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## **Juju and Justice at the Movies: Vigilantes in Nigerian Popular Videos**

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### **Abstract**

This article examines the rise of vigilantism in southeastern Nigeria. Two opposing discourses on Nigerian vigilantism are examined. The first is characterized by the valorization of vigilantes as heroes in popular Nigerian video movies. The second is represented by a recent Human Rights Watch (HRW) report denouncing the vigilantes as criminals. My research utilizes ethnographic research to contextualize the video movies as a means toward understanding the ideological gap between these discourses. A close analysis of the *Issakaba* video series reveals a subtle treatment of the vigilante phenomenon designed to appeal to an indigenous perspective that is cognizant of the inherent risks of vigilante justice but also aware of the limitations of reform strategies such as those proposed by the HRW report.

## **Juju and Justice at the Movies: Vigilantes in Nigerian Popular Videos**

I was traveling across southern Nigeria from Enugu to Lagos in what Nigerians call a “luxury bus.” Packed with people, the large coach alternated between rocketing down stretches of expressway that were relatively pothole free, and crawling slowly over the long tracks of road that were more pothole than pavement. It would be a full day of travel and as usual, a salesman provided entertainment for part of the journey. Before peddling his wares, he led the passengers in a few hymns and then gave a sermon in which he petitioned Jesus to protect the bus from violent attack. Utterances from the passengers enthusiastically endorsed this sentiment. Luxury buses had become a favorite target for the armed-robbers that plague Nigeria’s roads and markets. Just a few weeks earlier, robbers on this very route had forced a bus like this to a stop, and thirty passengers were murdered.

Thus, bus sermons provide a modicum of comfort to Nigerians who seek security in an increasingly perilous environment. Understanding this helps one to appreciate the poignancy of the opening scene of *Issakaba 2*, the second in an extremely popular Nigerian video movie series about armed robbers and the vigilantes or “Bakassi Boys” that have mobilized to stop them. The movie opens with an inspiring sermon on a luxury bus. The preacher, shouts, “I pray that none of you meet any robber today, in Jesus’ name!” and the passengers respond with a resounding “Amen!” He then smiles ironically and says, “Brethren, I don’t know how effective that prayer was... Because, you are face to face with an armed robber!” Suddenly brandishing a gun, he walks down the aisle demanding money and jewelry from the passengers. Along the way he grabs a baby from its mother and points his gun at its head as the mother begs pitifully for mercy. This dramatic transition from religious comfort to abject terror in the opening scene of the movie

resonates with the anxiety Nigerians feel about the pervasive violence that has become an increasingly prevalent fact in their lives.

On our bus, however, the preacher was of the ordinary sort. He was soon hawking his odd assortment of products including Indian ayurvedic ointments and packaged wafers. By the time we reached Onitsha his performance was over. It was Sunday morning and the streets of the great market city on the Niger River were bustling with people on their way to church services. Through the windshield I caught a fleeting glimpse of what looked like a headless body on the median. Then I saw another decapitated human body between the roads. Smoke rose lazily from it, much of the flesh burned away from the blackened bones. I watched the crowds of finely dressed churchgoers milling past the carnage. They seemed to take no more notice of the mutilated corpses at their feet than they did of the clutter of refuse that had accumulated between the roads. People stepped around the bodies and went on their way.

I knew the Bakassi Boys had been summoned by Governor Mbadinuju of Anambra State to rid the city of Onitsha of a plague of armed robbers. I knew that the Governor had acted under pressure from citizens of Onitsha, particularly the market women who had suffered extensive loss of property and life from the thieves' predations. I knew the methods of justice and techniques of execution employed by this now legendary vigilante group. I knew, therefore, what it was I was witnessing. I wondered whether the people who strode past the corpses perceived them as marking the end of a reign of terror—irrefutable evidence that the murderous criminals whose dismembered bodies smoldered by the road would no longer threaten them. My struggle to understand the scene intellectually, however, left me unsatisfied. The city's resident's reaction to the carnage remained opaque.

What is the popular logic of vigilantism in Southeastern Nigeria? In this essay I want to explore this question while resisting the tendency to reduce it to a “world-view” or “culture” incommensurable with my own. I want, instead, to ground my analysis in: 1) the ethnographic and historical complexities of the experience of violence and justice in Nigeria, 2) an examination of the social conditions that frame the present wave of vigilantism, and, most crucially, 3) the mythography of the Bakassi Boys in Nigeria's popular video movies. I contend that these movies provide unique insights into everyday Nigerian experience that help make the popular logic of vigilantism and public reactions to it more readily intelligible.

