

INTRODUCTION THE POLITICS OF PROTECTION: PERSPECTIVES ON VIGILANTISM IN NIGERIA

David Pratten

Vigilantism has become an endemic feature of the Nigerian social and political landscape. The emergence of night guards and vigilante groups as popular responses to theft and armed robbery has a long and varied history in Nigeria. Since the return to democracy in 1999, however, Nigeria has witnessed a proliferation of vigilantism: vigilante groups have organized at a variety of levels from lineage to ethnic group, in a variety of locations from village ward to city street, and for a variety of reasons from crime fighting to political lobbying. Indeed, vigilantism has captured such a range of local, national and international dynamics that it provides a sharply focused lens for students of Nigeria's political economy and its most intractable issues – the politics of democracy, ethnicity and religion.

Contemporary Nigerian vigilantism concerns a range of local and global dynamics beyond informal justice. In the Yoruba-speaking south-west crime fighting has been led by the O'odua People's Congress (OPC) (Akinyele 2001; Nolte 2004, 2007); in the eastern states by the Bakassi Boys (Baker 2002b; Ukiwo 2002; Harnischfeger 2003; Smith 2004; Meagher 2007); and across the north by *shari'a* implementation committees or *hisba* (Last 2004; Casey 2007). Beyond fighting crime, these groups spearhead contemporary political contests between the politics of identity and citizenship, and represent divergent aspirations for Nigeria's future including a pro-*shari'a* movement in the north and ethnic nationalism in the west. Ongoing claims of extra-judicial executions and torture, combined with evidence that vigilante groups were involved in ethnic and religious clashes in 2000 and 2001, have brought censure from the international human rights community (Human Rights Watch 2002, 2003, 2004; Amnesty International 2002), attempts at prohibition by the federal government, and ongoing contests with local authorities over the right to judge and punish crimes. In short, these vigilantes have assumed a status synonymous with the fractured and violence-ridden image of Africa's most populous nation.

A comprehensive history of vigilantism and policing in Nigeria is beyond the scope of this issue and in its localized plurality would prove elusive. However, it is evident that groups of young men or hunters based on lineage, compounds and urban wards were common pre-colonial bodies organized for the protection of person and property.

DAVID PRATTEN is University Lecturer in the Social Anthropology of Africa, and Fellow of St Antony's College, Oxford where he is affiliated to the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology and the African Studies Centre. He is the author of *The Man-Leopard Murders: history and society in colonial Nigeria* (Edinburgh University Press, 2007).

Almost all types of jurisdictional authority operating beyond the sanction of the state were criminalized up to the Second World War. But by the 1940s a piecemeal authorization of systems of night guards had emerged across the country. This coincided both with a key moment of vulnerability for colonial security forces during the war and with a period of more effective reform in the colonial police. As Anderson and Killingray have noted, however, these improvements were 'to a large extent directed at strengthening the ability of the colonial state to coerce an increasing number of industrial, agrarian and political opponents more effectively' (Anderson and Killingray 1991: 12). Indeed, across the continent colonial policing was far more concerned with the protection of property and with the maintenance of social order than with the prevention or detection of crime. Tamuno has argued that in Nigeria throughout the colonial period the distinction between soldiers and police was almost meaningless for the population at large and that the Nigeria Police Force has never shaken off its quasi-military origins (Tamuno 1970). Recent periods of military rule in the country, it is further suggested, have only served to accentuate the military character of the police force (Ekeh 2002).

