

**CITIES, INSECURITY AND THE RISE OF ETHNIC VIGILANTE
ORGANISATIONS IN NIGERIA**

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ABSTRACT

The rapid transformation of cities to mega-cities in Nigeria particularly in the era of the adoption and implementation of IMF and World Bank sponsored Structural Adjustment Policy (SAP) in Nigeria has created multifaceted problems. There is the problem of crime, violence and general insecurity. This paper focuses on the intersection of insecurity (or security), ethnicity and governance of Nigeria's mega-cities. What are the issues implicated under the conditions of accelerated growth and pervasive insecurity in the mega-cities? How are the ethnic components and character of the Nigerian federation rehashed or recreated in the cities? To what extent are ethnic associations such as ethnic vigilante groups involved in managing communal affairs and city insecurity – or security? How do local and national governments appropriate the services of these ethnic vigilante groups or suppress them? And what implications do they portend for over-all governance and management of mega-cities? The paper attempts to shed light on these crucial questions which are germane in understanding the interface of ethnicity and insecurity in contemporary metropolitanism in Nigeria.

MEGA-CITIES, INSECURITY AND THE RISE OF ETHNIC VIGILANTE ORGANISATIONS IN NIGERIA

INTRODUCTION

For developing countries, it is estimated that a whopping two billion new migrants will intensify the movement into cities in the next two decades. Consequently, the ultimate sustainability of emerging mega-cities in developing countries has generated global concern.¹ This concern is informed by what appears to be a common pattern of growth and transformation - overwhelming population inflows, limitless spatial expansion and associated similar socio-political problems - of existing cities into mega-cities in countries of the South where half of the population will live in mega-cities by 2030, thus giving cities an unprecedented political, economic and cultural relevance and power. Some of the attraction and enticements for migrants involved in the current spate of mass migration and rapid urbanization are linked to the surplus of unskilled rural workforce required to meet labour needs of the cities, poverty and lack of opportunities in the rural enclaves, information networks and the flow of global capital into cities. Indeed, contemporary global economic trends continue to prioritize the development of cities, and in the process exasperate a phenomenal pattern of migration with little or no bias for gender, religion, ethnicity, class, etc.

In Nigeria, the speed and dimension of urban growth has left in its wake multitude of social, economic, political and ethnic problems in its mega-cities. There is the presence of massive intractable mega-slums groaning under the weight of dislocating and relocating migrants who are mainly mega-city dregs besieged by poverty and unemployment. Inadequate metropolitan infrastructure, always in a perpetual state of disrepair, and overburdened social services militate against purposeful life in the cities. High rates of urban crime and violence coupled with recurring ethnic and religious bickering keep the cities bloody and boiling.² Despite public-private partnership which propels key programmes and policies of government, insecurity and real threats to lives and property loom large in the cities. From Lagos to Kano, Enugu to Abuja these trajectories of problems are replicated in increasing magnitude. Yet the need to make the cities a serene and comfortable abode for migrants to articulate and achieve their aspirations can not be over-stretched. This is the tall task confronting government, city managers, regional and urban planners in Nigeria.

My focus in this essay lies on the intersection of insecurity (or security), ethnicity and governance of Nigeria's mega-cities. What are the issues implicated under the conditions of accelerated growth and pervasive insecurity in the mega-cities? How are the ethnic components and character of the Nigerian federation rehashed or recreated in the cities? To what extent are ethnic associations such as ethnic vigilante groups involved in managing communal affairs and city insecurity – or security? How do local and national governments appropriate the services of these ethnic vigilante groups or suppress them? And what implications do they portend for over-all governance and management of mega-cities? I intend to shed light on these crucial questions which are germane in understanding the interface of ethnicity and insecurity in contemporary metropolitanism in Nigeria.

¹ *Megacities* Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, Summer/Fall 2007.

² Obono, O (2007) A Lagos Thing: Rules and Reality in the Nigerian Megacity, *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, Summer/Fall 2007.

ETHNICITY AND INSECURITY

In this connection, I, first, explore the ethnic dimension of the transformation of cities into mega-cities in Nigeria. The movement and settlement patterns in cities have maintained the traditional pattern which highlights and emphasizes Nigeria's ethnic and religious divide and their associated conflicts. Most cities in Nigeria have separate settlements for hosts and migrant ethnic groups. In keeping with covert British colonial policy of divide and rule, settlement patterns in cities in Northern Nigeria were officially segregated in ways that ensured indigenous ethnic groups lived separately from migrants. While southern migrants, mostly Christians, were compelled to live in *Sabon Gari*, their counterparts from other parts of muslim-dominated Northern Nigeria took up residences in *Tudun Wada*. And their host resided in separated and barricaded quarters of the city. In colonial Lagos and Ibadan, northern muslim migrants settled in *Sabo*.³ Even in Ibadan, Ijebu settlers were encouraged to live separately from their Ibadan hosts, although both sub-groups are extractions of the larger Yoruba ethnic group.⁴

