

'Balance of Terror' -- Rival Militias and Vigilantes in Nigeria

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Abstract

Militias and vigilantes that assume public authority by fighting crime reject the laws of the state, yet they have no other set of rules to regulate their activities. Many of them claim to be accountable to their ethnic or religious community on whose behalf they operate. But their communities have found no means to institutionalise control over them. Moreover, there are no institutions to settle conflicts between different militias and vigilantes. On a local level, rival groups have reached informal arrangements. However, these compromises are unstable, as they reflect fragile alliances and shifting balances of power. Leaders of militias and other 'self-determination groups' have suggested organising a conference of all ethnic nationalities in Nigeria in order to design a new constitution that would give militias and vigilantes a legal role and define their authority. But the groups compared in this article – Oodua People's Congress, Sharia Vigilantes, Bakassi Boys, MASSOB, and Niger Delta militias – pursue very divergent interests, and they are far from reaching a consensus on how to contain violence between them.

Zusammenfassung

Milizen und Vigilanten, die sich öffentliche Autorität anmaßen, indem sie Verbrecher bekämpfen, halten sich nicht an die Gesetze des Staates. Sie haben freilich keinen anderen Gesetzes-Kodex, der ihre Aktivitäten regeln würde. Viele von ihnen behaupten, der eigenen Ethnie oder Religionsgemeinschaft verpflichtet zu sein, in deren Namen sie kämpfen. Doch die lokalen Gemeinschaften verfügen über keine wirksamen Institutionen, um die bewaffneten jungen Männer zu kontrollieren. Zudem gibt es keine Institutionen, um Konflikte zwischen Milizen und Vigilanten beizulegen. Auf lokaler Ebene verständigen sich rivalisierende Gruppen immer wieder auf Kompromisse. Aber diese informellen Absprachen sind instabil, reflektieren sie doch fragile Allianzen und wechselnde Machtverhältnisse. Führer von Milizen und anderen 'Selbstbestimmungsgruppen' haben vorgeschlagen, eine Konferenz aller Ethnien in Nigeria zu organisieren, um eine neue Verfassung zu entwerfen, die den Milizen und Vigilanten eine legale Funktion und klare Befugnisse geben würde. Doch die Gruppen, die in diesem Artikel miteinander verglichen werden: Oodua People's Congress, Sharia-Vigilanten, Bakassi Boys, MASSOB, and Niger-Delta-Milizen, verfolgen ganz unterschiedliche Interessen, und sie sind weit entfernt von einem Konsens, wie sich die Gewalt zwischen ihnen eindämmen lässt.

1. Introduction

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With Nigeria's return to democracy in 1999, when 15 years of military rule ended, violence between different ethnic and religious groups 'exploded'.¹ Tensions had already built up under the military regime, but the security forces had been able to suppress most conflicts. When the generals returned to the barracks and a more liberal and restrained government took over, the number of vigilante groups and militias rose dramatically.² Many of them claimed to fight for 'true democracy', by which they meant, above all, the right of ethnic or religious communities to control 'their' territory and resources, to live according to their own ideas of law and justice, and to be free from the 'internal colonialism' of other ethnic groups. In a deeply divided society like Nigeria, the call for democratic self-determination did not unite the people, but set ethnic and religious groups against each other, with devastating results: "fewer people died in the entire period of military rule than they have now died in the first two year[s] of our democracy".³ In mid-2005, it was estimated "that at least 50,000 people have been killed in various incidents of ethnic, religious and communal violence since the return to civilian rule".⁴

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In their local communities, militias and vigilantes find "widespread support".⁵ People tend to accept the militancy of their youth as "the only effective means" to "protect their communities from criminals and 'hostile' neighbouring communities".⁶ Yet they are quite realistic when assessing the long-term consequences. In a survey conducted in 2002/2003, most respondents assumed that ethnic militias will not develop harmonious relationships with each other and that the rise of militias will undermine democracy.⁷ With a multitude of violent actors vying for control over people and territory, political competition cannot be expected to follow fair rules. When asked, how militias are producing security for their communities, many responded: "by creating fear of retaliation in other ethnic groups".⁸ Based on such a "balance of terror",⁹ Nigerians can, at best, hope for a fragile peace. Can they design institutions that domesticate violence? Or should they better split the country and go separate ways? Leaders of ethnic militias and other self-determination groups have campaigned for a National Conference where representatives of all ethnic groups could discuss how to restructure Nigeria. However, their aims and interests are so divergent that an agreement is not in sight. I will discuss these differences in four case studies. All the armed groups examined here are "unstable" organisations, with shifting aims and strategies, so they are difficult to define:¹⁰

1. The Oodua People's Congress (OPC) in Southwest Nigeria is commonly seen as a Yoruba militia which has repeatedly clashed with members of other ethnic groups. However, some of its members are also involved in vigilante activities, patrolling the streets and chasing down criminals.
2. Hisba groups operating in twelve states of Northern Nigeria try to enforce Islamic law and morality. As vigilante organisations, they were formed on a voluntary basis, but they have increasingly come under the control of state governments.
3. Among the Igbo in Southeast Nigeria, the biggest group propagating ethnic self-determination, the Movement for the Actualisation of a Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), is not involved in crime fighting. And vice versa: The most famous crime fighters in Igboland, a vigilante formation called Bakassi Boys, were not meant to act as an ethnic militia. Yet in an emergency situation, when communal tensions heightened, the Bakassi Boys attacked members of other ethnic groups, demonstrating that they might turn into the nucleus of an ethnic army. Such a transformation has already occurred in other parts of Nigeria where vigilantes merged with ethnic and religious militias in times of communal crises.¹¹
4. In the Niger Delta, ethnic militias have splintered into rival gangs. Instead of protecting their communities, they fight each other over shares of the oil resources.

