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The Bakassi Boys: fighting crime in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria's police and judiciary have failed to protect its citizens and have therefore lost all credibility. European principles of justice have likewise become discredited. Militias like the Bakassi Boys offer a popular alternative, which includes public executions and the use of the occult in fighting evil. But the growing fear of crime is only one reason why 'jungle justice' may spread. Governors and influential politicians help finance armed vigilante groups, and may make use of young men with machetes and pump-action shotguns to intimidate political opponents. As an ethnic militia that is ready to defend the interests of the 'Igbo nation', the Bakassi Boys have also been used to kill members of other ethnic groups. In many parts of Nigeria, ethnic and religious communities are preparing for 'self-defence', because they have no trust in the ability of democratic institutions to settle their conflicts.

INTRODUCTION

'Nigeria is the freest country in the world; you can get away with everything.'

The breakdown of state institutions has prompted citizens in many parts of Nigeria to resort to self-help by creating vigilante groups and armed militias. The Bakassi Boys, to take one example, were formed in Aba, a metropolis in south-east Nigeria that was particularly subject to crime. Its citizens live chiefly from the enormous market, one of the largest in West Africa. But this, the basis of their prosperity, was threatened because the traders were unable to break the reign of terror imposed for years by gangs of criminals. A veritable colony of criminals lived directly on the fringes of the market on Ngwa Road, regularly going round the market, collecting protection money from each of the shops and stalls. If anybody refused to comply, they were forced to watch their goods being confiscated, as the police simply looked the other way.

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Since the state could not be expected to help, the traders had to come up with their own way of checking the wave of violence. In principle, this was not difficult, as the majority of the criminals were known by name, and it was also known where they were to be found. All that was lacking was the resolve to take joint action against them. The catalyst came some time during 1998, when a tradeswoman who had 200,000 Naira on her in cash was robbed and murdered in a particularly brutal fashion. Hundreds of traders reached for the first weapon they could find, forced their way into the criminals' houses, dragged out everyone they could lay hands on, and hacked them death with machetes (*Tell* 28.8.2000: 24f.). The 'war' on the gangs lasted for weeks, but the tradespeople did not let up until their opponents had all left Aba and transferred their operations to distant parts.

Subsequently the traders recruited over 500 young men to maintain their control over Aba and neighbouring towns. The new 'security outfit' was named after a section of the market that is allegedly as swampy as the Bakassi Peninsula on the south-east coast of Nigeria. Since the members of the militia were employed full time, they received wages, which were covered by contributions collected from the traders. Some financial support also came from Orji Kalu, whose victory in the 1999 elections made him governor of Abia State. However, the state authorities themselves were divided over how to deal with the Bakassi Boys. While Orji Kalu allied himself with the gang, there was much resentment on the side of the police, who are responsible not to the governor, but to the president in Abuja, some 700 km away. There are doubtless many reasons why the police eventually came to tolerate the rival organisation, not least the information that leaked out from the negotiations between the Bakassi leaders and the police commissioner, during which the militia presented the latter with a list of policemen who collaborated directly with armed robbers. Their names were never made public, but afterwards the militia, which retained the secret, operated unimpeded throughout Abia State (*Tell* 28.8.2000: 25, 27).

After the Bakassi Boys had succeeded in 'cleaning' the entire state of criminals within a few weeks, Nigerians in other states pleaded to be likewise placed under their protection. In the neighbouring state of Anambra, which like Abia is almost exclusively populated by Igbo, the government finally agreed to entrust the task of fighting crime officially to the Bakassi forces. Once again, the initiative came from the traders, especially in Onitsha, a city with about half a million inhabitants that reputedly has the largest market in West Africa. Prior to the arrival of the Bakassi Boys, its citizens felt they were under siege. Robbers paraded through the streets and openly displayed their weapons, as if they were the lords of the town. And indeed

they had little to fear: 'In most cases, [the police] would run away whenever and wherever they sighted them' (Dr Chinwoke Mbadinuju, governor of Anambra State, in *Tell* 26.3.2001: 42).

There was no one to turn to for help when people were threatened at gunpoint. The criminals moved about the area with such confidence that on occasion they would tell people the exact date on which they would be robbed. On the appointed day, they would force their way into the houses they had earmarked, regardless of whether the occupants had fled or not (*Guardian* 18.9.2000: 12). According to the governor, the only refuge from the terror was to be found inside a church: 'Women were running into churches to get saved and to sleep at night' (*Newswatch* 18.9.2000: 12).

Today the city is scarcely recognisable.[1] All the inhabitants I asked proudly assured me that crime was largely a thing of the past. According to them, Onitsha had been transformed into the safest place in Nigeria, a place where one could walk through the town centre at midnight with a case full of money. A commission of journalists shared this view when it awarded Anambra a prize as 'the most crime-free State in Nigeria' (*Newswatch* 14.5.2001: 42). It might be expected that this level of safety could only be sustained through a massive presence of armed militiamen, but neither the market nor the surrounding shopping district showed any signs of guards or street patrols. Yet every inhabitant knew that the Bakassi Boys were close by; their local headquarters was next to the 'White House', the headquarters of OMATA (Onitsha Markets Amalgamated Traders Association). The militia fanned out from there, combing the streets for criminals, and during the first weeks of their operation in July and August 2000, over 200 alleged criminals paid with their lives (*Tell* 31.7.2000: 41).

Their sovereign power, which they could openly demonstrate in those weeks, continues to be celebrated by public executions. In order to ensure a steady stream of new criminals arriving at the place of execution, victims are also brought in from other areas. At first, however, they remain for some days imprisoned in the Bakassi Centre, where they are interrogated by an investigation committee. Only once their guilt has been established are they taken out on to the street and then to a road junction that is sufficiently large for hundreds of spectators. They are driven along the streets by a succession of blows, so that they have no time to turn to the bystanders, bewail their fate, or appeal to onlookers' feelings of compassion. Nor do the Bakassi Boys announce the sentence, or attempt to justify their actions. On arriving at the place of execution, they simply throw the bound victims to the ground and chop away at them for minutes on end with their blunt machetes – a silent bloodbath, because the victims do not scream, even though some are still

writhing on the ground when the Bakassi Boys finish their task by tossing car tyres on top of them and dousing them in petrol.

I was unable to find anyone among the crowds of spectators who voiced any disapproval or disgust. All that I occasionally noted was a slight feeling of apprehension. A number of women, for instance, scurried past on the way to do their shopping at the market, and merely cast brief glances at the horrifying scene while quickly crossing themselves. Others held cloths before their mouths, as if the smoke drifting over from the charring bodies was poisonous. But otherwise no regret was shown towards the victims; rather, people identified openly with the executioners, particularly in front of a European, who was an unusual sight in this setting: 'White man, you see what we are doing? Oyibo, are you shocked? What will you tell your people?'

According to a report by the Civil Liberties Organisation, the Bakassi Boys may have executed around 3,000 citizens in Anambra within a year and a half (*News Service* February 2001: 31–2) – a horrendous figure. But even more disturbing for human rights groups is the widespread support which the most dreaded militia in Igboland enjoys among the people. Even my former colleagues at the University of Nsukka scarcely aired any reservations about Bakassi justice, only scepticism as to whether the militia would manage in the long term to hold its own against a world of crime. Critical comments were made in the Nigerian press by journalists concerned about the violation of human rights; and similarly, police representatives spoke out vehemently against a return to lynch law. According to David Jemibowon, then minister of police affairs, the Bakassi Boys 'deal with criminals arbitrarily', 'without due regard for law', and should therefore be banned (*Tell* 28.8.2000: 26). But the police were no less brutal than their rivals, so no one took it seriously when police officers spoke out against 'jungle justice'. From the perspective of the traders, it is quite obvious why the state authorities are trying to discredit their more successful rivals, for they have lost a major source of income: 'Policemen … are annoyed that they are not making money from the traders' (*News Round* 2: 30, 2000: 5).