The pattern has not changed. Consciously or unconsciously, it has been sustained in emerging post-colonial cities and the metamorphosis of Nigeria's existing cities into mega-cities. For instance, in the emerging cities of Owerri, Umuahia and Aba in Southeastern Nigeria, Hausa traders and muslims live in *Ama-Hausa* quarters. Recent recurrence of bloody religious riots and conflicts, particularly in Northern Nigeria, has further forced city dwellers to observe some distance defined by ethnic and religious considerations in their settlement patterns. For fear of attack during the many recurring religious riots in Jos, Igbo Christian migrants prefer to live in parts with appreciable distance from migrant Hausa/Fulani muslim settlements in the city. Similarly, migrants, to a greater extent, organize and mould their daily lives more along ethnic than religious or class lines. Southern migrants belong to community and hometown associations; the associations have not relinquished their historical responsibilities. They still attend to the welfare of migrants in the cities and facilitate the movement of intending migrants from their town or community of origin to the cities. At another level and more recently, they constitute supranational organisations that act as shadow state in the context of the receding state in Nigeria. These issues point to the proclivity of migrants to remain ethnic in focus and orientation. More importantly, they draw attention to the centrality of ethnicity in the discourse of Nigeria's mega-cities.

The second issue I turn to relates the problem of insecurity. Perhaps nowhere in Nigeria has suffered the severe consequences of the crisis of insecurity than the mega-cities. Violence and insecurity have since colonial times remained fundamental and debilitating troubles in the myriad of problems plaguing the development of modern cities in Nigeria. Nevertheless, the systemic roots of nascent manifestations of insecurity can be largely located in the twin process of globalization and structural adjustment in Nigeria. Faced with dwindling economic fortunes in the late 1980s, Nigerian military leaders embarked on implementation of IMF and World Bank sponsored Structural Adjustment Policy (SAP) as solution to the nation's economic malaise. The essential elements of SAP included currency devaluation and exchange rate deregulation, cuts in public expenditure especially in the social service sector, removal of subsidies on state provided goods and services, privatization and

³ Albert, O (1993) *Inter-ethnic Relations in a Nigeria City: A Historical Perspectives of the Hausa-Igbo Conflicts in Kano, 1953-1991*. IFRA Occasional Publication No. 2, University of Ibadan.

⁴ Adeboye, O (2003) *Intra-ethnic Segregation in Colonial Ibadan: the Case of Ijebu Settlers in Fourchard, L and Albert, O (ed.) Security, Crime and Segregation in West African Cities since the 19th Century*, Ibadan: IFRA.

commercialization of public enterprises and services.⁵ Furthermore, SAP sought to promote the development of the rural areas and force the urban poor, unemployed and city parasites back to the rural areas where they could earn a living through agricultural production. To this end, government forged a working partnership with community-based organisations and ethnic associations aimed at kick-starting development in the rural areas.

The logic of SAP created greater problems than was envisaged and intended to solve just as its implementation threw up policy dilemmas and challenges. As cuts in public expenditure continued, budgetary allocations to the cities grew leaner, social services and infrastructure depleted and decayed faster. Privatization and commercialization accelerated the pace of retrenchment and subsequently increased the rate of unemployment. In the face of strangulating poverty and immiseration of the masses, many poor, unemployed and underemployed city dwellers were lured to criminal lifestyles thus increasing the population of existing criminal gangs and intensifying the rates of criminal activities in the cities. Armed bandits, street urchins and hoodlums like *Area Boys* in Lagos⁶ and *Yan Daba, Yan Banga and Yan Daukar Amarya* in Kano⁷ unleashed their fury on the cities. Because SAP canvassed the collaboration of government and ethnic associations in the development process, it unconsciously whipped up ethnic and religious sentiments and conflicts. Having been pushed to the fringes of social existence, the cities became hotbeds of ferocious ethnic and religious conflicts that destroyed many lives and property. With official corruption undermining rural development programmes, the anticipated movement of the urban poor and unemployed to the rural areas never materialized. Instead more and more migrants daily poured into the cities, scrambling for the available meagre jobs and dreaming of better living standards. These developments tended to compound the already complicated security problems in the cities.

It is in this context that I situate urban ethnicity and the rise of ethnic vigilante associations in the nexus of insecurity and the emergence of mega-cities in Nigeria. There is a sense in which ethnic associations can be blamed for the high rate of insecurity in the cities. In the first place, they provide safety nets for the poor and unemployed kinsmen who often retreat to their ethnic organisations for help and solace following the inability of the state to sustain the conditions conducive for migrants to meet their aspirations in the cities. It is this army of unemployed, disoriented and dissatisfied underemployed migrants who remain glued to the city. Hanging on delusions and illusions of a better future - despite their continued irrelevance to the advancement of the city - they become ready recruits for urban criminal gangs. Second, individual members of the organisations also assist their kinsmen to migrate to the cities. In doing so, they help to increase the already bloated population of the cities and nurture their complex security problems. It should be noted that intending migrants who, if left unassisted, may not want to move to the cities finally do so because of the precarious assurance of material assistance and financial support from members of town unions and ethnic associations in the cities. When these promises are not delivered as it is sometimes the case, most of the migrants eventually become nuisance and misfits in the urban environment. They

⁵ Jega A (2000) *Identity Transformation and Identity Politics under Structural Adjustment in Nigeria*. Sweden and Kano: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet and Centre for Research and Development (CRD).