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Before turning to these case studies, I shall look at debates about ethnic and religious autonomy. In Nigeria, these debates focus on the need to design a new form of federalism. Since autonomous communities claim the right to control 'their' land and keep armed forces to police it, they need a legal framework that regulates the use of violence between them. Faced with an oligopoly of violent actors, Nigerians have to construct a balance that is based more on rules and contracts than on terror.

2. Restructuring Nigeria

2.1. Ethnic and Religious Autonomy

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According to the constitution, the central government is in charge of the army and the police forces. Yet it is so discredited that it will not regain its monopoly of violence in the foreseeable future. With the return to democracy, when citizens could express their loyalties more openly, it became obvious that most of them resent central control. Ethnic and religious groups want to organise their social environment according to their own wishes, so the various segments of the federation are drifting apart. As the majority of Nigeria's citizens does not aspire to live under common laws, the project of nation-building has come to an end. In the Muslim-dominated North of the country, the parliaments of twelve states have rejected the secular traditions of Nigeria's constitution and introduced strict forms of Sharia laws. The government of Zamfara, which was the first, in January 2000, to implement an Islamic penal code, plastered posters throughout the capital, informing visitors that the constitution has been suspended: "God's Law is Supreme".¹² Since the police, as a federal institution, are not prepared to enforce local religious laws, Islamic vigilantes have emerged, meting out "instant justice".¹³ Politicians in the South protested against this breach of their common constitution, yet most of them defy constitutional principles as well. The Governor of Anambra, a re-born Christian, financed the dreaded Bakassi Boys in their war against criminals. Calling himself the "commander-in-chief" of this vigilante group, he referred to a divine mandate in order to justify the mass executions conducted by his boys: "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".¹⁴

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Militias, vigilantes and their political godfathers do not feel bound to constitutional principles, but so far they have no other set of rules to settle their disputes. How can they regulate the competition between armed groups? Nigeria's Western-style constitution is ill-suited for this purpose. With its catalogue of human rights, it defines the relationship between individual citizens and the state, but it does not regulate the relationship between ethnic or religious groups which claim a high degree of autonomy.¹⁵ Instead of sticking to "foreign models" which are not "suited to the needs and circumstances of African states", a number of intellectuals and human rights activists in Southern Nigeria have suggested to look for "autochthonous constitutions".¹⁶ These could be based on the idea that "citizenship in pre-colonial African societies" was rooted in "principles of collectivism, communalism and cooperation", which were "negated" when Nigerians adopted "Western attributes of citizenship".¹⁷ Ethnic self-determination groups argue that the country can no longer afford a constitution derived from "neo-liberal individualistic assumptions".¹⁸ Nigerians should come to terms with their ethnic realities: "What is vital is to recognise our social pluralism, to recognise that from now, Nigeria is a federation of ethnicities and nationalities, nothing else".¹⁹ Starting from this premise, Nigerians should design a new type of federalism which is no longer based on geographical units like the present 36 states, but takes autonomous ethnic groups as its constituent units: "The Ethnic Nationalities shall be the building blocks of the Federation, with the right to self-determination".²⁰ Legal experts suggested reconstituting Nigeria as a loose federation of 'ethnic republics' or of six 'geo-political zones' which would be free to decide internally how to distribute power between their component ethnic (and religious) units. However, before the technicalities of a new constitution could be worked out, Nigerians would have to take a fundamental decision: How much sovereignty should be left with the central government? From the perspective of self-determination groups, there are three options: a federal system with greatly reduced powers at the centre, a confederal arrangement in which the individual units can nullify decisions by the central government, or a complete break-up.²¹

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The political establishment in the Federal Capital Abuja has shown little interest in drafting a constitution which decentralises power. Initiatives to restructure the political system came from regional forces, from ethnic militias and other self-determination groups. Their rallying point has been the call for a National Conference where representatives of all 'ethnic nationalities' should sit together, air their grievances and discuss how they want to be associated in future. Such an inter-ethnic dialogue, where all options can be tabled, would give Nigerians the opportunity for a fresh start. A new social contract agreed by all groups might be the only chance to stop the descent into violence. In Southern Nigeria, where self-determination groups are better organised and more vocal, the call for a National Conference has found widespread support. Even the governors of the 17 Southern states supported the project, though they could not agree whether the conference should be sovereign or not.

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The six constitutional conferences which Nigerians held since 1950 never succeeded in establishing an acceptable legal order. The proposed National Conference, however, shall break with these traditions by using an organisational model which better reflects social realities. Those coming together to reconstitute Nigeria shall not be representatives of the Nigerian people but of ethnic nationalities. As such, they cannot be elected by citizens of ethnically mixed constituencies, but have to be delegated by their ethnic groups, and since these groups are considered autonomous, it is their internal affair to decide how they select their spokespersons. A coalition of ethnic leaders that submitted a bill to convene a National Conference suggested that the delegates should be nominated by ethnic associations like Afenifere, which unites a significant portion of Yoruba elders, or Ohanaeze, which provides a forum for Igbo politicians.²² This model of representation marks a clear break with liberal-democratic principles of constitutionalism. Ethnic groups become the crucial rights-bearing entities. They have a will, they take decisions, and they enter into contractual relationships with each other. This legal role is in line with popular perceptions of Nigerians. The history of their country is usually told as the story of changing relations between the major ethnic groups: the Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa-Fulani and the minorities in the Niger Delta and in the Middle Belt.²³