In order to understand why a group of professional killers should receive so much support, a number of factors have to be taken into account. This article concentrates on three of these in particular. First, the police and judiciary are no longer able to protect citizens, and have therefore lost all respect, while Western concepts of justice have similarly been discredited. Decades of gradual state decline, whether under military or civilian leaders, have taught Nigerians that they have to develop their own institutions where alien models, imported from Europe, have failed. Most people are

sceptical as to whether Western ideas about human rights are suitable for an African environment. Those speaking on behalf of the militia do not hide their disdain for constitutional principles; some even claim that they are reviving pre-colonial Igbo traditions, including the use of the occult to fight evil. This rejection of European ways of achieving justice is not restricted to Igboland, but is even more pronounced in northern Nigeria, where the political and religious authorities have broken openly with the secular constitution and its human rights provisions by introducing a strict form of Sharia law.

Second, armed militias could not have established themselves against the army and police without the backing of high-ranking Igbo politicians. These politicians, however, are pursuing their own agendas. Governor Mbadinuju, for example, who calls himself the 'commander-in-chief' of Bakassi (*Tell* 26.3.2001: 43), has been accused of using the 'boys' to intimidate his opponents. But violence is not monopolised by the governor: all sorts of politicians and businessmen make use of the Bakassi Boys or other armed gangs. Democratic institutions do not appear to provide them with an effective means of settling their disputes. Thus everyone must anticipate a resort to physical violence. By dragging vigilante groups into their conflicts, local big men provoke more and more clashes between them. There are also indications that larger groups like the Bakassi Boys, who are at the centre of conflicting demands from various clients, financiers and pressure groups, may split into rival factions, over which control is easily lost.

Third, as people lack faith in the ability of the state to contain violence, ethnic and religious militias have been formed in expectation of further clashes or perhaps to carry out ethnic cleansing and civil wars. Communal conflicts have multiplied since the return to democracy in 1999, when fifteen years of military rule came to an end. Journalists who had long campaigned against the rule of the army are now tempted to recall the relatively peaceful days of Generals Babangida and Abacha with a touch of nostalgia: 'Nigerians were living in harmony with one another until the exit of the military' (*The News* 15.5.2000: 20). Like militias in other parts of the country, the Bakassi Boys have already been used to massacre members of other ethnic groups. As a result, their popularity is largely restricted to the Igbo community. Seen from the perspective of the Kalabari, Ogoni and other ethnic groups living in adjacent parts of south-east Nigeria, they are a potentially hostile organisation that may, in a situation of conflict, turn against all non-Igbo. It is not yet clear whether they will metamorphose, together with other paramilitary units, into an 'ethnic army' (*Tell* 31.7.2000: 40) that is ready to fight under a unified Igbo command.

RIVAL FORMS OF JUSTICE

The defenders of the old order

In order to understand why the Bakassi Boys have been so successful, one must first look at their rivals, the police. The average Nigerian is bound to react with cynicism when the police minister complains about a relapse into 'jungle justice', for his own men are every bit as despotic and brutal in their dealings with genuine or purported law-breakers. During the long years of military dictatorship, it became normal to shoot convicted robbers in public, as a rule in football stadiums before a large, excited crowd. But these official executions, which were broadcast on state television, were not as frequent as extra-judicial killings. Police officers preferred not to wait until a suspect had been tried, but simply shot him after a brief interrogation: 'Robbers kill innocent people. What is wrong with police killing them? It saves our time' (*Newswatch* 3.4.1995: 21). According to the report of a government commission set up to investigate human rights violations, such executions have been performed in every part of the country (*Guardian* 17.3.2001). Some years ago the bodies of 400 murdered people were discovered beside a hospital in Lagos, and all the evidence indicated that they had been brought there from police cells (CLO 1994: 34).

It would have been pointless for the relatives of the deceased to take legal proceedings against those responsible. The latter had nothing to fear, unless, of course, they made the mistake of laying hands on someone with influential friends or relatives. Since the state authorities were not subject to public control, the perpetrators did not even try to conceal these illegal executions. The corpses were simply laid out by the roadside in the middle of town, all in neat rows with bullet holes in their hearts or foreheads. As soon as the news spread, the women hurried out from the surrounding huts to see whether their husbands or sons were among the dead.[2]

Instead of shooting their prisoners, the police may simply lock them up without trial. Tens of thousands of arrested people have languished in the cells for years on end. According to a government commission that inspected the over-crowded prisons, half of the inmates had never been legally sentenced. Some of them had sat in their cells for ten years without ever seeing a judge (*Guardian* 31.1.1995, 12.2.1996). Yet even if they came before a court, they would have scant hope of justice. Money is a factor in all court proceedings, and if large sums are involved, the judges are not afraid to impose long sentences on people who are generally known to be innocent. Anyone with sufficient money and influence can make use of state institutions to harm his opponents, whether in land or business disputes or in personal vendettas.

The failure of the police and the legal authorities cannot simply be laid at the door of the officials. Many criminals are safe from prosecution because they come from prominent families or enjoy the patronage of influential politicians. Others protect themselves by joining secret cults. The members of these cults swear blood oaths during their initiation, which bind them to protect one another, if necessary by force. It is extremely dangerous for the poorly equipped police to lay a hand on one of these 'untouchables'. With their ageing police cars and insufficient equipment, lacking radios and sometimes even ammunition, they are simply no match for their opponents. This and the poor pay are largely due to the former military rulers, who tended to view any forces not under their direct command as troublesome rivals.[3] In order to weaken the police, their numbers were kept quite small, with the result that a city like Lagos, with about 10 million inhabitants, had no more than 12,000 policemen at its disposal.[4] Being hopelessly overburdened, police officers cannot devote much attention to the citizens' safety. That they insist on being paid for every imaginable service also has – under these circumstances – a protective function for them: it prevents them from being inundated by floods of formal complaints.[5]

In Igboland, with its numerous traders and informal businesses, it can be highly lucrative to work as a policeman. Officers from other regions are said to bribe their superiors for the privilege of being transferred to one of the five Igbo states (*The News* 10.8.1998: 17). Whether this is true or not, many people regard the police and army as behaving like a foreign occupation force: 'people are permanently under siege and the fear of illegal detention' (*ibid.*). The feeling of impotence is no doubt increased by the fact that the police in Igboland are not controlled by people in the region, but by outside politicians living hundreds of kilometres away. The president, who is in charge of all the police and army units, is a Yoruba from the south-west of Nigeria, a man whom many accuse of hating the Igbo (*Newswatch* 5.2.2001: 19). He never asked the population of Anambra State whether they wished to continue living under the protection of their militia or not. In July 2000 he simply ordered the army and mobile police units to march on Onitsha and clean the town of militias.

The mission was in vain. The troops were brought to a halt at the city boundary. The Bakassi Boys had positioned themselves very visibly at the motorway tollbooth, so their opponents, in some confusion, stopped a good distance away. But the militiamen calmly waved to them to come closer and closer, until they had a good view of the scene that the Igbo fighters had prepared for them: a couple of the young men took up positions a few metres apart, aimed their weapons at one another and fired. The bullets simply fell off them onto their clothes, as everyone could see. It is said that

the attacking forces were seized with terror and rushed back to their barracks.[6]

The magical powers attributed to the Bakassi Boys may not have been the main reason for their victory. More decisive, perhaps, was the fact that OMATA, which is seen by many in Anambra State as a kind of 'shadow government' (*The Week* 26.12.1994: 19), had placed itself fully behind the Bakassi militia. On 1 August, as Governor Mbadinuju returned from negotiations in the federal capital, over 200,000 people had gathered in the market place of Onitsha and clearly demonstrated their resistance to the central government. According to press reports, they sang: 'All we are saying, give us vigilante' (*Tell* 28.8.2000: 28). However, the governor returned with good news. To the cheers of the crowds, he announced that President Obasanjo had rescinded his ban.