Fourchard's historical analysis in this collection disputes the commonly assumed watershed moments in the parallel development of Nigerian vigilantism. First, he demonstrates that popular responses to armed robbery did not commence in the aftermath of the Nigerian Civil War, as is commonly understood, but rather emerged from the 1930s onwards and developed with the proliferation of firearms and the availability of cars from the late 1950s. Second, he argues that the post-1999 trends of devolved and privatized security should be seen within the context of moves on the part of the federal government since the 1980s to improve the image of the police, to respond to the case of 'Anini – the law', an infamous armed robber who terrorized Benin City during 1986 (Marenin 1987), and to embrace policies of 'community policing' which were promoted internationally. It is to programmes of community policing that Nigerian law enforcement agencies and their funders have returned since 1999. Both the British and US governments launched substantially funded law enforcement assistance programmes in collaboration with the Nigeria Police in 2002, with experiments in community policing in Kaduna and Enugu states (Human Rights Watch 2005). The various police initiatives established since 1999 have themselves been subject to criticism. In responding to (largely undocumented) rising crime levels the Nigeria Police established a number of rapid response and anti-robbery squads along with a federal anti-crime task force known as 'Operation Fire-for-Fire'. Members of precisely these special police units were cited in human rights group reporting (Human Rights Watch 2005) on the routine use of torture and degrading treatment by the Nigeria Police Force, which included human rights violations targeting members of the Igbo Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB).

International observers, indeed, have found themselves in an awkward position in their reporting on the relationship between vigilantes and rights abuses, with no straightforward target at which to direct their criticism. Vigilantism exposes the limitations of universalizing discourses on rights, law, popular mobilization and civil society. In the context of reporting on the Bakassi Boys, for instance, Human Rights Watch (HRW) activists have found themselves caught between advocating for the state as the legally constituted guardian of law and order and yet citing these very state law enforcement agencies as responsible for human rights infringements. On the other hand, they have been caught between reporting on the violence and violations committed by vigilante groups, while at the same time arguing for the preservation of the rights of citizens to protect themselves. 'Self-appointed vigilante groups should never be a substitute for law enforcement agencies', they comment, but 'if there is citizen participation in schemes such as "neighbourhood watches", this participation should be regulated by law and there should be adequate procedures to ensure accountability and to prevent abuse' (Human Rights Watch 2002). Reporting on OPC has further highlighted these dilemmas. OPC members, for instance, were cited as both perpetrators and victims of human rights abuses (Human Rights Watch 2003). OPC's stance in advocating political rights meant that observers had to tread carefully in stating, as HRW did in its 2003 report, that it did 'not take a position on the legitimacy of the political demands of the OPC or other self-determination groups but believes that the federal government's strategy in responding to these groups has been inappropriate and counter-productive' (Human Rights Watch 2003).

These dilemmas highlight the irreducible ambiguity of vigilantism. It is this ambiguous positioning – in the interstices between state and society, law and disorder, and legitimacy and illegitimacy – that the articles collected here seek to investigate in the Nigerian context. Regionally the articles provide a diverse range of perspectives. Two (by Last and Adamu) examine northern, Islamic, Hausaphone contexts; two (by Fourchard and Nolte) reflect on south-western Yoruba cases; Higazi looks at the understudied region of Plateau; and the southern minority groups are represented in Pratten's analysis of Annang vigilantism. Two central axes of ambiguity are explored across these regional contexts. The first concerns the way in which contemporary vigilantism in Nigeria has been at the forefront of contests over the authority of the state. In this sense vigilantism reflects debates on governance, 'stateness' and distinctions between state and civil society that emphasize the 'twilight' qualities of local organizational politics (cf. Lund 2006b). As a 'frontier phenomenon' (Abrahams 1996) vigilantism serves to define community and constituency. In patrolling the boundaries of ethnicity, religion, morality, youth and sex, vigilantes provide a lens for assessing ongoing reformulations of citizenship in terms of the politics of identity, gender and generation. This focus on community belonging intersects with the second axis, which concerns the social and cultural interpretation of vigilantism. How do trajectories

of social mobilization frame the institutional shape of contemporary vigilantism, and how do local cultural repertoires help us understand the imperative to protect and punish?