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Most leaders of ethnic groups want to pursue their aim of self-determination within the framework of the Nigerian state, yet they reserve the right to quit the (con)federation if their 'nation' or 'tribe' does not get a fair deal. On their sixth Pan-Yoruba Congress in 2001, delegates decided to design a national flag and to compose a national anthem in order to be prepared for a possible secession.²⁴ Most of Nigeria's 500 ethno-linguistic groups are too small to establish their own state; but their leaders also claim some form of control over their territory, arguing that each nationality is "entitled to a space on the map of Nigeria".²⁵ Smaller groups may be forced to join an autonomous geo-political zone where they will have to share power with neighbouring ethnic groups; nevertheless each of them could have its separate constitution and administration.²⁶ Recognising such claims for autonomy has severe consequence. It leads to a "pluralist idea of citizenship"²⁷ which divides the population into two broad categories and gives full citizen rights only to the 'original' inhabitants of a place. Indigenes living in the land of their ancestors are seen to be the rightful owners who can ultimately decide how their territory is governed, whereas members of other ethnic groups which 'do not belong' to that area are given the status of settlers who have to accept the hegemony of the 'sons of the soil'.²⁸

2.2. Areas of Disagreement

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The best way to demonstrate control over a territory is by policing it. Militias of indigenes patrolling the streets in order to keep law and order can force members of other ethnic groups

to show deference. Among the Yoruba and most other ethnic groups in Southern Nigeria there seems to be a wide consensus that policing should be done exclusively by indigenes.²⁹ But this model is not accepted by many Muslims in the North. They reject the principle of ethnic autonomy in favour of a religious form of self-determination. Vigilantes in Sharia states like Kano and Zamfara differ from their counterparts in the South in that they enact Islamic law. This law is meant to regulate all spheres of public and private life, giving vigilantes a wide scope to interfere and arrest offenders. They may prosecute adulterers, restrict the movements of females and enforce a strict dress code. Such a morality police appears utterly illegitimate to most Nigerians in the South who have a different concept of crime. Another contentious issue raised by Islamic vigilantes is the legal status of infidels. Is it acceptable that Islamic authorities forbid Christians to build churches and that they impose death penalty on 'pagan' forms of worship?³⁰

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Religious and political authorities in the Muslim North have little interest in a constitutional debate which may set limits for the implementation of their divine law. So when self-determination groups in the South made a first attempt to organize a National Conference in April 2006, only a few Northerners attended, and they made it clear that they will rather defend the status quo than risk a radical restructuring.³¹ Transforming Nigeria into a looser federation might be a first step towards a complete disintegration which is unacceptable to Muslim leaders in the North. Without the framework of a common state, they could no longer claim a share of the oil wealth which is produced at the south coast, along the Niger Delta. The other delegates to the National Conference had no objections to far-reaching reforms. They agreed on the need to reconstitute Nigeria on the basis of ethnic autonomy, and most spoke out in favour of 'true federalism', although this term was interpreted in very different ways. A few separatist leaders, however, dismissed all these debates about genuine federalism and insisted that there should be only one topic on the conference agenda: secession.

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Though the first conference of ethnic nationalities ended up in strife, the call for a new federation will not abate. The present constitutional arrangements are so dysfunctional that most politicians break them at will. Nigeria's Fourth Republic, like its predecessors, cannot cope with ethnic and religious antagonisms. Its institutions were simply not designed to organise the relationships between communities that keep armed forces to defend their territory. Therefore, community leaders will have to look for new rules that may secure a peaceful coexistence. But the chances for a lasting agreement are slim, given their divergent interests and aspirations. If nothing counts but the self-interest of ethnic nationalities or religious communities, then pacts between them are only kept as long as it is advantageous. There is a further reason why it is difficult to establish a system of power sharing between them. Militias and vigilantes that have to assert their claims in a hostile and competitive environment cannot afford sticking to contracts or legal principles. Their leaders are unreliable partners who tend to renege on their promises and change their strategies when it seems opportune. As already pointed out in the Introduction, the groups that are explored in the following case studies lack institutional stability. How they adopt to changing circumstances shall be analysed by looking at their relationship to local political elites, to state authorities and to popular movements:

1. The Oodua People's Congress, named after the mythical ancestor of the Yoruba, was founded as a pro-democracy group, but turned to ethnic self-determination and combined it with vigilantism. Despite its militancy, it has received much support by Yoruba politicians, intellectuals and traditional rulers. The Yoruba establishment is interested in ethnic nationalism and in a

revival of African tradition as a means to play down internal antagonisms, particularly between Yoruba Muslims and Christians.

2. Most Muslims in the North do not look for 'autochthonous' solutions to the Nigerian crisis. Inspired by Islamic reformers in Saudi Arabia and Iran, they demand submission to a universal religious law that tends to eclipse ethnic differences. Sharia has the advantage of being clearly defined, but it cannot be implemented properly. The Islamisation campaign provoked bitter resistance by Christian minorities and resentment among a growing number of Muslims who dislike a strict religious policing. Given the strong and sometimes violent counter-forces, Hisba vigilantes have enforced Islamic law only sporadically and arbitrarily, depending on shifting balances of power.
3. Among the Christian Igbo in Southeast Nigeria, militant vigilantes like the Bakassi Boys have found broad support, but the most popular self-determination group, the Movement for the Actualisation of a Sovereign State of Biafra, is committed to non-violence, at least for the time being, as long as it cannot risk a violent confrontation. With its call for secession, MASSOB has split the Igbo society and alienated the elite which profits from the Nigerian federation.
4. The liberation movements of the Ogoni, Ijaw and other Niger Delta minorities were formed in response to military repression and a reckless exploitation of the oil resources by multinational companies. But fighting for 'their' oil wealth has set the 'indigenes' against each other, creating bitter divisions between villages, clans and ethnic groups. Far more people have died in communal feuds than in clashes with the police and the army. The dominant actors are local gangs, called 'cults', which form fragile alliances with local politicians, government officials and oil companies.