The president's decision presumably allowed for the fact that many police officers would have been loath to enter into direct confrontation with the Bakassi Boys. Two hundred of their colleagues had lost their lives during streetfighting in Lagos in a vain attempt to flush out the local OPC militia (Akinyele 2001: 627). Even if they managed to disarm the militia without serious losses, how would the police assert themselves in a city where they were faced with a hostile population? The morale of the police had also been dented because they had failed in their most vital obligation: the fight against crime. Given this embarrassing record of failure, the minister of police was asked in an interview why his troops reclaimed control over Onitsha and other big cities: 'In the event that Bakassi and OPC boys are swept off the streets, what assurance can you give the public that the police, as constituted now, will guarantee their safety?' Minister Jemibowon: 'The police can't guarantee their safety' (*Tell* 28.8.2000: 26).

Fighting with occult forces

Whilst the police often trigger hate and fear, the Bakassi militia tends to inspire trust and confidence. But what is the secret of its success? The methods employed by the two rival forces are not very different. Like the police, the Bakassi leadership calls upon the public to report crimes, and assures them that all information will be treated confidentially. Whatever has been reported is put before an investigation unit, which looks into the matter and ultimately decides whether the accused should be arrested. When it comes to interrogations, defendants certainly cannot expect a fair trial. They cannot refuse to make statements, because that would simply provoke blows or worse. But here too, the Bakassi methods do not differ from those of the police, who 'routinely' inflict torture on detainees (CLO

1994: 22). It is all the more astonishing that the militia is far more effective in its war on crime, and with highly parsimonious means. There are no more than twenty-five to thirty Bakassi fighters stationed in the centre of Onitsha. People also have their own private security guards, and sometimes vigilante groups in the various districts collaborate with the Bakassi. But these groups, which already existed formerly, had never managed to hold their own against the enormous tide of violence.

There is one decisive reason for the success of the Bakassi Boys. They have given the impression of not being corrupt, at least until now, and so ordinary citizens do not challenge their ruthless power. Governor Mbadinuju, for example, vouches for their incorruptibility: 'nobody has anything to fear except he is a criminal – and no matter how highly placed' (*Tell* 26.3.2001: 43). His claim that the Bakassi Boys do not distinguish between rich and poor is, however, exaggerated. When they were introduced into Anambra State, they were given clear limits on their operations. They were paid to chase armed robbers, not corrupt politicians. Within this framework, however, their justice is regarded by most people as being fairer and more efficient than the official one. Time and again the people I talked to expressed their conviction that the militia does not shed innocent blood, even though it is not always known in individual cases for what the person has been convicted. At the six executions I witnessed more or less by chance while out shopping at the market, none of the bystanders could name the crime for which the culprits were being killed. It was known that some of them had been taken to headquarters five days beforehand, and I was assured that they were bandits, perhaps even murderers.

So far, the Bakassi Boys have acted less arbitrarily than the police, because they are more under the control of the local population. The traders in particular keep a close eye on them, and the young militiamen, whose headquarters are situated in the middle of the market, take care not to provoke their hosts. If they were to start killing at random, they would immediately lose their privileged position and become just one more gang among many others. In addition to this limited form of public control, a committee supervises Bakassi activities in the whole of Anambra State, consisting of representatives of the major stake-holders: traditional rulers, market associations, town unions, the police, the state government and legislature. Its chairman, however, is the security advisor to the governor (*Newswatch* 14.5.2001: 39).

The discipline that the militiamen have displayed so far may also be due to the fact that they are not part of the state bureaucracy. From the Igbo point of view, it is important that their vigilante organisation is formed in a more traditional way, that is, it acts like a secret society and uses occult

powers to fight evil. Thanks to their superior charms (or *jujus*), they need not fear even the most dangerous opponent. In addition, they possess infallible means of shedding light on even the murkiest cases, the most famous of such methods being the 'lab test': a special chain is hung around the suspect's neck during interrogations, or sometimes a tortoise, which make it impossible for the person to lie (*Tell* 18.12.2000: 34). The Bakassi also possess a sword that reputedly kills only when it comes into contact with a murderer or robber (*Newswatch* 18.9.2000: 16). In using such mysterious means, the Igbo militia is drawing on a tradition that goes back to pre-colonial times. Since most Igbo communities had no central authorities who could administer justice, conflicting parties would often turn to the priest or an oracle who questioned the gods, or to diviners who were able to identify or 'smell out' culprits by magical means.

The modern, or rather Western judicial system has dispensed with such methods, which were often decisive in establishing the truth. Many Igbo are therefore not surprised that judges are misled by magical influences. Their arbitrary decisions are not simply explained by their corruption: it is also assumed that they are being manipulated by invisible forces, without them even noticing it.[7] The Bakassi Boys, by contrast, being equipped with magical (and religious) means, are prepared to arrest and execute a category of persons whom the police would not dare to touch, namely witches and sorcerers. In doing so, they are drawing on a tradition that is closely linked to the history of the market in Onitsha. Witches were often forced to confess at this most public of locations. While they divulged their crimes before all those present, they slowly stripped the clothes from their bodies piece by piece, until they stood there naked. The bystanders then picked up stones that had been brought there for the purpose, and killed them (Bastian 1993: 146–7).

The most prominent sorcerer to be prosecuted by the Bakassi Boys was Edward Okeke or Prophet Eddy, who was also called the 'Jesus of Nawga'. Until the day of his execution, he owned a church in which miracle cures were performed. In front of his healing centre, the visitors were welcomed by an enormous sculpture of Jesus, flanked by statues of Moses, the Prophet Elijah and Eddy himself, depicted as rising above a fallen Lucifer (*News Guide* 1.1.2000: 5). Behind this façade of Christian piety, the most heinous crimes were allegedly performed, including a series of ritual murders. The man of god is reputed to have killed 93 people in order to produce magic charms from the human remains, including the theft of sixteen babies who disappeared one night from a maternity ward in the Onitsha area. Accusations of this kind are unsettling in Nigeria, where thousands of ritual murders are committed.[8]

Because of his alleged supernatural powers, the prophet was suspected of being not an ordinary mortal, but half man, half ghost, as he himself confirmed after his arrest.[9] Extracting this confession was difficult, and some even say that it would have been impossible had not the Bakassi juju man, who was on the interrogation team, resorted to special means. In order to break the prophet's magic, they cut off his long, bushy hair.[10] In addition, during his arrest attention was paid to the fact that Eddy could make himself invisible. A video film reconstructing the feats of the Bakassi Boys shows how their opponent disappears into thin air before his pursuers. But thanks to the magical manipulations of a Bakassi leader, the spirit being is forced back into the world of appearances.[11]

With their victory over the notorious sorcerer the Bakassi Boys were able to prove their own occult powers. This impression of invincibility is carefully cultivated in various other ways, including the ritualised cruelty with which they stage their executions, such as playing football with the freshly severed heads in front of the spectators. Such gruesome spectacles likewise demonstrate that they do not even fear the spirits of the dead.[12]

The ruthlessness of the Bakassi Boys is not seen as contradicting the justice they wish to impose. Instruments of justice, such as oracles, traditionally presented themselves as pitiless powers that not only pronounced judgement on the guilty, but could also crush them on the spot.[13] Apart from oracular deities, there were also secret societies that assumed the right to persecute law-breakers (Meek 1930: 21, 52; Shelton 1971: 143–4). The decisions they reached were carried out by groups of younger men, who could kill with impunity. Their power derived from contacts with the spirit world, as well as from magic regalia that they accumulated at their cult centres in the form of charms, masks and amulets. Such 'war medicine' was openly displayed in order to scare off the enemies (Cole & Aniakor 1984: 133–4).