CONTESTING SOVEREIGNTY AND CITIZENSHIP

It is increasingly common to relate the rise of the private security sector in Africa to neo-liberal economic models that emphasize privatization and the outsourcing of public goods and services (for critical reviews see Abrahamsen and Williams 2007; Pratten and Sen 2007). Globally, policing has 'entered a new era, an era characterized by a transformation in the governance of security' (Bayley and Shearing 2001: 1). The analysis of the rise of the private security sector in Africa has been dominated by a focus on combat-active military companies. It should be highlighted, however, that everyday security actors – including private guarding companies, neighbourhood watches and vigilante groups – constitute a no less significant part of this sector (Abrahamsen and Williams 2007: 131).

This new paradigm of privatized and decentralized policing contradicts our common understanding of the state's provision of security through its monopoly of force as the essential function of government. The net result of austerity measures has been a cut in the numbers, wages and status of the police, which is exacerbated by their politicization and criminalization. Where this leaves the state is now open to debate. On the one hand, within the 'new geographies of governmentality' the appropriation of the means of governance by non-governmental groups has led to a crisis of 'redundancy' for the nation state (Appadurai 2002: 24). On the other hand, as Abrahamsen and Williams suggest, it may be a mistake to regard the increasing prominence of private actors as a concomitant or automatic feature of the decline of state power and authority (Abrahamsen and Williams 2007: 136).

Perhaps plural policing regimes should be seen instead as a new alternative mode of governance. Indeed, in the African context Mbembe has noted that while the pluralization of regulatory authorities may suggest an abrupt collapse of notions of the post-colonial state's public good, the resulting rise in the privatization of lawful violence is not an indicator of chaos. Rather, Mbembe discerns in this plurality signs of struggles aimed at establishing new forms of legitimate domination that restructure the existing formulas of authority (2001: 76). A key feature of the historical sequence unfolding in Africa, 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*' (Mbembe 2001: 78–9, italics in original).

The fracturing of the state, the increasing privatization of lawful violence, the creation of alternative jurisdictional organizations and the role of everyday security actors are especially pronounced features

of contemporary Nigeria. The question that these articles address, however, is whether this explanatory framework is sufficient. The link between globalization and the rise of the private security sector is a powerful argument, but only a partial one. From a distance and when viewed from the outside, private security and vigilantism can look like a reflex of wider, global discourses and dynamics. From below, however, the reflex link is much harder and more complex to delineate, since vigilantism obeys not only the logics of neo-liberalism but its own local and national historical and cultural logics.

In the Nigerian case, for example, these dynamics of fragmentation have emerged both within and outside the federal structures of the state. Post-1999 shifts within the state itself and in the role of state governors have provided a significant impetus for vigilante practices. In addition to multiparty elections, the return to democracy in 1999 also ushered in a subtle but significant shift in relations between the federal centre and the presidency, on the one hand, and the states and their governors on the other. Though almost wholly dependent on federal financing according to the derivation system, many state governors began to pursue quite independent agendas. The developments involving vigilantes, such as the institutionalization of *shari'a* implementation and state co-option of the Bakassi Boys, were both introduced by state governors, and have to be seen in the context of a range of tactics by which governors have exploited the room for manoeuvre that now exists between state and federation. The most notable instance was the legal challenge heard in the Supreme Court in 2002 concerning the territorial sovereignty of the federal government over oil revenues from off-shore drilling.

As a result of these dynamics vigilantes find themselves enmeshed in zones of contestation around the legitimate exercise of authority. Nigerian vigilante groups are no strangers to the interface between local and national politics. Fourchard's historical analysis shows that Ibadan's night guards were used as political 'heavies' in the election campaigns of 1959, 1964 and 1965; and the legal sanctioning of the Bakassi Boys by south-eastern state governors has posed fundamental constitutional questions to the Nigerian federal state concerning the federal (rather than state) basis of the Nigeria Police Force. State governors have also argued since 1999 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 substitute for autonomous state-level police forces. In response, the federal government 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).

The re-implementation of *shari'a* law across the northern states of Nigeria in 1999 and 2000 also challenged the sovereignty and scope of federal law, and how it was 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. Evidence from Annang vigilantes suggests that in other 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: instead, 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 that require fluency in the 'languages of stateness' (Hansen and Stepputat 2001).