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Militia and vigilante groups are guided by very divergent ideas of a normative order. By comparing them I want to address the following questions: Can they establish some legitimate authority? Are there clear limits defining their sphere of operation and the scope of the law? How do they relate to ethnic and religious outsiders? Do they cooperate with local authorities and state institutions?

3. The OPC in Southwest Nigeria

3.1. Asserting Ethnic Hegemony

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Founded in 1994, the Oodua People's Congress started as the armed wing of a pro-democracy movement, led by human rights activists who fought the military regime and its annulment of the presidential elections in June 1993. After the generals withdrew and Nigeria became democratic, the OPC had to find a new mission. It shifted its focus and presented itself as a "socio-cultural organization",³² defending the interests of the Yoruba people. In the words of Dr. Frederick Fasehun, a founding member of the organisation and its uncontested leader until it split in 1999: The OPC is "a completely non-violent organisation. [...] It is made up of the best elements of the Yoruba race; and the Yoruba nation is the best nation in Africa".³³ According to its leaders, the OPC is pursuing two main goals. The first is "flushing out criminals from Yorubaland",³⁴ which is done, as in other parts of Nigeria, with machetes, petrol and tyres. The second goal is "the protection of Yoruba interests anywhere in the world".³⁵ So far, OPC units have not operated outside Nigeria; their main area of operation is

the Southwest of the country, but here, in their home territory, the struggle for Yoruba interests went quite far. When dock workers elected some Ijaw as their trade union leaders, an OPC commando stormed the port of Apapa and shot members of the rival faction to ensure that a Yoruba candidate is heading the organisation. Dr. Fasehun defended this intervention: "we felt that our fatherland was being taken away from us. The OPC had to invade the ports to show solidarity and assert the rights of the marginalized Yoruba".³⁶

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It is mainly in Lagos, in the centre of OPC activities, that Yoruba nationalists see their political and economic position threatened. Nigeria's former capital has attracted millions of citizens from other parts of the country, among them many Muslim Hausa from the North and Christian Igbo from the Southeast. Though the mass migration started generations ago and many non-Yoruba were born in Lagos, the 'indigenes' generally see them as 'settlers', 'tenants' or 'guests'. Like other Yoruba patriots, Gani Adams, leader of the more militant OPC faction, "claimed that Lagos belonged solely to the Yoruba and [...] he vowed to forcefully resist any attempts by the Igbo to 'infiltrate' Yorubaland".³⁷ OPC gangs attacked Igbo traders who were accused of having monopolized parts of the Alaba electronics market, and they clashed with militias of the Ijaw community in Lagos. But their main targets were Hausa, members of the biggest ethnic conglomerate in the North, whose leaders had dominated Nigeria's politics for nearly four decades. The Yoruba 'warriors' were not willing to accept that the biggest abattoir in Lagos was managed by Hausa butchers, and they also intervened at the Mile 12 market when Yoruba traders clashed with the Hausa Yam Sellers Association, giving their rivals an ultimatum "to cede control of the market".³⁸ Another target was a radio station broadcasting BBC news in Hausa, the lingua franca of the North. The OPC "accused the management of Raypower of cultural imperialism which undermine[s] the culture of Yoruba people",³⁹ and "threatened to deal with them if the broadcast were not stopped within two weeks".⁴⁰

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As 'sons of the soil', OPC members claim control over the land of their ancestors, and this territorial control is demonstrated by policing it. But when patrolling in quarters with a large proportion of 'non-indigenes', they sometimes met with fierce resistance. In Ajegunle, a multi-ethnic slum in Lagos, a major clash erupted in October 2000 when vigilante members pursued an alleged thief who happened to be a Hausa. The man on the run grasped his only chance to evade instant justice by hiding among some fellow-Hausa who declined to hand him over to his prosecutors. The Yoruba fighters, however, insisted on their right to secure law and order in all parts of their hometown. They called in reinforcement and embarked on a "kill-and-burn operation"⁴¹ against the Hausa. From Ajegunle, the violence spread to other parts of Lagos so that the governor had to call in the army and impose a curfew. After three days of fighting, when journalists could finally inspect the "war zones", they saw the streets "littered" with corpses.⁴²

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Politicians in Northern Nigeria bemoaned that in the first ten months of democracy more Northerners had been killed in the South than in the previous four decades since independence.⁴³ Some critics accused President Obasanjo, a Yoruba, of having "licensed" the "ethnic cleansing".⁴⁴ Others blamed him for failing to protect the Hausa diaspora in the South: "His people in Ogun State massacred our people", "without Obasanjo raising a finger".⁴⁵ Yet these accusations are unfounded. After the killings at Mile 12 in November 1999, the president declared the OPC illegal and gave order to shoot at any member who resisted being arrested. In order to enforce the ban, he deployed anti-riot police and army units which unleashed a "reign of terror".⁴⁶ Scores of OPC members were killed and at least 2000 were detained,⁴⁷ yet the security forces did not manage to regain control over Lagos with its ten or twelve million inhabitants.