Like their traditional models, the Bakassi Boys arm themselves with every conceivable kind of weapon. 'They fight with the power of good and with the power of evil', as one of the market traders put it. For most Igbo, the power of good is associated with Christianity, the faith that the Bakassi Boys share with their social surroundings. Every Monday morning, at the start of the market week, the members of the militia gather for prayers with a priest. And like other believers, some of them wear a cross around their neck. Nonetheless, however evil or satanic the old 'heathen' practices may be, it would be unwise to dismiss them, particularly in a world in which evil so clearly triumphs. In order to match their rivals, even Christian vigilantes must be armed with occult powers. Every Bakassi man wears a charm

clearly displayed on his upper arm, or sometimes around his hips or ankle. The blades of their knives are dyed a bright red, and as they march to the execution site, before using their weapons, they perform a silent ritual with them. In order to avoid being persecuted by their enemies, the entrance to their offices is decorated with jujus and mysterious signs, and it is said that they do not step through the doors in the normal fashion, but backwards, averting their faces from the magic charms.

Apart from their military training, which they undergo at a camp on the outskirts of Aba, the Bakassi warriors also submit themselves to a process of initiation, in which oaths of secrecy are sworn during veiled ceremonies (*Tell* 28.8.2000: 27). Those who are received into the circle of warriors learn to communicate with other members through secret signs and words. Moreover, the Bakassi Boys, like the members of traditional secret societies, set themselves apart from their fellow human beings through the observance of special taboos. They are not allowed to touch certain foods, and above all they are forbidden to engage in any sexual contacts. This cultic isolation is clearly aimed at preventing the formation of social relationships that might compromise their loyalty to the group. It is also likely, however, that women are seen as having a polluting influence that cancels out the power of magic or religious rituals.[14]

The occult dimension of the Bakassis' activities is seen by local observers as an essential part of their mission. Those who support and pay for the militia insist that the fight against crime is also directed against the invisible forces of evil. The case of Edward Okeke serves to illustrate this point. When the 'false prophet' was arrested and held captive in the Bakassi headquarters, the state authorities demanded his release. Rumours had it that a number of politicians, among them ex-president Babangida, who is considered the richest and most powerful man in Nigeria, leant on the governor in an attempt to pressure the Bakassi Boys into releasing the prophet. Politicians and businessmen sent envoys to Onitsha to negotiate directly with the militia on their behalf. Some market traders whose stalls are located around the Bakassi headquarters recalled how, when Edward Okeke was being kept a prisoner there, government limousines from other states would drive up at regular intervals. Even the Presidential Office in Abuja intervened and demanded that the prisoner be handed over to the police. Against this conspiracy on the part of politicians, people took to the streets. Scores of traders travelled by truck and coach to the provincial capital of Awka, where they stormed Government House and demanded the immediate execution of the 'great spiritualist', threatening to burn down government buildings, including the Anambra State Broadcasting Service. In the end, the will of the demonstrators prevailed and Edward Okeke

was led to an execution ground where a crowd of 20,000 watched how he met his death (*News Round* 2: 30, 2000: 6; *Tell* 11.12.2000: 42; *News Guide* 1.1.2000: 2–3, 7–6).

The importance of occult powers can also be seen from an incident that overshadowed the official introduction of a Bakassi branch in Imo State. The new branch which had been established through a law passed in the State House of Assembly, was regarded by many not as a genuine Bakassi unit, but as the puppet of local politicians. What triggered suspicion was, among other things, its lack of competence in the realm of invisible forces:

> Whereas the original Bakassi Boys in Abia and the ones in Anambra use magical powers to fish out criminals, the ones in Imo relied on information supplied by members of the public to arrest their suspects. Soon, it became public knowledge that people were supplying Bakassi Boys with names of their enemies to settle personal scores. Imo indigenes concluded that Bakassi Boys without magical powers must be fake ones. (*Crystal* August 2001: 42–3).

The original group sent a detachment to Imo State to overpower their 'fake' brothers, but after the Abia group had left, the Imo State Parliament went ahead and organised a launching ceremony in a stadium, which was filled to capacity when the Imo Bakassi presented themselves. 'The masses wanted the boys to prove their invisibility [*sic*] by allowing loaded automatic rifles fired on them and sharpened daggers thrust in their bowels. When the Bakassi Boys of Imo refused to take such risks … the crowd became restive. Shouts of "fake, fake" rent the air and stones were hurled at the boys. The crowd turned into a mob and stormed Government House', but before they could burn down the building, they were dispersed by anti-riot police (*Crystal* August 2001: 43).

The rejection of Western law

In law courts fashioned after European models, the process of establishing the truth is acted out openly in front of all those concerned. This public control, combined with elaborate rules of evidence and technical procedures, should guarantee that the truth comes to light. But in the eyes of many Nigerians, all the intricacies of an alien judicial system, which was imposed on them at the dawn of the twentieth century, do not create transparency but rather impede the quest for justice. Court cases drag on for years, and in the end lead only to arbitrary results, as the crucial dealings take place behind the scenes. Even within the courtroom, observers find it difficult to follow the proceedings because their outcome is determined by

a profusion of legal regulations. The practices of abandoning the trial when errors of procedure are made, or ruling in favour of the accused in case of doubt, had already undermined the authority of colonial jurisdiction. The Igbo were often appalled when defendants were set free simply because the judge had to observe rules that are commonly referred to in Nigeria as 'technicalities' or 'legal niceties'. In cultures without written law codes, like that of the Igbo, people found it difficult to understand why they should follow the letter of the law. In pre-colonial times they had maintained a pragmatic relationship to justice, without recourse to ideological principles or a morality based on universal claims. People seeking justice could often choose the judicial authority themselves by arranging for a poison oracle to be carried out or turning to the priest of a powerful deity, or perhaps presenting their case to a council of elders. As in all pre-state societies, the main thing was to obtain a decision, regardless of what it was, so that the conflict came to an end before it escalated further and triggered a chain of blood vengeance (Girard 1979).

The colonial powers did little to change this pragmatic approach. Western principles of law hardly took root, because the state institutions to back them scarcely existed (Herbst 2000: 67ff.). The few British administrators had to rely on indigenous elites and thus on traditional forms of jurisprudence. The consequence was that different legal codes were officially allowed to coexist. Against this background, it seems legitimate to most Nigerians that justice should be administered in very different ways. In the north of the country, 80–95 per cent of all disputes are still taken before 'traditional' courts or Islamic Kadis (Ostien 1999: 15). From a European point of view, these courts follow rather crude rules of evidence. But for local communities, they have the advantage that religious or magical elements play a prominent role in establishing the truth.

Given the importance of the occult, ordinary people are ready to accept their exclusion from the trials, which take place in interrogation cells behind the walls of the Bakassi headquarters. While decisions over life and death are taken in obscurity, executions are celebrated as public spectacles. Everyone has the right to see a robber or murderer being destroyed in a triumphant show of sovereignty and brutal intimidation. In this respect, the Bakassi Boys offer a type of justice that is the exact inversion of the rule of law as enshrined in Nigeria's constitution. According to this law – which is commonly referred to as European, though it only emerged in Europe itself in the course of the nineteenth century – the defendant is entitled to a public trial, whereas his punishment is concealed from the ordinary citizens, as if the authorities were ashamed of the sentence they are imposing (Foucault 1995).

