme, 2001; Argenti, 2006.

parative instances hunter associations and vigilantes confound simple oppositional categories of pre-modern and modern, pre-colonial and post-colonial, esoteric and rational.⁶² These recent forms of insurgent violence and protection have been dismissed as ‘random misfits’, yet both provide a lens on a microcosm of contemporary trends in insecurity and the failings of the state, and on the nature of citizenship. Local ways of making sense of disorder, and of justifying violence, rest on an ontology and semiotics that are relevant precisely because of the privatization and deregulation of security that are key features of our times, not in spite of them.

This chapter highlights the localized meanings and imperatives of vigilantism in southern Nigeria. Here, as elsewhere in Africa, vigilantism ‘cannot be reduced to either expressions of the mob or to mere antidotes to formal law’.⁶³ Hence, it is necessary to explore vigilantism as a practice rather than as an object of analysis with clear-cut conceptual and empirical boundaries. It is argued that to understand vigilantism it is necessary to move beyond an argument that vigilantism is straightforwardly a popular response to the vacuum left by state collapse, failure or instrumentalized disorder. Like other forms through which violence and conflict have been expressed along the Guinea coast of West Africa, Nigerian vigilantes can be seen as ‘a logical extension of longstanding ethics and practices concerned with the protection of their communities’.⁶⁴ The cultural and historical repertoires that inform Nigerian vigilantism, it should be emphasized, do not constitute a ‘re-traditionalization’⁶⁵ of cultural forms, nor a ‘perversion’ of social institutions.⁶⁶ To dismiss as neo-traditional, reactionary or dysfunctional the cultural and social frameworks through which vigilantism is made meaningful for vigilantes and the communities in which they operate is to obscure the activities that

62 Leach, 2004 p.xv.

63 Buur and Jensen, 2004, p. 140.

64 Leach, 2004, p. ix.

65 Chabal and Daloz, 1999.

66 Ikelegbe, 2001.

take place within these associational forms and obscures the trajectories of routine and histories of knowledge and accountability that enable us to understand popular responses to disorder.



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DAVID PRATTEN

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