

Notes from the Field: Mob justice in Gulu

Julian Hopwood writes about an unsettling event on the field that led him to reflect on mob justice and the complicated moral and political territory it finds itself.

There was a strong smell of petrol in my car one morning back in March. I was worried that it might be a leak, before I realised what it was.

Mob justice in my part of Gulu (and maybe the rest) seems to be on the increase. There were a couple of lynchings within a kilometre of my house in November last year. I was in a meeting with a colleague on the afternoon in question when I noticed a lot of noise outside. I asked my daughter-in-law what was happening and she said that people had caught a thief – “We told them to take him somewhere else – we don’t want them to kill him here”. By this time the noise had faded and there was nothing to be seen. I got in the car with my colleague and we raced the three hundred metres to the local trading centre, where a crowd had gathered around the boda boda (motorcycle taxi) stand. A guy was kneeling at the centre of the circle, his face so swollen that I had no sense of his age or what he looked like. I thought of trying to intervene. I have a measure of standing in the community, reflected in the fact that I was the guest of honour at the 2016 St Jude’s Boda Boda Association’s May Day event! But whether that, combined with the neo-colonial faux-authority white people sometimes seem to be able to project here for reasons I have never fully understood, would have been sufficient to swing the crowd I was unsure, and I did not know any of the men beating the guy on the ground.

I decided it was better to go for the police, but at the nearest post, we were told by a small child that they were away. There were police at the next post we reached, but none of them seemed keen to come with me. The guy on the desk said he would contact a colleague whose responsibility this apparently was. After a while, someone turned up and said he would change into his uniform. Then he had to get his gun. Then he had to wait for another colleague. It was now twenty minutes since we had left the scene and there seemed no likelihood of a swift police departure, so we drove back alone. There was a body lying in the ditch at the crossroads where the beating had been happening, now silently watched by maybe 50 or 100 people. The guy was unconscious but seemed to be still breathing so we bundled him into the car and took him to the nearest hospital – St Mary’s, Lacor – one of the best in Uganda.



Image credit: Gavin Fordham

Peter, who I have since gotten to know, has now made a full recovery over a period of several months. His story is that he was driving a borrowed motorcycle which (unbeknown to him, he claims) had been stolen a few weeks before. Two boda driver friends of the original owner spotted it, gave chase, and proceeded to beat him to unconsciousness, aided by several local thugs. They had then poured petrol over him and demanded matches from the watching community. Some women started screaming and some of the men shouted that they were going too far – the thief had been punished and that was enough. No one was willing to give them matches, so the attackers dropped a large rock on Peter's head and left.

I have since heard that a number of people present were unhappy that I had intervened by taking him to hospital. It is not that they were against him surviving, but they felt that one of their community leaders should have taken charge of the situation. In fact, none of the three elected council leaders whose jurisdictions meet at the crossroads, neither the pastor of the Pentecostal church, nor the head of the local 'crime preventers' security group (who was in his hut 20 metres from where the attack took place) showed up.

This is complicated moral and political territory. The police and a number of local political leaders, including the mayor of Gulu, George Labeja, are understood to thoroughly approve of mob justice (Labeja's electoral success rests on his reputation for killing thieves, much like Duterte's in the Philippines). Also, there is no real state justice alternative – the police, as we have seen, are reluctant to leave their stations and all aspects of the system are profoundly corrupt (see ['Truth, Evidence and Proof in the realm of the unseen. Part 2'](#)). A third theoretical option, informal local justice (as opposed to mob 'justice') is deeply problematized by the state. One might suppose that a relatively measured response by local elected leaders, who are in fact authorised by law to conduct courts – in effect community meetings – to try minor crimes including theft, would be preferable to the randomness and excess of lynchings. But as our colleague [Rebecca Tapscott has described](#), the central state's response to local attempts to generate greater security is fickle and sometimes violent. Local actors learn to be very cautious in exercising public authority.

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The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog, the Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa or the London School of Economics and Political Science.