Another legal principle that the Bakassi way of justice has abandoned is the separation of powers. In Western societies this serves as a way to protect citizens against unfair treatment by state organs. In Nigeria, however, the separation of judicial and executive powers often appears to obstruct the course of justice. The police, for example, often decline to hand over detainees to the courts because they do not trust the judges: again and again they have seen those standing trial being acquitted in return for money. This is one reason why policemen take the law into their own hands and execute those they believe to be guilty. Alternatively, they follow the example of corrupt judges and extort money from their detainees. In contrast to these state institutions, the Bakassi Boys operate a machinery of justice that works faster and more efficiently because it is organised as a closed system. The militiamen who uncover criminals also pass judgement on them and execute them.

Even though the Bakassi method of justice violates the constitution, it would be unwise to say so openly, at least for the governor and his cabinet, who have to pretend that everything in their state runs in accordance with the law. Dr Mbadinuju, for example, who is a jurist with his own law firm, assures the public that the activities of his 'boys' are not illegal, since the State House of Assembly has passed a law granting militias the right to operate under a supervisory committee. However, this law does not allow them to carry firearms or execute people. The governor is therefore forced to claim that the young men are unarmed and are merely aiding the police to catch criminals. In making such absurd statements, he is simultaneously indicating that the façade of legality that he has to uphold *vis-à-vis* the federal government is just a farce: '[Journalist:] But we hear that they also use guns? – [Mbadinuju:] Have you seen any gun? (*general laughter*) When David Jemibowon (the former minister of police affairs) came, he didn't see any gun. He said [Bakassi] was self-defence (*general laughter*)' (*Tell* 26.3.2001: 43).

Occasionally the governor says openly how little he cares about constitutional rights. When asked in an interview whether the Bakassi Boys are empowered to kill people, he replied: 'No. They don't kill. … But if … some of these [robbers] run away by themselves and if in running they don't observe very well and run into the River Niger or somehow they hurt themselves or inflict a personal injury on themselves who do you blame? … We shouldn't worry ourselves how an armed robber dies. That is not our business' (*Newswatch* 18.9.2000: 15). As the highest authority in Anambra State, the governor is suggesting here that the rules of how justice is carried out should no longer be a matter of public concern. And those in charge should not be restricted by considerations of human rights: 'You don't need

to bother about what the human rights people, civil rights people and the lawyers say. When we were crying that armed robbers were killing us, innocent people, nobody did anything. … If you catch a confirmed armed robber and you kill him and the human rights [*sic*] are shouting, is it fair?'[15] Against human rights campaigners who cannot show a way out of the crisis, Governor Mbadinuju claims to be reviving traditional forms of justice. Instead of leaving it to an alien bureaucracy to settle conflicts, people take control of their security concerns themselves: 'what we are doing … is an age-long system of our people taking care of their defences – from village level to town level' (*Tell* 28.8.2000: 28). His hints at a revival of African traditions remain vague, however. In Anambra State, government officials and members of Parliament do not debate openly whether the fight against crime should be conducted with the help of 'jujumen' and other popular means.[16]

Since many Igbo see themselves, in relation to other peoples in Nigeria, as bearers of Western civilisation, they find it hard to break explicitly with 'modern' ideas of justice. The situation is different in northern Nigeria, with its strong Muslim majority, where a dozen democratically elected state governments have rejected central elements of Nigeria's secular constitution and implemented Sharia law in its stead. Muslim politicians find it unfair that they are singled out for criticism. Governor Ahmad Sani, for example, who was called 'The Butcher of Zamfara' on the title page of *The News* (10.4.2000), complained about the hypocrisy of the press, which is dominated by Christians from the south. Journalists maintain that public stoning or the amputation of arms and feet disregard the most basic civil rights, though in their own part of the country human dignity, as they understand it, is not protected any better.

Accepting that Muslim governors are breaking the laws of the federation entitles Igbo leaders like Mbadinuju to disregard the constitution as well: 'If Zamfara is a Muslim state, allow them to organise their state on that basis. If I'm a Christian state, I organise my state on that basis' (*Tell* 26.3.2001: 43). Mbadinuju's call to turn some parts of south-east Nigeria into a Christian state may sound a little out of place, but the 'Bakassi Governor', who promises to revive age-old African traditions, likes to present himself as a staunch Christian: 'Our power comes from above and they have to kill our Lord Jesus Christ before they get me, because I am in him' (*Newswatch* 14.5.2001: 38). As a lay preacher and a member of the 'Full Gospel Businessmen's Fellowship', the governor likes to go to the market with a Bible in his hand and proclaim the word of God. At Government House too, he makes sure that every working week starts with a common prayer: 'Monday morning prayers is the key that has held Anambra State. … we put God first and things are working' (*ibid.*).

In the Bakassi debate, the governor uses Christianity as he does Igbo traditions. In order to gain popular support from all sides, he sees nothing wrong in describing the activities of his 'security outfit' as a divine mission: 'The Bible says that he who lives by the sword shall perish by the sword. And that is exactly what is going on. Bakassi became an instrument of judgment in the hands of God against the armed robbers' (*Tell* 26.3.2001: 43).

LOCAL POLITICS AND ORGANISED VIOLENCE

Political intimidation

The Bakassi Boys could not have established themselves against the resistance of the federal authorities without the backing of Governor Mbadinuju. When he assumed office, he was at first reluctant to let them operate, but he soon discovered the advantage of having armed forces on his side. In a country where the fear of crime has turned into panic, a politician can obtain a lot of support if he can promise security. Mbadinuju desperately needed popular support, since he had broken with large parts of the political establishment. After his election, he disregarded agreements made within the ruling party in order to push through his choice of Speaker of the House of Assembly – a junior partner in his legal firm (*Tell* 13.11.2000: 56). High-handed decisions of this kind required him to build up a personal power base, independent of the big men who sponsored him. In this respect, it was an advantage to style himself the 'commander-in-chief' of the Bakassi Boys, if only to gain popularity as a crusader against crime.

Critics of the governor alleged that he was concerned less about law and order than about his political career. Above all, he wanted to use the vigilantes to intimidate his opponents. A number of opposition politicians were murdered, but it is not clear to what extent the Bakassi Boys were involved, and there was no compelling evidence that Mbadinuju ordered the attacks.[17] According to him, the fear that he might turn the militia into a 'private army' (*Tell* 30.7.2001: 31) was totally unfounded. He did not need to employ violence to deal with political opponents, because he feared no one: 'I have no political opposition in Anambra State' (*Newswatch* 18.9.2000: 15). But despite his claim that he enjoyed overwhelming support in Anambra, the governor had every reason to fear his opponents. The fact that he was elected with more than 90 per cent of the votes showed only that local power-brokers paved his way to the top by eliminating all serious competition.

One of them was Emeka Offor, a rich businessman who boasted that *he* brought Mbadinuju to power. The governor had to admit to receiving a

donation of N14m from Offor during his election campaign. In return he signed a written contract entitling his sponsor to appoint two ministers in the future cabinet, one for finance, the other for works (*Newswatch* 14.5.2001: 32–3). But after moving into the governor's palace, he announced bluntly that he did not feel bound to the deals he had made: 'There are some gentlemen's agreements which politicians make in the heat of the elections … But I don't think they should be the basis to run an administration' (*Tell* 13.11.2000: 58). Offor then threatened to use his money to force the governor out of office (*Newswatch* 13.8.2001: 56, 60), and in December 2001, he ordered several busloads of heavily armed anti-riot policemen to storm the State House of Assembly, where parliamentarians and the governor had met to debate the next year's budget. During the raid, Offor was personally present, clad in a bullet proof vest, in order to ensure that all the MPs were expelled (*Newswatch* 25.2.2002: 34). On his orders, likewise, policemen arrested the chairman of the Anambra Bakassi and kept him detained for two days of interrogation in his private villa (*Newswatch* 25.2.2002: 33).