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The OPC enjoyed a lot of support among the Yoruba population, and it had the backing of prominent Yoruba politicians. The governor of Ondo State called its members "freedom fighters", and his colleague in Lagos, who acted like a "patron" of the OPC, wanted to entrust them with official police functions.⁴⁸ Much support came from the intellectual elite as well. Dr. Beko Ransome-Kuti, who enjoyed much respect in Western human rights circles as the long-term chairman of the Campaign for Democracy, functioned at the same time as national treasurer of the OPC.⁴⁹ And Gani Fawehinmi, Nigeria's most prominent human rights lawyer, was allied to the more militant Adam's faction which later became notorious through kidnapping and acid attacks on policemen. When asked about his involvement, he claimed that until 1999 he did not know about violent acts, but rather mistook the organisation for a "human rights group".⁵⁰ Personal ties between the OPC and other segments of 'civil society' may explain why the Civil Liberties Organisation defended the militia against attempts to ban it: "Banning the OPC [...] will lead to an increase in crime rate. The group has instilled fears in the mind of criminals".⁵¹ Sunday Mbang, bishop of the Methodist Church and president of the Christian Association of Nigeria, also pleaded against a ban, and Professor Wole Soyinka, the Nobel Laureate, stated that the OPC is a "legitimate organisation".⁵²

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Reacting to OPC activities, leaders of the Hausa community warned "to ruin Lagos if any Hausa resident is killed again".⁵³ Yet as a minority, Hausa fighters had no chance to gain the upper hand. In the North, however, they could strike back massively. So whenever ethnic clashes erupted in the Southwest, the Yoruba minority in the North had to fear for their life. After the killings of Hausa in Sagamu, near Lagos, Yoruba migrants in Kano had to pay. Hundreds of them were killed, and endless convoys of refugees headed south, back to their homeland where they could feel safe.⁵⁴ In a press communiqué, the Arewa Consultative Forum, an association of Northern politicians, announced: "henceforth, attack on Northerners in any part of [the] country will not [...] go unavenged".⁵⁵ However, ethnic violence in Southwest Nigeria calmed down, after it had peaked in 2000. With the election of a Yoruba president, power shifted more to the South, so the call to resist Hausa 'colonialism' lost its urgency. Moreover, in the course of ethnic clashes, the local balance of power changed in favour of the Yoruba. Since the Hausa diaspora was no longer as self-assured as during the rule of Northern generals, they were forced, at least in some contested areas, to acknowledge the hegemony of their 'host' community – a process which Insa Nolte observed in Sagamu, north of Lagos. Here, the Hausa 'settlers' had to accept that an annual masquerade, organised by a Yoruba secret society, passes through their Muslim quarter of town. In addition, they had to give up their monopoly on the kola trade, and their community representative, the Seriki Hausawa, had to submit to the traditional ruler of town by undergoing an installation ceremony in which he received his insignia of authority through the hands of the Yoruba chief.⁵⁶

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Vigilante work, which began on a large scale in 1999, helped consolidating OPC control over disputed areas, but it was also a response to a popular demand.⁵⁷ In the beginning, crime rates fell drastically, as OPC members pursued criminals into zones where the police did not dare to operate.⁵⁸ Observers reported that the freedom fighters acted with much self-discipline. When they invaded an area and searched it house by house, they did not steal from the inhabitants.⁵⁹ In July 2002, Nigeria's Inspector-General of Police offered to cooperate with the vigilante, on condition that they hand over suspects to the police. OPC fighters complied to some extent, but accused the police of releasing criminals in exchange for money. In late 2005, after both faction leaders had been arrested again, the OPC declared that it would withdraw its vigilante services from Southwest Nigeria in order "to put an end to frequent confrontation with the police".⁶⁰ Many members, however, have become involved in the security business on the basis of private contracts. Their employers are community

associations, landlords or traders associations, bank managers and businessmen. In principle, these clients are free to decide how much security they need and where to buy it. Very often, however, they contact local OPC officers in order to hire security men.⁶¹ This arrangement is advantageous for both sides. The OPC receives a share of the salaries paid to the guards, and if any of them misbehaves, the employer may turn to the OPC zonal coordinator and demand disciplinary measures. Erring members may be expelled or beaten up, but disciplining them is difficult, as they can easily join the rival OPC faction or some other gang.⁶²

3.2. Factionalism and Cultural Unity

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Clashes with the police were not the only reason for the decision of OPC leaders in 2005 to distance themselves from vigilantism. The organisation had lost much of its popular support, since too many real or fake members were involved in criminal activities. They accepted jobs from politicians acting "as mercenaries for political violence", or they extorted money so that their security services sometimes resembled a protection racket.⁶³ Among non-Yoruba, OPC vigilantes had evoked fear right from the beginning, as they were perceived as "hostile towards other tribes".⁶⁴ From the perspective of disillusioned Yoruba who had initially supported the liberation movement, it seemed as if the organization had been hijacked by "hoodlums", "miscreants" and "illiterates": "OPC has not only become an embarrassment to the Yoruba, its leaders have completely lost control of about four million malevolent people they claim to lead".⁶⁵ Two former members told me that things began to go wrong, when the organisation split in early 1999 and the rival factions recruited new members indiscriminately in order to swell their ranks.⁶⁶ The initial controversy that divided OPC leaders revolved around their relationship towards the state. Gani Adams, a 29-year old youth leader with little formal education, accused the OPC president of participating in the transition towards Nigeria's Fourth Republic and of taking bribes from Olusegun Obasanjo during the presidential election campaign. Dr. Fasehun, in turn, expelled his rival for "hooliganism" and "unnecessary terrorism",⁶⁷ and he decried that Adams recruited his supporters among the "rabble".⁶⁸ However, despite their bitter enmity, the rank-and-file of both factions share a similar social background, and when they clash it is usually not about programmatic differences.