⁶ Abubakar, M (2003) The Political Dimension of Urban Youth Crisis in Nigeria: The Case of the Area Boys in Lagos in Fourchard, L and Albert, O (ed.) *Security, Crime and Segregation in West African Cities since the 19th Century*, Ibadan: IFRA.

⁷ Dawha, E (1996) *Yan Daba, Yan Banga and Yan Daukar Amarya: A Study of Criminal Gangs in Northern Nigeria*, IFRA: Ibadan.

hope against hope and frequently turn to crime as a way of eking out a living in the city. Paradoxically, ethnic associations and vigilante groups have been instrumental in the vanguard to curb crime and maintain security in mega-cities.

ETHNIC VIGILANTE GROUPS AND MEGA-CITIES

The rise of ethnic vigilante associations is a major contribution of urban ethnicity to efforts at managing insecurity and crime in the cities. Although most of such organisations were formed to promote ethnic interests, they took up vigilante services as secondary assignment. Oodua Peoples Congress (OPC), for instance, was formed to protect Yoruba ethno-regional interests in the aftermath of the annulment of the 1993 elections believed to have been won by late MKO Abiola, a Yoruba, and the overwhelming political persecution visited on the Yoruba ethnic group during the military administration of the late General Sani Abacha.⁸ Soon, the OPC, however, veered into vigilantism in Lagos, Ibadan and other major cities in Southwestern Nigeria where they were employed as vigilantes in streets, communities and neighborhoods. In addition, individuals and corporate organisations engaged their services to guard their private residences and business concerns. Despite its frequent confrontations with state security agencies which have robbed it of official recognition as vigilante group, the OPC is both respected and feared as a ruthless vigilante organisation in most cities in Southwestern Nigeria.

Bakassi Boys was specifically formed to respond to the deteriorating security situation in Aba, a commercial town in Southeastern Nigeria. Over time, the exploits of Bakassi Boys spread abroad, endeared it to the people of the zone and was consequently established in Onitsha, another commercial city in Southeastern Nigeria notorious for its high levels of crime and insecurity.⁹ Following the return of democratic governance many state governors in Southeastern Nigeria invited the Bakassi Boys to fight crimes in major cities under their jurisdiction. State governments provided vigilante groups with funds and vehicles, and in Anambra, the government passed a law officially creating the Anambra Vigilante Services (AVS). Imo and Abia States followed the trend and officially established the state vigilante service with the Bakassi Boys constituting the nucleus of the vigilante service. The beginning of wisdom in the cities became the fear of Bakassi Boys. The activities of Bakassi Boys were strongly felt in Onitsha, Aba, and Owerri - notorious for their high crime rates – as crime rates reduced and some modicum of social tranquility returned to the cities.

As the Bakassi Boys recorded astounding success in combating violent criminals and evil forces that the police were unable or unwilling to apprehend, they therefore became attractive to politicians who seized on their popularity and attempted to coopt their vigilante activities for political gains. Politicians of the ruling party came under caustic criticisms from their rivals for abusing the vigilante groups and using them to intimidate and assassinate political opponents. Allegations and counter allegations bordering on the activities of Bakassi Boys, OPC and their implications for the respect of human rights of the citizens forced the federal government in Abuja to rethink its position on ethnic vigilante groups. The federal

⁸ Guichaoua, Y (2006) *The Making of an Ethnic Militia: The Oodua People's Congress in Nigeria*. Oxford: CRISE Working Paper No. 26.

⁹ Smith, D (2004) *The Bakassi Boys: Vigilantism, Violence, and Political Imagination in Nigeria*, *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 19, Issue 3,

government thus reverted to its earlier perception of these organisations as ethnic militant groups that hide under the cloak of cultural and ethnic organisations committed to curtailing crimes located in their ethnic enclaves. To the federal government they were not different from the nascent ethnic militant organisations that challenge the legitimacy of the federal government and the sovereignty of the Nigeria state. Consequently, the federal authorities mandated the Nigerian Police to clampdown on these organisations.

CONCLUSION

Nigeria is a multi-cultural, multi-religious and multi-ethnic nation. And the cultural diversity of Nigeria is reflected in the constitution of its mega-cities. Considering the overwhelming influence of ethnic organisations in the socio-cultural and political life of city dwellers and the extant policy of public/private partnership in the process of development and nation-building, ethnic vigilante organisations should be involved in the management of insecurity as well as governance of the mega-cities. However, care must be taken to ensure that such organisations are not hijacked by ethnic entrepreneurs to promote ethnic tension or serve the selfish interests of politicians and ethnic chieftains. One way city planners and managers can achieve this is by integrating the associations in the formal administrative structures of the city. In this connection, the associations must be orientated and trained to subsume their ethnic interests under the larger national interests. When this is done the pitfalls observed in previous attempts to involve ethnic vigilante associations in fighting crime in the mega-cities will be avoided.

The essay submitted is the work of only the individual whose name appears on the front page as the author; any parts taken from other sources are appropriately referenced in the essay.