The argument that we require new analytical tools in order to distinguish genuine 'civil initiatives' (Meagher 2007) in this context is misplaced. Against what criteria are such initiatives to be judged? The drawing of artificial distinctions around civil initiatives and civil society is a thankless task (Karlström 2000; Comaroff and Comaroff 2000; Hann and Dunn 1996). As Lund has argued, 'In excluding the "bad boys" from our analytical lens, we develop "tunnel vision" and lose perspective. The unruly, the un-civil and the ones who are capricious and hard to nail down are just as significant in local politics as more angelic organizations' (2006a: 678).

Like the emergent Mande hunter associations along the Guinea coast in West Africa, Nigerian vigilante movements 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 comparative instances hunter associations and vigilantes confound simple oppositional categories of pre-modern and modern, pre-colonial and post-colonial, esoteric and rational (Leach 2004: xv). These recent forms of insurgent violence and protection have been dismissed as 'random misfits', yet looking through the lens they provide we view a microcosm of contemporary trends on insecurity, the failings of the state, and the nature of citizenship.

Nigerian vigilantes are located within contests over citizenship defined in terms of the politics of identity, gender and generation. Most vigilante groups invoke notions of themselves as the protectors of a 'moral community'. How such communities are constructed through vigilantism, and especially through the processes of boundary making in which they are engaged, is a central question. In Nolte's presentation, the O'odua People's Congress highlights an enduring feature of Nigerian vigilantism, the relationship between social mobilization and the politics of belonging. OPC champions a Yoruba 'nationalism', yet it does so in centres of heterogeneous population like Lagos, Ibadan and the university towns. This not only links vigilantism to the national debates about ethnic marginalization, but also implicates vigilantism in local discourses, practices and conflicts of 'indigeneity' or 'autochthony' (Meyer and Geschiere 1999; Geschiere and Nyamnjoh 2000). Since 1999 opportunities for trade, employment and accommodation are increasingly determined in Nigeria's cities by questions of identity and the practices of closure (Human Rights Watch 2006). The articles on northern Nigeria by Adamu and Last also point to the way in which vigilantism forms part of a quest for modes of citizenship beyond that

of the nation. In this context vigilantism is linked to a reaffirmation of a Muslim citizenship that exists in dialogue and tension with a modern Nigerian conception of citizenship. Such a renewal is afforded by the possibilities that emerged after 1999 in the relation between state and federation, and should be seen as the current form of boundary making, or 'a sense of closure' as Last calls it, that was captured in sufism and Islamic education during colonialism, and in physical architectural and territorial barriers before that.

Higazi's article, in particular, illustrates the enmeshing of security, identity and politics. Based on a detailed case study of violence in Plateau State between 2002 and 2004, the analysis situates vigilantism within the crisis of communal violence and within alternative forms of social mobilization such as militia. Progressively divided along familiar Nigerian faultlines of religion and ethnicity during the crisis, vigilantes began to stand for and redefine claims to indigeneity that drew on historical narratives of belonging, territorial claims, and grievances of political marginalization. In this context vigilantes adapted quickly to the new insecurity by shifting their focus from thieves to armed militia, and in certain instances assumed offensive rather than defensive roles.

Large numbers of unemployed young men provide a fertile breeding ground for armed groups and vigilantes. This volume also explores how vigilante work is a resource for poor, unemployed youth, and a means by which they may insert themselves within political and economic niches of the state apparatus. Vigilantism captures the way in which youth in Nigeria spearhead an insurgent construction of the public realm in which marginalized and excluded groups challenge the logic, locations, patterns of discourse and constructions of the public good (Cruise O'Brien 1996; Abbink and van Kessel 2004; Honwana and de Boeck 2005). The central organizational force behind the Bakassi Boys resided in the informal shoemakers' associations in Aba, which were made up largely of middle-aged men with some years in the business. Youth feature here as the foot soldiers of the organization, with little hand in its institutional orientation or in its subsequent outcomes. In Fourchard's article the role of vigilantes is a lens disclosing the intergenerational politics of Yoruba society in the post-Second World War era. Here he links the decline of night guards to a change in relations between youth and elders in which the former began to refuse the dangerous and time-consuming demands of the latter.