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Gani Adams has, of course, a reputation for militancy, but in his political demands he is not far away from Frederick Fasehun and the mainstream of Yoruba politics. He was even appointed a member of the committee that drafted the 'Yoruba Agenda', a position paper meant as a common platform of the Yoruba elite in their negotiations with representatives of other ethnic groups. It contains the blueprint of a new constitution which establishes 'Yorubaland' as one of six geo-political zones within a very loose federation. Secession is not ruled out by Adams and the other authors of the Yoruba Agenda, but it is seen just a "last option", in case the Yoruba cannot realise self-determination under the umbrella of a Nigerian state.⁶⁹

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A large part of the Yoruba establishment acknowledges Gani Adams as a legitimate leader of the youth. The militancy of his 'boys' appears acceptable, in principle, as it can be used by the elders in their competition with other ethnic elites: "Yoruba elders, politicians and traditional rulers [...] are persuaded that the OPC will help in instituting a 'balance of terror' against the North".⁷⁰ This tacit or open support of youth militancy seems to indicate that the rich and mighty are not much worried that the angry young men may rebel against them. Most OPC activists are children of the poor, "very conscious of the economic and social deprivations which they suffer. But they put all of these down to political marginalisation caused centrally by the Hausa-Fulani elite".⁷¹ Ethnic nationalism has helped playing down class antagonisms within Yoruba society. Nevertheless, the OPC has also been used to articulate popular anger

against the elite. During the national elections of 2003, both OPC factions mobilised voters against the corrupt incumbent Yoruba governors.⁷²

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Critics of ethnic nationalism predicted that an autonomous Yorubaland would be destabilised by the same centrifugal forces which have been tearing apart the Nigerian federation: "the Yoruba [...] have seeming unity in a united Nigeria because, of course, they have rivals, the Igbo and particularly the Hausa-Fulani. Now without these people, the Yoruba will go back into a state that also the whitemen met them. You remember the Yoruba wars. They were involved in internecine warfare, the area was totally ungovernable".⁷³ Before the British conquest, the Yoruba-speaking peoples had indeed experienced a century of warfare.⁷⁴ They had drifted into disaster, when a section of them allied with Hausa-Fulani jihadists. As a result, the Old Oyo Empire in northern Yorubaland fell apart, and the area around Ilorin turned into an emirate ruled by a royal Fulani family. A similar constellation shaped political events after the end of colonial rule, in Nigeria's First Republic. When a faction of Yoruba politicians collaborated with the ruling Northern People's Congress, the Yoruba lost control over Southwest Nigeria, and their leaders were put in jail. During the Second Republic, disunity within the Yoruba elite produced again a similar result.⁷⁵ National history, with its trauma of treachery and humiliation, contains a clear message: Domination by outsiders can only be repelled, if Yoruba overcome their internal weakness. In order to "decide their own destiny"⁷⁶ they have to close ranks against hostile forces and forge a nation that never existed before.

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According to its constitution, the Oodua Bill of Rights, the OPC is striving for an "absolutely unflinching unity" by propagating an "Oodua worldview" and by inducing their compatriots to "identify with Yoruba history and cultural origin".⁷⁷ On behalf of the nation, the OPC has revived cultural festivals and restored, among others, the shrine of a water-goddess in Lagos.⁷⁸ Many OPC members are staunch Muslims and Christians, yet they do not protest against such 'idol worship', because the ancient gods are key symbols of Yoruba unity. At meetings of Afenifere, the most influential association of Yoruba politicians, members swear by Ogun, Sango and other deities. Similar with the OPC. Fasehun is a Christian, while Adams is a Muslim, but their organisation is not divided along religious lines. When new members are initiated, they swear by their common gods and they receive protective charms fashioned according to the "ancient wisdom of our forefathers".⁷⁹

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In Yorubaland there are probably as many Muslims as Christians, and the line between the faiths runs through most families. A religious confrontation would be the worst disaster that could befall them. No elected Yoruba governor has ever advocated the introduction of Sharia, not even in a limited form, although Sharia courts with a restricted jurisdiction had existed in Northern Nigeria for decades. Muslims in the North could approach Islamic courts to seek rulings in civil proceedings involving questions of inheritance, divorce and other family matters. However, even such a limited application of Islamic law would have brought strife to Yorubaland, because Sharia demands that a Christian may not inherit from a Muslim and vice versa. Despite the risks of a religious polarisation, some Yoruba Muslims joined the recent Sharia campaign, and the Governor of Lagos, himself a Muslim, came "under immense pressure" to introduce Islamic law.⁸⁰ But so far, ethnic solidarity among the Yoruba has proved stronger than religious loyalties. As a Muslim chief put it: "I'm a Yorubaman first and foremost. [...] I have a duty to my race".⁸¹ Religious authorities in the North accused their Yoruba co-religionists of not taking their faith seriously. Both sides are aware, however, that the call by Hausa-Fulani Muslims to join the Sharia campaign and establish Islamic courts in Yorubaland is not meant to bring peace. After decades of religious conflicts in the North, Hausa-Fulani politicians would benefit if the "Sharia virus"⁸² spread to other parts of the country. A Northern journal, in favour of Sharia, wrote: "Yoruba have enough Muslim

population to adopt their own mode of Sharia and create their own fratricide".⁸³ Faced with these attempts to deepen internal divisions, many Yoruba assume that only nationalism can contain religious passion. This may explain why a number of Yoruba intellectuals have supported the OPC despite its record as an "extremely illiberal nationalist group".⁸⁴ Critics in the North called Wole Soyinka an "apostle of ethnic hatred"⁸⁵, but it seems his nationalism was calculated to save his people from a religious confrontation. The Sharia campaign looked to him like "a prelude to civil war"⁸⁶, as it spread southward from the Islamic regions in the far North into religiously mixed states.