A man like Offor could not be forced to seek an armistice with the governor. He did not have to fear the Bakassi Boys coming to arrest him. However, there seem to be other cases where the militia, which Mbadinuju claimed to command, worked as an efficient means of intimidation. A famous example was the deposition of John Nebolisa, the 'traditional ruler' of Awkuzu. He had a sinister reputation as a main sponsor of organised crime in Anambra State, so nobody was surprised that he went on the run after the Bakassi fighters started their 'cleansing' campaign. From his refuge in Lagos, he allegedly drove to a secret meeting with Governor Mbadinuju, where it is said that Joneb, as he is known, 'broke down, almost kneeling' and 'pleaded with the governor to forgive him and also [to] arrange for a meeting between him and the *Bakassi Boys*' (*Tell* 27.11.2000: 35). Whatever the truth of such reports, Joneb was subjugated by the governor. He lost his royal title, but was able to return to his home town, and the militia was no longer after him. The chairman of the Anambra Bakassi simply declared that he was not aware of any investigations against the former ruler of Awkuzu (*Vanguard* 12.12.2001: 8).

Such episodes undermine the reputation of the vigilantes, who come to be seen, not as impartial arbiters of justice, but as tools in the hands of politicians. In order to dispel this impression, they have to demonstrate their incorruptibility, which may be why they insisted, against all the interventions of the state authorities, on executing Prophet Eddy. While Eddy was being detained in the Bakassi centre, everyone in Onitsha was eager to see whether his captors could be manipulated by political heavyweights. Traders in Onitsha told me that if ex-President Babangida wanted to buy

someone's liberty, he could offer N50m without hesitation. But the Bakassi Boys were not to be bought. They led Eddy to the execution ground, because their justice was not for sale.

Getting out of control

The Bakassi leadership may have seen itself as coming under pressure from the traders, who chose the case of Prophet Eddy to provoke an open confrontation with the political establishment, including the governor.[18] Traders' associations exercise considerable control over the vigilante group, as they are among its main backers: 'Any day *Bakassi* goes for any reason, we traders will make Anambra State ungovernable' (*Newscap* 2.3.2001: 7). In their attempt to keep the militia functioning, they have to join forces with the governor, otherwise they could hardly ward off interventions by the federal government. Despite this alliance, power struggles rage behind the scenes, even if little of this seeps through to the public. According to a local Igbo newspaper, the traders all agreed to stop paying their fees for the security force, as they found it unacceptable that only Mbadinuju had access to the Bakassi Boys' bank account (*ibid.*).

It cannot be in the interest of the traders and Nigerian citizens in general that their security force is dragged into political intrigues. Among all organised lobby groups, the market traders' associations have the greatest interest in ensuring that the Bakassi Boys do nothing but chase criminals: 'Our only concern is that nobody should touch the only thing that makes us sleep with full eyes closed' (*Newswatch* 14.5.2001: 43). It is mainly due to the vigilance of the traders that the Bakassi Boys, despite their brutality against criminals, have not yet acted as arbitarily as policemen. Nevertheless, it would be an illusion to assume that market organisations, as part of 'civil society', act as a kind of democratic safeguard ensuring public control over the militia. The Onitsha Market Amalgamated Traders Association is not democratically administered, and has often been paralysed by internal wranglings, as when warring factions went after each other with gangs of thugs. In 1994, a large part of the market was burned to the ground during one such conflict.[19]

Since different individuals and interest groups seek to obtain influence over the vigilante group, it may be torn into rival factions. A number of clashes have already occurred between armed units operating under the name of Bakassi. In the market town of Nnewi, citizens complained that their Bakassi branch was being misused by a clique of local government councillors and was 'terrorizing innocent citizens, dabbling into domestic, political, business, traffic and matrimonial matters' (*News Service* Feb. 2002:

5). So the Bakassi unit from Onitsha was called in to disarm their discredited brothers. But the group in Onitsha was also branded as bogus, especially since the first generation of fighters, who had been brought in from Aba, had gradually been replaced by locally recruited men. When some of them 'turned bad' and started extorting money like policemen, the 'original' Bakassi from Aba had to intervene.

Even in Aba it is disputed who the genuine Bakassi are, as individual militiamen become entangled in local disputes. One incident in particular is worth examining, as it illustrates a kind of conflict that might eventually lead to the disintegration of the group. Individual Bakassi members are tempted to accept 'jobs' from clients who have no better intentions than to settle personal scores. This privatisation of the militia may trigger a cycle of violence and counter-violence, as happened in Aba, when a handful of Bakassi men assisted a landlord in evicting one of his tenants, flogging their victim and setting his property on fire. The aggrieved man, a trader, mobilised his fellow traders, who stormed the Bakassi centre, ransacked its offices and torched the building, 'including a collection of … Bakassi charms' (*The Week* 19.11.2001: 21–2). The local Bakassi group took revenge by kidnapping fifteen traders, beheading them and bringing their maimed corpses back to the market. After lengthy negotiations, the Bakassi Boys apologised. Despite the bitterness between the conflicting parties, both sides realised that they depended on each other. Without popular support from traders, taxi drivers and other professional groups, the Bakassi Boys would lose their quasi-official status and sink down to one of many armed gangs. And conversely, if the traders tried to dismantle the militia, they would revert to living in a world of crime.

So far, the militia has shown a remarkable sense of discipline and self-restraint. But it is one of many groups which claim the right to arrest, interrogate and execute people. The new oligopoly of power is shared by police and army units, vigilantes, bodyguards, the militant youth wings of various political parties, and an ethnic liberation movement called MASSOB. Since these groups operate within the same territory and are linked to rival politicians, they inevitably clash with one another.

THE RISE OF ETHNIC MILITIAS

The politics of self-defence

When President Obasanjo tried to ban the activities of the Bakassi, Governor Mbadinuju travelled to the federal capital and interceded for his 'boys'. But individual politicians like Mbadinuju or Kalu are not the only ones to support the militias. The protest against Obasanjo's decision

was backed by an organisation called *Ohanaeze*, which serves as a forum for the most powerful Igbo politicians. Its executive expressed concern that, without Bakassi, crime would creep back into Onitsha and other commercial centres (*Tell* 28.8.2000: 28).

Apart from these security considerations, Igbo leaders may have other motives for throwing their weight behind their most efficient fighting force, and be interested in employing the Bakassi as an ethnic militia. Igbo warriors have already been mobilised in northern Nigeria, where they serve to protect the Igbo diaspora against attacks by the indigenous Muslim population. When religious violence flares up and members of the Hausa-Fulani majority invade the Christian quarters of Kano, Kaduna and other northern cities, one can see lorry loads of Igbo fighters being brought in from neighbouring places.

Armed gangs have also been formed to defend Igbo interests in the Igbo heartland, among them a militant 'liberation movement' called MASSOB, or Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra. Its members have broken with Nigeria and proclaimed an independent Igbo state, named after its predecessor in the 1960s, the Republic of Biafra, whose formation drove the country into a ruinous civil war. According to the leader of MASSOB, Igbo can only lose by staying within the federation: 'Nothing good can ever come out of Nigeria. What you hear are power outages, shortage of water, armed robbery and other evils. We don't want to be part of that evil. … Biafra has all the resources – our scientists are scattered all over the world, they will come back. I tell you, in the first two years of Biafra, we shall be manufacturing nuclear weapons' (*The News* 17.4.2000: 16). Supporters of the independence movement openly hoist the old separatist flag or distribute maps showing the boundaries of the new Igbo state, which, like the break-away republic of the late 1960s, includes large oil-producing areas in the Niger Delta populated by the Ijaw, Urhobo and other ethnic minorities. Spokesmen for these groups have declared that they will resist any attempt to force them into the Biafra project (*Newswatch* 29.5.2000: 13). But the MASSOB leader insists on his annexation plans: Bayelsa, Cross River and three other states along the south coast will be incorporated into the secessionist republic because the people living there allegedly sent representatives who asked him to join the Igbo in their struggle for liberation (*The News* 17.4.2000: 15).