In her comparative analysis of women's participation in the O'odua People's Congress, Nolte highlights not only the role women play in providing consent and legitimacy for vigilantism but the active roles they play on night patrol, in street surveillance and as informants and producers of vigilante technologies. OPC vigilantism, she argues, depends in crucial ways on the symbolic and supernatural repertoires of women. Adamu's contribution, by contrast, illustrates the very stark ways in which women have been victims of contemporary vigilantism. The 2004 ban on women riding with men on motorbikes led to clashes between *hisba* and motorcycle taxi drivers in Kano. Adamu shows

how the restrictions placed upon women's movement have serious implications for women's health, education and participation in the public sphere. Like the impact of *shari'a* codes regarding adultery and fornication, the enforcement of transportation restrictions will be most acutely felt by women among the urban poor in their daily attempts to secure access to livelihoods.

IMPERATIVES TO VIGILANTE VIOLENCE

This collection brings together scholars who share a concern with investigating the social organization and localized meanings of vigilantism. Here, as elsewhere in Africa, vigilantism 'cannot be reduced to either expressions of the mob or to mere antidotes to formal law' (Buur and Jensen 2004: 140). Hence it is necessary to explore vigilantism as practice rather than as an object of analysis with clear-cut conceptual and empirical boundaries. In this sense these articles move beyond an argument that vigilantism is straightforwardly a popular response to the vacuum left by state collapse, failure or instrumentalized disorder. Elements of this thesis appear in each article, of course, and each contributor is emphatic in claiming that police resourcing and corruption contribute materially to the emergence and continuing legitimacy of vigilantes as they provide protection from the 'life-choking dangers' of armed robbers and thieves (Ekeh 2002).

While it is possible to draw distinctions, Nigerian vigilantes are frequently conceived within the same framing as forms of militant youth movements such as militias, campus cults, and street gangs known as 'area boys'. The self-ascriptions of vigilante groups are themselves sometimes blurred. While the *shari'a* implementation committees (*hisba*) in northern states constitute a form of alternative policing, they do not, like night guards, call themselves vigilantes. Within the history of Yoruba vigilantism, too, there are continuities and discontinuities between vigilantes, forms of hunter and night guard association, and community policing.

The widespread mobilization of these groups, especially the so-called 'ethnic militia', provide a popular counter-narrative to the legitimacy of the Nigerian nation state (Ikelegbe 2001; Watts 2003; Ukiwo 2003; Gore and Pratten 2003; Agbu 2004). The labelling of youth-led violent social groups, however, and the potential insurgent challenge they pose are often conflated (Reno 2002). Higazi's article provides a counterpoint to this view since it deals explicitly with the distinctions between militia and vigilantes in the context of communal violence in the Middle Belt region. He demonstrates both the historical trajectories and immediate imperatives to mobilization in Tarok and Jukun communities, and identifies the ways in which vigilantism provided a specific response among a range of options to the crisis in the Plateau lowlands. In some instances, he found distinct differences, while in others the roles and identities of vigilantes and militias appeared to converge.

Contemporary Nigerian vigilantism 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 the protection of local religious injunction and protection. Like combatants on the Guinea coast, Nigerian vigilantes can be seen as 'a logical extension of longstanding ethics and practices concerned with the protection of their communities' (Leach 2004: ix). The development of *hisba* committees in northern states, for example, draws upon a religious idiom of legitimacy and discipline. It is a grassroots response to the failures of the judicial system and to the inequalities experienced by those young men who invoke piety as a political act and join vigilante groups to enforce the *shari'a* code. Last, for instance, argues that the rationale for vigilantism in northern Nigeria differs fundamentally from other vigilante groups in the southern states. Here, a widespread anxiety over the identity and activities of strangers within the Muslim *jama'a* (community) has provided the groundswell for an impulse and imperative of 'renewal', which Adamu also highlights and refers to as a 'new regime of morality'. The enforcement of *shari'a* and the role of *hisba* are the result of a 'new piety', Last argues, in which the proper order of public interaction among Muslims is reconstituted. 'Manifest piety is not just a personal stance,' Last suggests, 'but also a conscious political effort.' This emphasis is confirmed in the very meaning of the term taken by *shari'a* monitoring and implementation groups: *hisba* refers to 'an act which is performed for the common good, or with the intention of seeking reward from God'.