While wary of analytic strategies that posit coherent but incommensurable cultural worlds, I also remain wary of strategies that assume conditions of social incoherence. In examining the crisis of civil law in Nigeria, I want to avoid resorting to the concept of chaos that has become a common formula for describing conditions in postcolonial states. In this I heartily agree with Achille Mbembe's (2001: 8-9) critique in which he contends that little is accomplished by resorting to the notion of chaos to dismiss rather than interpret the complex fluctuations, meanderings, juxtapositions, displacements, and entanglements of factors that characterize postcolonial African nations. Mbembe argues that employing chaos as a pseudo-explanatory strategy is a lazy intellectual gesture that falls back on a pernicious habit of analyzing conditions in Africa by way of notions of lack, absence, incompleteness, and darkness.

My underlying assumption is that all societies value human life and social justice, that every society is faced with individuals who transgress those values, and that the prevalence of those transgressions increase when systems of social control are corrupt and ineffective. Events of day-to-day life, however violent, are made intelligible and are imbued with meaning on the basis of lived experience. Reactions to public violence in different societies vary not because of innate

differences of culture or value systems that are incommensurable, but due to historically constituted conditions that structure variant and sometimes radically divergent expressions of common human needs and values.

### **Valor or Villainy? The Rise of The Bakassi Boys in Nigeria**

In May 2002 Human Rights Watch (HRW), in conjunction with a Nigerian NGO called Centre for Law Enforcement Education-Nigeria (CLEEN), issued a report entitled *The Bakassi Boys: The Legitimization of Murder and Torture*. The report condemned the extrajudicial crime-fighting activities of the Bakassi Boys who have been conducting vigilante operations in the Igbo speaking region of Nigeria since the late-1990s. HRW argued that while vigilante action may have been initiated as a desperate effort by citizens to protect themselves from the rampant crime in the region, the vigilantes have now become a terror themselves, committing a range of atrocities including torture and execution without trial. The report chronicled the vigilante excesses and challenged the Nigerian government to prosecute the Bakassi Boys for their crimes and bring all law enforcement activities under control of the established federal criminal justice system.

Responses to HRW's report came quickly from Nigerian pundits and intellectuals. Many of them, while agreeing for the most part with the facts cited, differed rather markedly regarding the report's *evaluation* of the Bakassi Boy phenomenon. Many also took exception to HRW's proposal that legal action against vigilantes and enhanced training for Nigerian police constituted an appropriate or adequate response to Nigeria's intractable law enforcement crisis. In an essay published on AfricaResouce.com, Peter Ekeh (2002) began his critique by acknowledging what

he called the “courageous reports” issued by Human Rights Watch regarding the destructive activities of oil companies in the Niger Delta and other human rights abuses in Nigeria. He went on, however, to criticize HRW’s condemnation of the Bakassi Boys, beginning with what he called the report’s “anthropological speculation”—referring to HRW’s argument that the Bakassi Boys represent a resurgence of precolonial structures and practices. He suggested that the explanation for the rise of vigilantism in Nigeria is “far less complicated.”

Ekeh redirects attention to the deplorable conditions that, in his opinion, have made vigilante justice a necessary evil. Most crucially, he cites the complete failure of government to protect the civilian populace from criminals. He argues that the government has been degraded by decades of kleptocratic rule and is beholden to multinational petroleum companies to such an extent that it is no longer a government at all in the conventional sense. Ekeh reasons that the fundamental structure of Nigerian government is so utterly corrupt and unaccountable to its citizenry that it cannot fulfill the most basic peacekeeping functions. Under such conditions, argues Ekeh, the rise of vigilantism is not only likely but also perhaps inevitable.

In an essay entitled “The Truth about the Bakassi Boys,” U. S. based Nigerian author Obi Akwani (2002) provides another critique of the HRW report. Akwani begins by acknowledging that his own initial reaction to news of vigilantism in Nigeria was similar to the concerns expressed in the report. He assumed that the Bakassi Boys were an Igbo political militia driven by regional and ethnic nationalist impulses parallel to the O’odua Peoples Congress (OPC) of the Yoruba or the Arewa Peoples Congress (APC) of the Hausa-Fulani. It was only upon his return to Nigeria that he recognized the striking distinction between the crime fighting Bakassi Boys and the other explicitly *political* organizations. This was a difference he felt was poorly understood by Human Rights Watch.