Some MASSOB members parade through the streets in the uniforms of the former Biafran police force, and have clashed with the Nigerian police. Ten people are said to have died and fifty were wounded when policemen and soldiers of the 34th Artillery Brigade attacked the MASSOB headquarters (*News Round* 2: 30, 2000: 5; *Tempo* 22.2.2001: 7). The freedom

fighters, who were chased out, took revenge by raiding a police station where some of their members had been detained (*Guardian* 11.3.2001). No prominent Igbo politician wants to be seen campaigning openly for this secessionist organisation. Nevertheless, MASSOB enjoys some official support, especially from the governor of Imo State, Udenwa. According to him, MASSOB is a non-violent, law-abiding organisation, and so it should be allowed to operate unimpeded in his state (*Champion* 18.3.2001). In neighbouring Abia State, however, Governor Kalu is not on good terms with the movement. According to the MASSOB leadership, this is the reason why fifty-three of their men have been killed there by Bakassi Boys (HRW 2002: 36).

Throughout Nigeria, including Igboland, politicians are preparing for violent conflicts. The most outspoken defender of the 'Igbo nation' seems to be Governor Kalu, who promised his compatriots: 'people of my generation … will soon take over the leadership of the Igbo race. … I belong to a generation of Igbos that is ready to do everything to defend the interest of the Igbo anywhere, any time' (*Tell* 19.2.2001: 24). He was even clearer in his statements when Muslim Hausa killed hundreds of Igbo during Sharia clashes in northern Nigeria: 'If they kill an Igboman, we will retaliate immediately' (*The News* 27.3.2000: 11). Straight after this announcement, armed gangs, including the Bakassi Boys, erected roadblocks and, within 24 hours, killed about 400 Hausa migrants from the north who were living in various Igbo towns (*Newswatch* 13.3.2000: 20; *The News* 13.3.2000: 16 & 27.3.2000: 11).

No Igbo politician dared to claim responsibility for this massacre, but some took the opportunity to advise their rivals in the north to see the 400 dead Hausa as a 'warning signal' (*The News* 27.3.2000: 16). The message was clear: the principle of blood revenge, which in pre-colonial times caused havoc between rival clans or families, is now being transplanted to the level of 'ethnic nationalities'. Striking back massively when a nation feels provoked serves to demonstrate that one is not afraid to take up a fight. In the words of General Ojukwu, the former Biafra leader, who in 1967 dragged the country into civil war and who, once again, is ready to fight the cause of Igbo Christians: 'we are tired of being threatened. No religion has a monopoly of violence. If … you tell me about the Jihad, know that we had our Crusades too, and you did not fare better' (*Tell* 6.3.2000: 25).

Internal divisions

The feeling of being surrounded by hostile neighbours may weld the Igbo 'nation' together. Yet it is far from clear whether millions of Igbo, including

those who have invested in remote parts of Nigeria, will overcome their internal divisions and fight another secessionist war. What is labelled a 'nation' by self-acclaimed Igbo leaders was in pre-colonial times a heterogeneous collection of autonomous village groups, without any overarching religious or political institutions. While Igbo speakers in today's Abia or Imo State lived in acephalous societies, the inhabitants of Onitsha or Asaba had developed a quite distinct form of social organisation, which focused on sacred kingdoms. Moreover, they felt they had so little in common with Igbo-speaking communities to the east and south of them that they regarded it as an insult to be called 'Igbo' (Henderson 1972: 40–1; van den Bersselaar 1998: 53, 58).

The chauvinist rhetoric of Kalu and other Igbo politicians thus plays an essential role in constituting the community they claim to represent. They constantly appeal to the 'Igbo nation' as a souvereign, self-determining unit, though it is not clear whether they are in fact concerned about Igbo unity. Orji Kalu, who boasted that he is richer than the state he governs (*Tell* 19.2.2001: 20), was until recently seen as a sell-out who had become rich and powerful through the patronage of northern politicians.[20] But his rabid criticism of President Obasanjo, whom he branded as an enemy of the Igbo people, made him the hero of militant youths, who campaigned for him to become the first Igbo to be elected president of Nigeria.

Kalu's patriotism blends in perfectly with his own political ambitions. The autonomy he calls for in the name of his people serves to expand the authority of his government and remove it from the supervision of the capital, Abuja. Ethnic mobilisation is a weapon that can be directed against President Obasanjo and his federal powers: 'If anybody thinks he can do anything because he controls the police and the army, then we will use our own people. There will be violence and bloodshed' (*Newswatch* 1.10.2001: 54). Making use of one's people to threaten others is more efficient when these people are armed. Orji Kalu was the first governor to allow the Bakassi fighters to establish themselves in his state, and retains a cosy relationship with them: 'the anti-crime outfit is in love with Kalu' (*Tell* 11.3.2002: 50).

By replacing state institutions with more informal, locally recruited groups, Igbo governors are seeking to built up, with the help of Bakassi, MASSOB or other militias, a *personal* power base: 'I'll prefer something I'll control, whether you call it police or you call it anything. This is because when I make my own law, I will have somebody to enforce it' (Governor Mbadinuju, in *Tell* 26.3.2001: 43). Despite their patriotic slogans, Igbo governors and other big men have little interest in establishing centralised power structures capable of uniting the 'oppressed' and 'marginalised' Igbo

nation. Why should they subjugate themselves to an authority that might be controlled by rival politicians from neighbouring Igbo states?

If attacks on Igbo diasporas in northern and western Nigeria were to escalate, the Bakassi Boys, together with other militias, could become the nucleus of an 'ethnic army' operating under a central command. At the moment, however, it seems unlikely that Igbo politicians and their retainers will overcome their bitter disputes and present a common front against ethnic outsiders. Without a consensus that can impose some self-restraint on the political actors, it will not be possible to establish a monopoly of power over the whole of Igboland. The vacuum created by the decline of the federal authorities would then be filled by a multitude of rival gangs, not by a Biafran police force or army. In such a case, the question remains: will there be larger groups like the Bakassi Boys, which are able to bring wide areas under their control and pacify them? Or will lots of fragmented groups wage mutual war, leaving citizens to live in constant fear?

NOTES

1. I frequently passed through Onitsha during the years 1993 to 1996, and on one occasion was caught in a hold-up, in which armed men had blocked the motorway directly behind the town and were plundering every approaching vehicle.

2. Naturally there are no statistics on the number of these extra-judicial killings; people only ever learn about individual cases. In Nsukka, for instance, a town of perhaps 50,000 to 100,000 inhabitants, at least twenty-three people were shot in police custody in 1995. The executions occurred with the connivance of the police headquarters in the provincial capital of Enugu, and the officer in charge was promoted on the strength of his successful work. Likewise, the vice-chancellor of the University of Nsukka sanctioned the immediate shooting of robbers caught on the campus, rather than first bringing them before the courts.

3. Under the military dictatorship, members of the army refused to submit to the public legal system. Army officers openly assumed the right to decide whether they would hand possible offenders over to the police or not: 'we … court-martial such offenders. When found guilty, we discharge them from the army and hand them over to the police' (*The Week* 24.10.1994: 13). In cases of conflict there were even exchanges of fire between the police and army units; soldiers attacked police stations in order to free imprisoned colleagues, or forced their way into court and abducted defendants during trials. The police and the courts were more or less helpless against such incursions, and were forced to watch as even the highest circles of the government flagrantly disregarded court orders. The governor of Niger State, for instance, remarked on a sentence against him: 'although the state government believes in the rule of the law, the ruling of the Appeal Court in Kaduna would have no effect on the government' (*Guardian* 14.12.1995).