Pratten similarly argues for the historically contingent and culturally specific logics of what being a vigilante means. He argues for the need to take account of the moral imperatives to violence. In this context vigilante practices are shaped by cultural values and the representation of deviant types (Heald 1986). Crime is not simply an issue of the commission of any single offence but also of being a 'bad lot', a moral evaluation of character often seen as a set of dispositional attributes that are 'inherent, unalterable and irremediable' (Heald 1986: 76). Indeed, we are reminded in this context that intolerable deviants are often those who threaten 'reproductive capacities by aggrandising themselves at the expense of their immediate neighbours and kin and ultimately of the wider community' (Austen 1986: 385).

The imperative to combat the scourge of armed robbery in Nigeria has long since led to the formation of vigilante groups. In local and national discourse the term 'armed robber' has assumed a demonized status. At a very localized level, as Pratten shows, the armed robber is conceived in Annang society in ways analogous to familiar representations of malevolent, non-human ancestral spirits. And for the police, too, it is widely reported that those individuals labelled 'armed robbers' are often subject to 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 2005).

Each of the articles concerned with southern Nigeria points to the way in which vigilantes protect not only their communities but also themselves. Across Nigeria vigilantes draw on cultural repertoires of personal protection – of charms, shape-shifting and secrecy – that feed directly into the idioms that structure counter-criminal organization. Nolte's work, for instance, has shown that in Yoruba communities in south-western Nigeria the membership of the Oro secret society and the OPC overlap (Nolte 2004). Fourchard points us to the historical trajectories of hunting guards in current Yoruba vigilantism. Meagher also notes in the context of the Bakassi Boys that 'practices drawn from secret societies and occultism . . . provided effective blueprints for informal systems of law enforcement and legitimate authority' (Meagher 2007: 111). And Pratten similarly traces the contingent narratives and performative traditions of pre-colonial secret societies in the practices of Annang vigilantism. In this context vigilantes have recourse not only to the physical weaponry of imported and locally produced handguns, but to a repertoire of supernatural devices. Charms of invisibility and immunity (especially bulletproof medicines (M. G. Anderson 2002)), combined with the use of ordeals and oaths to determine confessions and truth, have been reported as a common feature of vigilantism. The continued salience of the use of these elements in vigilante practice lies not in the mere invocation of 'tradition', however, but in the manipulation of the ambiguous properties of power and protection with which it is linked.

The stress here is on historical trajectories and contingencies as opposed to reductionist explanations of 're-traditionalization' (Chabal and Daloz 1999). Some commentators, for instance, misread this emphasis on the role of African culture and infer that vigilantes represent a reversion to traditional and violent institutions (Meagher 2007: 90). This is to misrepresent attempts to understand the practical meaning of being a vigilante and the emic cultural frameworks in which they operate. It makes light of the localized conceptions of the ethnic, religious or criminal 'other', and related discourses of risk, fear, protection and punishment.

'Popular' violence tends to obey moral imperatives and is often structured in terms of 'legitimate' targets and appropriate punishments. It is important to account for the different moral and aesthetic evaluations people in different contexts make of their actions on the bodies of others (Spencer 2003: 1568). 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 and Poole 2004: 22). Hence, in any setting the making of community boundaries through vigilance and violence is predicated primarily on these cultural understandings and sets of practices. To investigate them is not a whimsical exoticization but a necessary research strategy for any perspective on vigilantism that aims to offer an 'inside story'. 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 both the activities that take place within these associational forms and the trajectories of routine and histories of knowledge and accountability that enable us to understand popular responses to disorder.