Akwani's observations are particularly germane to this analysis because he credits his insights regarding the Bakassi Boys to his viewing of several popular Nigerian movies that, in his words "depict... them as heroes." The Nigerian video movie industry has arisen in the past decade as a grass-roots phenomenon.<sup>i</sup> It is an "outsider" movie industry that operates without funding from government or interests abroad. This "folk cinema" is quite distinct from the art films and documentaries that have traditionally been the focus of African cinema studies. The videos circulate in open markets and have quickly established a diverse audience across the continent. It is a highly prolific industry producing thousands of titles a year. Genres include comedies, romances, religious melodramas, and action films. Among these, movies on the topic of vigilantism are among the most popular. Vigilante themed titles are so abundant that they can be said to represent a sub-genre in themselves. The list includes the *Ashes-to-Ashes* series, the mediocre *Baka Boys*, and the inept comedy *Bakassi Girls*. The most popular by far, however, is the *Issakaba*<sup>ii</sup> series, of which, the fourth episode was recently released and, as they say in Nigeria, "sold like pure water." Virtually all of these popular movies present the Bakassi Boys as mythic heroes, superheroes in fact, endowed with extraordinary abilities due to the powerful jujus they possess. The charms make them invulnerable to machetes and bullets and allow them to precisely identify the guilty.

The Nigeria depicted in the movies is one characterized by a pervasive failure of leadership. The argument that the cause of Nigeria's many problems can be traced to a failure of leadership was canonized by Achebe's (1984) well-known essay: *The Trouble with Nigeria*. Among Igbo people this view is virtually proverbial and it pervades the dramatic logic of the vigilante movies. In the world of *Issakaba*, village chiefs, elected officials, religious leaders, police, and venerable native doctors all conspire in greed driven murderous exploits while decent members of the community



live in perpetual terror. When, at last, the vigilantes arrive, they are depicted as the very embodiment of a return to justice. The drama revolves around the vigilantes' employment of occult techniques to unravel the complex web of deception, avarice, and the abuse of public trust that has undermined the possibility of conventional institutionalized justice.

### **The Elusive Character of Justice**

The disjuncture between the depiction of Bakassi Boys as valiant superheroes in Nigerian movies and HRW's accounts of them as perpetrators of atrocity is significant. Both the movies and the report engage in discourses that seek a moral clarity—a formula for action that can make justice possible under conditions where both agree that justice is sorely needed. The movies draw the viewer into the Nigerian experience of violence and the despair that results in a way that vividly evokes what Mbembe (2001: 8) calls the "labyrinthine entanglements" of crime, leadership, and justice in postcolonial Africa. In doing so, the movies concretize a narrative that makes the Bakassi Boys intelligible—a position from which one can agree with HRW's report in principle, but nevertheless empathize with the day-to-day desperation and loss of faith in government that informs Nigerians' attraction to the mythography of vigilante justice in the movies.

If, however, the movies simply valorized Bakassi Boys without exploring the inherent fallibility of vigilantism—indeed, the inevitability of its corruption—then they would have failed not only as ideology but also as drama. In truth, many of the weaker examples of the genre have this failing. I contend, however, that the popularity of the *Issakaba* series is due precisely to the fact that a pervasive subtext regarding the perilous character of vigilantism and indeed, the elusive

nature of justice itself is enfolded in the dramatic structure. The movies are crafted to remind us that while the Bakassi Boys are “depicted as heroes” they are also susceptible to the human weaknesses that have corrupted the leadership in the communities they seek to rescue. In *Issakaba*, this subtext warns the audience that those who fight corruption will eventually be contaminated by it.

To understand the popularity of the *Issakaba* video series one must go beyond the obvious explanation that the movies glorify Bakassi Boys as saviors who finally bring an end to the daily violence and terror with which Nigerians are all too familiar. Virtually all the vigilante themed movies valorize vigilantism, but the *Issakaba* movies do so in a highly nuanced manner. I contend that Nigerians are attracted to *Issakaba* because it gestures toward complex truths that mediate between a simplistic valorization of vigilantes on-one-hand and their criminalization in global forums like the HRW report on the other. One distinguishing feature is the charismatic performance of Sam Dede as Ebube—the leader of Issakaba. Dede's embodiment of cool philosophical detachment in the face of danger and violence aligns him with classic action heroes from Clint Eastwood's lone gunman to Richard Roundtree's unflappable Shaft. Like them, his reflections on the nature of his violent occupation also reveal a sense of its moral ambivalence. But Dede's character is also both a distinctly African and distinctly modern hero who speaks in proverbs and who longs to return to his former occupation as a fashion designer. In each of the four *Issakaba* movies Dede's character is confronted with a powerful native doctor whose juju he cannot, at first, defeat and his cool detachment gives way to a very human despair and fits of frustrated rage.