4. *Financial Times* 23.6.2001. The security problems as seen from the perspective of the police are described in Alemika 1997: 81ff. On the decline of the public administration and the loss of control in Nigeria's cities, see Adisa *et al.* 1995: 25ff.; Agbola 1997: 57ff.; Francis 1996: 19ff.; Isokun 1994: 92ff.; Olowu 1999: 50ff.

5. The situation is similar among the judges. That they pull out court cases or destroy files on payment of an appropriate sum is also due to the fact that they are unable to cope with the deluge of cases they receive. (CLO 1996: 101; Uwazie 2000: 21)

6. This story was related to me by various people, including a Catholic priest who added that the event had triggered a debate among the clergy of the local dioceses as to whether this had been a divine miracle. Tradesmen to whom I spoke in Onitsha claimed to have seen with their own eyes how the Bakassi Boys performed the same show in the market. They did not use blanks: bullets hit their bodies but could not penetrate them. We have more detailed information on how the OPC militiamen in Lagos

make themselves bullet proof. When going to the 'war front', they take a clay pot of water with them, which is carried by a virgin or an elderly woman: 'the elderly woman or virgin on arriving at the battle field, 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' (*The Source* 31.7.2000: 15).

7. Judges are also sometimes openly threatened by magical practices. During the proceedings against an alleged syndicate of ritual murderers, it was alleged that the accused brought sorcerers to the court and had magical substances disseminated about the room by means of a fan (*Champion* 14.12.1996).

8. According to official estimates, there were about 6,000 victims of ritual murders between 1992 and 1996 (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 2.11.1996).

9. His confessions were recorded on a tape that was sold later all over Igboland: *The Original True Confession of Prophet Eddy Nawgu*. The content of the tape is, however, a kind of collage, with the sound of police sirens and machine gun fire in the background. And the purported confessions are not from Eddy's own mouth, but are read out as in a radio play. This does not necessarily mean that the text was invented. Evidently original recordings do exist, because during their dispute with the federal government, the Bakassi leaders sent the president a video cassette showing scenes from the interrogation. But these recordings were never made available to the public. Colleagues at the University of Nsukka, some of whom had been Eddy's former clients, speculated as to which parts of the interrogation were kept from the public. It is conspicuous that the *Original True Confession* does not mention any of the persons to whom the prophet sold his charms. What disturbed many, in this context, is the fact that Edward Okeke numbered many politicians among his customers, including, it is said, the former military dictator, Ibrahim Babangida. These big men must all have exercised enough influence to have their names deleted from the 'confession' tape.

10. This scene is shown on certain Bakassi posters which are sold in all major markets.

11. The video is called *Issakaba* (marketed by Mosco Int., Aba/Onitsha). Similar scenes are shown in a movie with the title *Last Prophet* (Coruma Int., Onitsha/Aba/Lagos).

12. It was a widespread custom in Igboland to cut off the heads of slain enemies. However, in pre-colonial times headhunters handled their trophies quite differently. The skulls of the victims were treated with care, sometimes decorated and stored in shrines to the ancestors, while the warriors who had stained themselves with blood underwent elaborate purification ceremonies (Uka 1972: 80–1).

13. The most famous oracle, the shrine of Arochukwu, which drew clients from all over Igboland, was simultaneously the most dreaded. Whenever the spring that flowed from the holy grove turned red, the people knew that Arochukwu had executed a guilty person (Azuonye 1990: 16; Hives 1933: 116ff.). Other oracular deities took a little more time to administer punishment. Weeks or months might pass before the guilty person or one of his or her relatives suddenly fell ill and died.

14. Henderson 1972: 145, 206, 251. How dangerous it can be to become involved in a sexual relationship is illustrated in the video *Issakaba*. One of the militiamen, who is seduced by a woman, immediately falls prey to a gang of robbers and suffers a dreadful death. The reality of the Bakassi Boys may be quite different. When I discussed their organisational structure with a European security manager working for a multi-national company in Igboland, he doubted whether the boys abstain from sex: 'Every soldier wants to fuck', he said, and it would be unwise to enforce a prohibition. According to the security expert, it is nevertheless crucial in other respects to set very high standards of disciplined behaviour, thus creating the impression that it is a mark of distinction to fight as a Bakassi man. Members of the organisation should have the feeling that they must constantly be striving to maintain their exceptional status. Without such *esprit de corps*, the individual members of the group would be completely useless: 'The people they recruit are just the same rabble as those they fight.'

15. *Newswatch* 18. 9. 2000: 14. In a report entitled 'The Bakassi Boys: the legitimation of murder and torture', the American-based Human Rights Watch (2002: 9, 6) demanded that the vigilante group be disbanded. But given the 'huge popularity' of the group, it is suggested that the government should not only ban it, but 'embark on a public education campaign to raise awareness of the illegality of the operations of … the Bakassi Boys'. The problem, however, is not a lack of awareness. The inhabitants of Anambra or Abia know full well that their militia is breaking the laws of the federation, but they see no convincing alternatives to this so-called 'jungle justice'. How can critics insist on the due process of law when there are no institutions to enforce it? The answer given by Human Rights Watch is simple: 'eradicate corruption in the police force' – as if the government of Olusegun Obasanjo or any other president in Nigeria had the power to 'ensure that any force exercising government-endorsed law enforcement powers observes international standards for law enforcement' (*ibid.*: 6, 5).

16. In South Africa, politicians discuss in great detail how the law of the land should be changed in accordance with Zulu or Xhosa traditions. A government commission to look into the problem of witchcraft and ritual murder came to the conclusion that witches can kill and should be sentenced to prison. At the same time the commission acknowledged that it is difficult to detect witches, as their crimes cannot be witnessed by the naked eye. Thus it is no coincidence that their proposal to reform the old 'eurocentric' Witchcraft Suppression Act is complemented by the draft of a law that would give 'traditional medicinemen' official recognition (Harnischfeger 2000).

17. As there are no serious government investigations or court cases against Bakassi fighters and their 'commander-in-chief', it is difficult to assess the conflicting evidence given in press reports. According to investigations by Human Rights Watch (2002: 2off.), a number of witnesses blamed the Bakassi group in Onitsha (or a faction of them) for the murder of an opposition politician from Nnewi, south of Onitsha.

18. The mass protest against politicians who seemed to be protecting a ritual murderer resembled the famous 'Owerri riot' of 1996, when demonstrators attacked the houses of real or alleged ritual murderers, all of them local millionaires who were intimately linked with the political establishment of the town. 'The targeting of swanky stores and hotels, posh cars, and the residences of some of Owerri's wealthiest men could be read as a kind of class warfare' (Smith 2001: 805). But ideas about blood money, juju murders and occult conspiracies are an important aspect of it. They reflect the decline of the 'moral economy', and the emergence of exclusive circles of nouveaux riches who disregard social obligations, monopolising illegitimate power and wealth which is not under popular control (Harnischfeger 1997). The case of Prophet Eddy has some similarities. The 'great spiritualist' had to die because he represented the ruthless and perverse aspect of political power.

19. *The Week* 26.12.1994: 18. During my last visit in Onitsha, in February 2002, the famous OMATA White House had been burnt to ruins, and OMATA as an umbrella organisation of all Onitsha market associations had been dissolved.

20. He was reputed to be so criminal, even by Nigerian standards, that in 1999 the State Security Service strongly suggested that the electoral commission should not allow him to seek public office in the forthcoming elections: Kalu 'is generally seen and known in the state as one of the 419ners [fraudsters]'. He 'can go (to) any length to do anything to achieve his interest' (*Tell* 21.2.2000: 19).

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