Existing approaches to the study of vigilantism tend to stress the oppositions between which vigilantes are ambiguously sited – state–society; law–disorder; governance–failed-state; legitimate–illegitimate violence. Perhaps, as the contributors here suggest, we should shift our attention away from these oppositions and consider instead the intermeshing of sociality and security. Security as a cultural discourse permeates Nigerian society and yet evades the clichés of Western analysis. Security is a key element of the social premium placed on all economic transactions. As people invest in social relationship and the practices of being ‘social’ (burials, meals, marriages), they are also investing in forms of insurance and protection. On the one hand these social investments are forms of economic protection in terms of economic diversification and symbolic capital (Berry 1989: 49). On the other, they concern physical protection and the formation of relationships with people on whom one may rely for dispute settlement, bail money and sanctuary. Security in this sense is an organizing principle both horizontally in networks, associations, fellowship, marriage and congregational allegiances; and in the vertical politics of patrimonialism as relations with powerful patrons and the police, and conversely as insurance for patrons in redistributing to clients in order to avoid accusation, and to endebit clients as labour and guards. Security as an organizing principle intersects with common oppositions such as state and society and becomes an important sphere of creativity and improvisation.

AFRICAN PERSPECTIVES

The representation of Nigerian vigilantism in various formats from human rights reporting to popular videos points to the complexity of analysis that is required in order to grasp its localized practices and meanings. Since 1999 the prominence of vigilantes in everyday routines, in extraordinary spectacles, in political contestation and in media controversy has brought the idea of the vigilante to the screen (McCall 2004). The proliferation of video film production since 2000, often referred to as ‘Nollywood’, witnessed the ‘vigilante movie’ emerge as a genre in its own right. This has enabled a broad audience in Nigeria and beyond to engage with representations of the Nigerian vigilante phenomenon and the sets of ambiguities they disclose.

Elsewhere across the African continent vigilantism is contested in comparable ways to the Nigerian case. In Nairobi, Kenya, for instance the violence associated with rival vigilante groups in the city is seen to be a reflection of criminal activities, especially extortion, the consequence of struggles for political control in the city (D. M. Anderson 2002), and the manifestation of the politics of generational conflict

(Kagwanja 2006). Other examples have shown how *sungusungu*, the classic model of East African vigilantes who were spontaneously mobilized to combat cattle theft and witchcraft (Abrahams 1987, 1996) have, in certain areas, transformed themselves. In some instances *sungusungu* have come under state sponsorship (Fleisher 2000; Heald 2006), while in others they have sought to distance themselves and combat state corruption (Heald 2007).

In South and Southern Africa there has also been an increasing preoccupation with law and criminality (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006a, 2006b), and with the securitization of development (Buur *et al.* 2007). Vigilante organizations and their relationship with the post-Apartheid state have proved an important aspect (Baker 2002a; Buur and Jensen 2004). Here vigilante organizations have exposed the limits of the new state's capacity to secure justice for all. As a result, one of the most striking juxtapositions to have emerged is between a universalizing ideology of individual rights, enshrined in the South African constitution, and alternative ontologies of relational persons that are embedded in the practice of vigilante judgements and punishments (Buur 2007).

As these brief examples serve to illustrate, questions about state authority, governance and the production of social and political order are shared across the continent (Abrahamsen and Williams 2007). Given this common set of concerns it is important to reiterate how the perspectives on Nigerian vigilantes collected here may contribute to this debate. Nigerian vigilante organizations do not constitute a reflex of global trends; 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. 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 of vigilantism as both counterpoint and complement to the 'police failure' thesis.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My sincere thanks to Richard Fardon and Karin Barber for their editorial support. I am also grateful to the two anonymous reviewers, to Charlie Gore and to the contributors.

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