In *Issakaba*, Ebube offers a thinly fictionalized version of the seminal events that precipitated the emergence of the Bakassi Boys in southeast Nigeria in the late 1990s. The cinematic account is

quite consistent with Harnischfeger's (2003) research as well as Bakassi Boy origin narratives I encountered in my own ethnographic research. The Bakassi Boys originated in the sprawling Ariaria Market in Aba. According to Harnischfeger (2003: 23) the pivotal events occurred in the shoe manufacturers section known as Bakassi. The name "Bakassi" was a reference to the Bakassi Peninsula that had been the object of an ongoing dispute between Nigeria and Cameroon. The shoemakers' market gained this nickname because of a bitter battle over jurisdiction of the area between two local governments and the Market itself. In 1998 the marketers were plagued by well-organized armed robbers who had taken up permanent residence along Ngwa Road on the outskirts of the market. The thieves regularly extorted protection tribute from merchants and confiscated the goods of the noncompliant. These thugs were able to steal and kill with impunity as the police ignored and even profited from their activities. The break point came when a popular tradeswoman was brutally murdered for 200,000 Naira (approximately \$1500.00). An immediate uprising of hundreds of traders descended on the robbers' settlement. The enraged marketers dragged the men who had been terrorizing them into the streets and hacked them to death with machetes (Ibid). The Bakassi Boys' vigilante organization was formalized in the wake of these events.

The Bakassi Boys originated in acts of necessity undertaken in the face of terror. Noble intentions, however, have a tenuous existence in the midst of the endemic corruption, political factionalism, and electoral machinations that characterize the Nigerian political landscape. Thus, Nigerians remain suspicious of the power ceded to vigilantes. They recognize that the "goodness" of any action is never absolute regardless of the evident "evil" of its target. If history has proven anything to Nigerians it is that power, no matter who wields it, will eventually corrupt. Thus, when Dede's character warns: "the danger in hunting down evil, is that you

gradually become that which you seek to destroy” the sentiment resonates with Nigerians. In a country where military coup has been a more prevalent mode of regime change than popular election, Nigerians know that replacing one band of armed thugs with another offers little hope for a true political reform.

Nigerian video movies often tend to be slow moving and many are driven by soap opera like dialog linked by tedious transportation shots that dwell on expensive automobiles wending their way through traffic to the next scene. Therefore, the opening sequence of *Issakaba* in which the vigilantes arrive and publicly decapitate an undercover gun dealer before the title credits even begin, is an unambiguous assertion of a more aggressive approach to storytelling. This initial scene ends with Dede's character announcing, “Justice has come to town.” If the movie's message can be distilled, it is that “justice” is always mixed blessing. When the elders in the village first implore Ebube to rid the village of criminals, he offers a proverbial warning: “A river does not flow through a forest without breaking down trees. You have asked for cleansing. That cleansing will affect every one of you.” Needless to say, this wisdom proves to be prophetic and by the time the drama has concluded many prominent citizens are exposed as criminal ringleaders and the social order of the community is devastated.

### **Juju and Justice**

As discussed earlier, Ekeh (2002) dismissed as “anthropological speculation” the HRW report’s contention that the Bakassi Boys were resuscitating precolonial legal practices. Ekeh did not, however, refute the claim. He only directed attention to the failure of government law-enforcement (a system Nigerians still refer to as “European”) and away from the profoundly

indigenous character of the vigilante response to that failure. The mythography of the movies goes much further than HRW to develop this particular trajectory of “speculation.” The employment of various charms and occult abilities by both criminals and vigilantes is a central dramatic motif of these vigilante dramas. The charms employed are of two main types, defensive charms such as those that prevent harm from bullet or machete, and revelatory charms that are used to extract confessions. Charms that protect the owner from injury are well documented in the colonial literature and belief in the efficacy of such charms remains widespread (Basden 1921: 203; Talbot 1923: 233-34, 1932: 331).<sup>iii</sup> Many Nigerians with whom I discussed the matter, including university trained scientists, insisted that no one could take on the armed robbers without adequate counter-charms of power greater than the protective charms of the criminals.