4. Hisba Vigilantes in the Muslim North

4.1. Piety and Control over Territory

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Muslim reformers in Northern Nigeria reject ethnicity as basis for self-determination. Instead of reviving African traditions, they want to remodel their society according to a set of universal rules. By submitting to Sharia, Nigerians shall adopt a common identity which "eliminat[es] tribalism and all other primitive chauvinistic ideologies".⁸⁷ When practised strictly, Islamic law would overcome all man-made boundaries: "all Muslims, irrespective of race, language or nationality, must constitute a single brotherhood, one Umma. [...] the Umma, from one end of the world to the other, is but one single nation, its diverse peoples sharing but one faith, one law, one culture and one destiny".⁸⁸ However, the fight for Sharia in Nigeria has always been linked with ethnic hegemony. When Usman dan Fodio, a Fulani preacher, declared a Holy War in 1804, his followers toppled the Hausa kings, whom they accused of apostasy and corruption, and replaced them with a Fulani aristocracy. Since the new rulers formed just a small minority of the population, they used Islam in order to unite the subjugated peoples and keep the disparate empire together. As custodians of the true religion, the rulers of the caliphate were especially concerned with imposing the outer manifestations of their faith such as the observation of Ramadan, Friday prayers and other rites which spread a uniform culture.

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When Nigeria became independent in 1960, the Premier of the Northern Region, Ahmadu Bello, embarked on a conversion campaign. As a direct descendant of Usman dan Fodio, he frequently used the imagery of the jihad and stressed the continuity between his government and the old caliphate.⁸⁹ The target of his campaign were mainly the ethnic minorities in the Middle Belt, which had managed to defend their independence during the time of the jihad. Many members of these minorities had adopted Christianity as a means to distance themselves from the advancing Hausa culture, so they saw the Islamisation policy as part of an 'internal colonisation'. In recent years, when a new wave of Islamisation spread south, representatives of the minorities protested the introduction of Sharia law: "The indigenous ethnic groups [...] will not want to lose their ethnic identity due to the Islamization".⁹⁰ However, the dominant forces in the North, the Hausa-Fulani leaders, see the Middle Belt as their sphere of influence, so they are not willing to negotiate with ethnic minorities on the basis of mutual autonomy. While the leaders of the Yoruba and Igbo, the two biggest ethnic nationalities in the South, have strong autonomist tendencies, their counterparts in the North reject the right of ethnic self-determination, "because the Hausa-speaking emirate leaders have transregional aims and interests based on both precolonial history and religious culture".⁹¹ Through Sharia, the Muslim majority tries to constitute itself as a political community with control over a vast territory where it can "re-establish" a "*dar al-Islam*"⁹² that transcends ethnic boundaries. Like the caliphate of the nineteenth century, it would include at its margins many non-Hausa minorities, among them predominantly Christian groups with strong autonomist tendencies, like the Tangale in Gombe State or the Sayawe in Bauchi State. So far, these minorities have preserved some control over the land of their ancestors, but

where Hausa-Fulani Muslims are strong enough to control the state governments, they have pushed for Islamic legislation as a means to override the rights of indigenous groups. At the headquarters of the Arewa Consultative Forum, the most important association of Northern politicians, I was told that the introduction of Sharia helps to 'homogenise' the population.⁹³

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While the divine law is well suited to challenge claims of indigeneity, it can also serve the opposite function and consolidate the superiority of native populations. In Kano and other urban centres of the far North, where the culture of Hausa-Fulani Muslims has been entrenched for generations, the Sharia campaign has supported "an autochthonous, ethnic, religious exclusionism, backed by the often violent 'policing' of *yan daba* and *yan hisba*".⁹⁴ By elevating their own sacred law to the status of state law, the indigenous population has asserted its hegemony vis-à-vis Christians from the South who have migrated there since colonial times. Though these 'settlers' or 'aliens' often live apart from the rest of the population in so-called strangers' quarters, they have managed to bring parts of the local economy under their control. By passing Sharia laws in the face of massive Christian protests, the 'original' inhabitants have presented themselves as the lords of the land who can force the state apparatus to do their bidding. Their sovereign power to determine public life is also manifested by an increased "symbolic presence of Islam",⁹⁵ by public prayers and dress codes, by strict fast and food taboos. Wherever the Christian migrants turn their gaze they are constantly reminded that they are living in a foreign land and that they will remain in the role of outsiders as long as they resist being assimilated. For those who want to overcome their marginal position and assimilate, the decisive step is conversion to Islam.⁹⁶ In this context of entrenching religious dominance, Islamic vigilantes serve a dual function. First, they make visible the boundary between believers and infidels by urging the faithful to discharge their ritual obligations and to abstain from "un-Islamic behavior".⁹⁷ Second, they force non-Muslims to acknowledge the supremacy of the indigenous population. Though the minorities have not been reduced to a *dhimmi* status (of a subordinated population subject to Muslim protection and legal supervision), they have to respect at least some laws of the dominant religion. In a number of Sharia states, they may not drink alcohol, they have to observe some form of gender separation, and they are not allowed to build churches, not even in their strangers' quarters.