More significant to our inquiry, however, are the revelatory charms depicted in the movies. Unlike the protective charms that are employed by robber and vigilante alike, vigilantes use revelatory charms to identify those guilty of crimes. One commonly represented method involves the use of a charmed machete that glows blood red when held before a guilty individual. In *Issakaba* the most important charm of this type is a cowry-laden necklace that compels the wearer to speak the truth. Confessions obtained by torture as reported by HRW are nowhere to be found in the movies. Instead, the vigilantes stand by passively while their jujus cause thieves to confess and to implicate those with whom they have conspired. Acceptance of the efficacy of these truth-seeking jujus is crucial to the claim that vigilantes can administer justice without recourse to due process of law. Therefore, the historical provenance of the authority these charms are granted seems much more significant than Ekeh’s acknowledges when he dismisses the precolonial roots of vigilante justice in Nigeria.

Truth seeking jujus have a long and illustrious history in Nigeria and despite colonial campaigns to destroy them and missionary efforts to discredit them, they remain important fixtures of village life in southeast Nigeria. Known as *arünsi* or *alüsi* in Igbo, truth-mediating jujus were at one time a central institution for justice in the region.<sup>iv</sup> One of the most famous Igbo *arünsi*, *Ibin Ukpabi*, was located in a cave near Aro Chukwu. The British colonials recognized the jural authority vested in the shrine, which they called the “Long Juju,” and in 1900 they mounted an expedition into the “hinterlands” to destroy it (Nwabara 1977:100).<sup>v</sup> While they successfully dynamited the cave and subsequently brought the region under colonial control, the priest of the *arünsi* simply relocated it and *Ibin Ukpabi* and the countless other shrines like it remained important mediators of justice in the region. Portable *arünsi* and poison oracles vested with power from a fixed shrine or independently imbued with such power were employed by secret societies and other social mediators to divine the truth in legal disputes. Jural guilds, such as the *Ekpe* society that originated in Calabar but exercised legal authority in communities more than a hundred miles up the Cross River, consisted primarily of traders allied to protect their goods and freedom to travel against the predations of thieves and slave raiders. While colonial courts displaced these practices in ordinary criminal cases, they continued to be employed to settle disputes, such as witchcraft accusations, that fell outside of the paradigm of colonial law.

There was no historical break separating precolonial legal procedures from colonial and postcolonial practices. Precolonial legal procedures coexisted, and in the case of customary law were officially integrated with those imposed by the colonial regime such that an array of legal systems including colonial courts, customary law tribunals, elder council deliberations, *arünsi* shrine priests, and diviners offered options that could be played off each other to the advantage or disadvantage of litigants. *Arünsi* remain active in village life to this day. There is no need to

speculate a *resurgence* of precolonial practices to understand why, in the face of an evident failure of national law; indigenous legal rationalities come into play.

### **“Normal Law and Order”**

The HRW report's (2002: 41) call for the Nigerian government to implement reforms assisting the police in “resuming their normal law and order functions across the country as soon as possible” presupposes that a police based system of law and order has at some point been a “normal” state of affairs in Nigeria. Such an assumption places the report on unstable premises from the perspective of most Nigerians. Nigeria has a national police force. States and local governments are forbidden from maintaining their own police. The new regime of civilian rule has done little to change the perception of police as alien to the regions they monitor. Thus they are regarded more like occupying troops than as helpful civil servants. The corrupt character of Nigerian police is legendary and the first *Issakaba* movie includes the local police chief among the cadre of officials who conspire with robbers for their own enrichment. In one scene, a woman with a blood streaked face runs into the police station announcing that armed robbers have just stolen her car. The officers ignore her at first and then lackadaisically shove a pad of paper at her and tell her to write her report. When she demands to see the police chief, he interrogates her about the valuables in the car. He then explains that he only has two rounds of ammunition for his small pistol and that the robbers use automatic weapons. He pleads: “I don't want to commit suicide madam.” When the indignant woman finally leaves, the chief makes it clear that he already knows the identity of the thieves. He recounts her inventory of money and jewels to the officers and tells them to make sure they are not cheated when collecting their share.

The depiction of the police as corrupt is not merely a dramatic strategy in the movies. It reflects the attitudes and everyday experience of many Nigerians. The popular daily newspaper *Vanguard* published a story by Harry Nwana (2000) recounting his experiences with the Nigerian police. Nwana insisted that collaboration between criminals and police had become the normal state of affairs and that people who identified robbers to the police were marked for assassination. He wrote: "The situation on the ground is that only criminals and potential criminals seek the friendship of the Nigerian police, not honest decent men and women." In spite of the fact that *Issakaba* portrays the police as corrupt, the vigilante leader Ebube is remarkably sociological in his explanation of the overall failure of the police. Rather than blame the moral shortcomings of individual officers he offers a more structural interpretation: "The police alone cannot keep the peace. They are handicapped—poverty, illiteracy, inadequate mobilization. I think some persons in high places are benefiting from under-developing the police force."

As the series unfolds, the relationship between the vigilantes and the police evolves. In the second movie Ebube announces that they will now turn criminals over to the police rather than execute them. He explains, "We used to maim and kill them but we have come to realize that no matter how wicked some of these people are, no one has the right to take another's life." This plot development closely follows official statements made by the actual Bakassi Boys regarding execution of criminals after criticism of the large-scale massacre of alleged robbers in Onitsha. In spite of these declarations of cooperation, however, neither the Bakassi Boys nor the cinematic *Issakaba* were able to keep this pledge.

The official status of the Bakassi Boys has been unstable and has varied from region to region. In both Abia state and Anambra state they have received support from the governors and opposition from the police. When the Bakassi Boys cleaned up the market in Aba and subsequently pacified



other crime-ridden areas in Abia state, Orji Kalu, the governor, endorsed their crime fighting efforts, even as the police protested. The most dramatic official sanction came, however, in 2000 when the governor of Anambra state asked the Bakassi Boys to employ their uniquely effective methods in Onitsha. The city was at a break point. Robbers openly brandished weapons as they intimidated marketers and stole goods and money. They terrorized the market on a daily basis. As police resolve to neglect the problem became painfully apparent, the thievery escalated into a full-blown bloodbath. On one occasion a shooting spree in the market involving a gang of over 100 thugs “left dozens dead and hundreds injured” (Baker 2002: 225). Shortly after that the luxury bus massacre was on the front page of newspapers. It was clear that the violence was out of control and that something had to be done. Under pressure from Onitsha market women, Governor Chinwoke Mbadinuju invited the Bakassi Boys to Anambra State offering them land and vehicles. Almost immediately vans and trucks marked “Anambra Vigilante Services” were plying the roads around Onitsha teeming with machete waving Bakassi Boys. This very image is returned to again and again in the movies accompanied by the *Issakaba* theme song. Thus, when the movies gained popularity, the valorizing anthem irresistibly sprang to mind whenever one saw the vigilante vans passing on the road.

The burned human remains I witnessed from the window of the bus were the result of the first wave of executions staged by the Bakassi Boys after they were brought to Onitsha. My old friend Chief Ink explained the reason they chose to leave the corpses exposed and why they destroyed them by burning. When they first began operations in Aba, the Bakassi Boys removed the bodies of the people they executed. People began, however, to accuse them of selling human body parts to ritualists for use in moneymaking ceremonies. The traffic in human body parts is a grisly business that most Nigerians will go along way to keep their distance from. The fate of those

who do not is a theme explored in many of the popular videos (McCall 2002). Public witness of the disposal of criminal remains is, therefore, a technique to demonstrate that the vigilantes have “clean hands.” The Bakassi Boys leave the bodies on public display as a gesture of transparency. It is a procedure of reverse panopticism born of Igbo participatory democracy and it is fundamental to the unique legitimacy that the Bakassi Boys claim. Foucault (1977) argued that modern systems of social control are based on panoptical surveillance as opposed to premodern practices, such as public torture and execution, which are based on spectacle. The shift from premodern to modern techniques of social control involves a reversal of the legitimizing gaze from transparent public display to centralized pervasive surveillance. In the context of Nigeria, however, “the center cannot hold” as Yeats and Igbo proverb have it.<sup>vi</sup> The government has failed to establish an effective system of social control or civil justice in which the populace can have any confidence. Therefore, the raw public transparency of the Bakassi Boys’ form of justice is powerful precisely because it promises to turn the public gaze upon the thieves in their midst and follow the corruption as far up the structure as it can go.

### **Folk Justice and Political Reform**

The *Issakaba* series ends, suitably, on a note of irresolution. Ebube’s second in command, an ambitious young man named Nwoke is exposed extorting money from citizens. Nwoke breaks from the group and starts his own corrupt vigilante squad. Fully knowledgeable about the source of Issakaba’s occult powers, Nwoke proves to be their most formidable opponent. He leads a band dressed in the distinctive Issakaba uniforms on a killing spree. The villagers, believing that the vigilantes have violated their pledge to “never shed innocent blood,” rise up in protest and

the Issakaba are driven from town. In the end, Ebube must fight Nwoke alone. He is victorious but his vigilantes have been disbanded and dispersed. Corruption within their membership has undermined their cohesion and their reputation. Their claim to represent justice is destabilized by the uncertain locus of vigilante authority. This cinematic turn closely follows the actual fluctuations of vigilante status in Nigeria. Though the three *Issakaba* sequels were all produced in 2001, they were released in a staggered manner and the fourth movie hit the shelves in late 2002 shortly after the HRW report was released. As viewers were buying the fourth installment, Nigerian Police began to crack down on vigilante activities in Abia State, where the Bakassi Boys originated. Newspaper reports on the police raids confirmed many of the accusations made in the HRW report including accounts of torture chambers, rape, and arbitrary imprisonment (Abuja 2002; Ujumadu 2002). The police crackdown on the Bakassi Boys was, however, limited and had mixed results. One commentator observed that: “A police force incapable of checking armed robbery can hardly be in a position to stamp out such a well-organised and popular community group, more so, when it offers no viable alternative to the services of the vigilantes” (Elekwachi 2003).

The Nigerian constitution prohibits the establishment of state and local police precisely because ambitious leaders could employ local militias to oppose federal forces or silence political opposition.<sup>vii</sup> The official endorsement of vigilantism, however, may have provided governors a legal loophole to do just that. In late 2002, as Nigeria moved toward elections in 2003, critics of the incumbent governors in some of the southeastern states began to fall victim to a horrifying wave of brutal assassinations. Police reported they believed that the state sponsored “Anambra Vigilante Services” were behind the killings of several opposition leaders including the brutal murder of Barnabas Igwe, president of the state bar association and outspoken critic of Anambra

governor Mbadinuju. (United Nations 2002). As in the *Issakaba* movies, a lack of clear distinction between authentic Bakassi Boys, political thugs, and renegade imposters further obscured the already murky status of vigilantism in Nigeria. As the vigilante actions against criminals became increasingly entangled with the suppression of earnest political opposition the popular support for vigilantism began to wane (Abuja 2002, Ujumadu 2002).

The HRW report recommends that the only acceptable solution to Nigeria's crime problem would be a systematic reform of the police and courts by the federal government. I am quite sure that the vast majority of Nigerians would welcome such a development. They remain, however, highly skeptical that the government they have can produce even a marginally less corrupt criminal justice system in the near future. This skepticism is born of an intimate understanding of the extent of government's failure in Nigeria and the day-to-day, decade-to-decade experience of overwhelming structural impediments to the government's ability to reform itself. It is in this spirit that Obi Akwani (2002) argues that movies such as the *Issakaba* series can be viewed as popular rejoinders to the HRW report. Yet the videos' depiction of lethal extrajudicial justice and the ultimate failure of vigilantes to maintain "clean hands" can also be taken as a confirmation of the report's grimmest charges. While some Nigerians still feel that their life is safer than it was before the vigilantes began their campaign against criminals, public opinion as reflected in editorials and comments reported in the press has become more pessimistic about the consequences of vigilantism (Abuja 2002, Ujumadu 2002).

Nevertheless, critics like Ekeh, Nwana, and Akwani insist that HRW fails to understand that many Nigerians feel that reform must begin at the grassroots level. The Bakassi Boy's vigilante movement was an armed uprising, not against the government, but against the absence of effective government. While the failure of the Bakassi Boys is now evident, the movies still

capture a profound longing for social transformation at a community level. In the movies, heroes step forth from their ordinary lives and take political reform into their own hands. This reform operates through highly localized insurrections—a village-by-village overthrow of corruption—implying that only a nation of communities that have exorcised their own demons and established trustworthy leadership can hope for effective reform at the highest levels. For Nigerians, this understanding of Nigeria’s predicament, while setting the requirements for reform quite high, has a certain practical plausibility that HRW’s universal human rights prescriptions lack. It is a charter for a higher national destiny that must first be seized by people in their own communities rather than imposed from above by government or externally by international law. The vigilante movies capture a shared vision of what Nigerians wish vigilantes could be and, in the case of *Issakaba*, also gesture at what they unfortunately appear to have become. While the cinematic version is romanticized and fanciful, from a Nigerian perspective it may be no more so than HRW’s expectation that Nigeria’s government can readily reform itself. Even a national leadership with the best intentions would find itself up against an entrenched configuration of illegitimate relationships with powerful multinational corporations, particularly the oil industry, that have proven highly resistant to calls for reform and restructuring. True political reform in Nigeria would require, at the very least, the multinational petroleum corporations taking responsibility for the role they play in distorting Nigeria’s economy, maintaining kleptocratic structures of administration, and yielding profit from corrupt arrangements of commerce.<sup>viii</sup> It appears, however, that Nigeria’s citizens are less than confident that such a development is likely in the near future and so they focus their attention on their own communities. This political realism is bluntly reduced to the slogan “fuck the world, save yourself” emblazoned across a t-shirt worn by Ebube in the second *Issakaba* movie. Ultimately most Nigerians would probably

agree that vigilantism is not sustainable as a system of justice. When viewed from the ground, however, cleaning up their own communities seems a more plausible goal than reforming the most powerful industry in the world and reclaiming their wayward government. A true empathy for the despair that confronts the Nigerian desire for justice helps account for the popular attraction to the cinematic mythos of the reforming hero—the promise of hope evoked by Ebube’s declaration that “justice has come to town!”

### **Postscript**

It is important to note that while this article was in review for ASR, a movement to reform Nigeria’s government at the highest levels gained momentum and international visibility. Efforts to take local control of law enforcement have spawned a monstrous and unaccountable array of arbitrary powers—from vigilantes in the southeast to Sharia law in the north. Spurred by the federal government’s ineffectiveness in the face of increasing political turmoil and recent tragic incidents of inter-ethnic violence, a proposal for a **Sovereign National Conference** to reformulate the political structure and constitution of Nigeria is finding support among a wide range of ethnic, regional, and religious leaders. In a recent forum, conference advocates argued that Nigeria’s highest goal must be to restore the people’s faith “in the possibility that they can change their governments through the ballot box” (Ibe 2004).

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> Jonathan Haynes (2000) edited volume *Nigerian Video Films* provides an excellent overview of Nigeria's video movie industry.

<sup>ii</sup> Issakaba is Bakassi spelled backwards with a final vowel added to make it more easily pronounceable.

<sup>iii</sup> Talbot (1932: 331) wrote: "A small grey bird is also used as a war preparation. They cut the warrior and rub in the preparation; they also put some into a belt that he wears round his waist. Afterwards no bullet can harm him. We call this medicine Abigwe." Harnischfeger (2003: 46-47) provides a more current account of protective jujus used by modern Yoruba OPC militiamen: "They take a clay pot of water with them which is carried by a virgin or an elderly women... [who] puts the pot down, strips herself naked and washes her private parts therein. Thereafter, amid weird chants, all the *eshos* take turns to scoop water from the pot which they use in washing their faces." In the first *Issakaba* movie armed robbers are seen drinking a concoction provided by a powerful native doctor in order to be "fortified" against machetes. In *Issakaba 3* a rather distinct formula for the *Issakaba's* protection juju is offered. The strength and invincibility of Issakaba is made potent by the spirit of a brave and ancient warrior by the name of Oja Dike. In those days, Oja Dike was a fearless warrior who fought against evil. He was so powerful that no arrow or sword could pierce his body. One day, Oja Dike out of ignorance, slay an innocent girl, soiling his hands with innocent blood. Oja Dike became powerless and committed suicide. The strength of Issakaba is beyond the physical. They are so powerful because the spirit of Oja Dike guides them. That is why no bullet can pierce their body.

<sup>iv</sup> This Igbo orthography follows that prescribed by Echeruo (1998).

<sup>v</sup> Frank Hives (1930) published a self-aggrandizing account of the colonial confrontation with Igbo arünsi in southeastern Nigeria under the title *Ju-ju and Justice in Nigeria*.

<sup>vi</sup> Thanks to Achebe's (1959) use of Yeats' verse: "Things fall apart; the center cannot hold," to frame his story of the disruption colonial modernism brought to an Igbo community, the phrase has taken on proverbial status and now commonly flows from the lips of Igbo-land's eloquent and well-read elders.

<sup>vii</sup> Section 214 of the current version of the Nigerian constitution, instituted in 1999, specifically forbids state and local police forces.

<sup>viii</sup> A recent tax evasion charge against Dallas based oilfield services firm Halliburton Inc. revealed that they paid bribes totaling \$2.4 million to Nigerian tax officials (Igbikiowubo 2003). Halliburton has been suspect in the view of many Nigerians since 1998 when villagers in the oil rich Niger Delta accused the company of complicity in the shooting, by Nigeria's Mobile Police Unit, of a protester who was organizing resistance to the company's exploitive operations. As in similar cases involving Shell and Chevron, Halliburton claimed they employ the notorious "kill-and-go" unit to protect company properties (Leopold 2003).