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For the majority of the population, Kano, Zamfara and Sokoto are "Muslim states that wish to see their state apparatus organized in conformity with their faith".⁹⁸ So they claim the right to govern their land without regard to the largely secular constitution and its catalogue of 'universal' rights. In debates with Western critics, Sharia has been presented as a "defense against unwanted cultural globalization", as a means to protect "cultural diversity" and preserve the "authentic" culture of Northern Nigeria.⁹⁹ However, the recent Islamisation movement has rather destroyed cultural diversity, particularly in rural areas where Islam used to coexist with small 'pagan' communities. By banning music, dancing and the brewing of traditional beer, some governments have criminalised important elements of 'pagan' rituals. At the height of the pious campaign, busloads of urban-based Hisba members raided villages to suppress un-Islamic forms of worship.¹⁰⁰ Thus they accelerated a social transformation which appeared, to Western observers, like a 'de-Africanisation' of Hausaland.¹⁰¹

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In urban centres like Kano, with its big Christian diaspora, Sharia has not led to assimilation but to a hardening of ethno-religious boundaries. Christian Igbo and Yoruba from the South have preserved strong links with their home communities, so they are less likely to convert and embrace the dominant culture. Yet in an environment placed under Islamic rules, they are made to feel like second-class citizens who are largely excluded from participation in public affairs. Locked in their role as permanent guests, they are expected to accept the conditions set by others without protests. In the words of Dr. Datti Ahmed, president of the Supreme

Council for Sharia: "If any individual feels too uncomfortable with any set-up established by the majority in any state, he has the right to choose another state".¹⁰² Since Sharia reformers have rejected the secular principles of the constitution, it has become more difficult for Muslims and Christians to arrive at an agreement that would secure the rights of religious minorities. In cases of conflict they cannot refer to common rules which would determine how faith-based communities shall relate to each other. Instead of a consensus they will reach, at best, partial and unstable arrangements which are not rooted in common convictions. Compromises that stipulate to which extent Christians have to submit to Islamic hegemony depend on local constellations of power, so they change over time and vary from region to region. Where Christians form a small minority, as in Zamfara or Kano State, they had to accept that public life was thoroughly Islamised, at least in the beginning of the Sharia era. In states like Kaduna or Gombe, however, the Christian minorities were strong enough to risk a violent confrontation. After Sharia clashes in February and March 2000 left thousands of people dead, Islamic laws could only be implemented in a very limited form.

4.2. The Limits of Islamic Law

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Islamic law as a guideline for vigilante work has several advantages. It is, in parts, clearly formulated, so it provides more legal security than the informal justice of OPC 'warriors' who hold their trials in secret or pronounce their sentences on the spot. The classical books of Islamic jurisprudence give rules for a division of labour between judges, who hold public trials, and vigilantes, who play a subservient role. A Hisba that worked strictly within the framework of Sharia norms could be integrated with other state institutions and could contribute to the reconstruction of a functional state. Moreover, Islamic law might bridge the divide between rich and poor, binding all faithful to a common set of divine rules which nobody may alter to suit his or her interests. As Sharia is clearly derived from holy scriptures, it is in its essential parts not disputed among legal and theological authorities. With its aura of divine righteousness and impartiality it looks ideally suited to provide Islamic vigilantes with a clear mandate and a robust legitimacy. There is however a major problem. Sharia is meant to regulate in minute detail all aspects human behaviour: "Our way of life, that is, from the day you were born to the day you enter the grave is governed by Sharia. How you eat, walk, talk, [...] everything".¹⁰³ In a modern, large-scale society, such a tight system of legal prohibitions, ritual prescriptions and purity taboos cannot be implemented properly; its partial and episodic enforcement leads to arbitrary punishments, to double standards and hypocrisy. In Nigeria's Sharia states, a few teenage women were flogged for pre-marital sex, but when the son of an emir was sentenced to caning for drinking alcohol, the emir gave order to dissolve the Hisba group.¹⁰⁴ Members of the elite, who can hide their entertainment in clubs and guest houses, normally get away with the breach of the law.¹⁰⁵ Under the new religious regime they have neither cultivated a sense of decency nor of social justice. From Zamfara, the heartland of Sharia, it was reported that the "forceful acquisition of land and other properties of the less-privileged by those in authority, particularly village and district heads, [has] reached alarming proportion".¹⁰⁶

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The political elites which introduced the divine law are not always in a position to control how it is implemented. Where governors were reluctant to enforce the new legislation, independent Hisba groups emerged, linked to radical preachers and imams. This religious vanguard was not inclined to honour agreements which exempted Christians from most Sharia prohibitions. Some even felt authorised to turn against the ruling circles that had enacted the law of God but paid only lip service to its commands. For the Hausa-Fulani elite, the Sharia campaign had been, above all, a means to put pressure on President Obasanjo and other Christian politicians who had risen under his rule.¹⁰⁷ As a means of political blackmail it was successful, but it had unintended consequences. Sharia governors, who insisted that God's

commands are superior to Nigeria's constitution and any other man-made law, have set a political paradigm that erodes the legitimacy of state authorities and empowers religious counter-elites. By invoking the supreme authority of the word of God, radical Muslims reject the state-controlled Sharia with its half-hearted compromises and call for a 'pure' Islamic order that can only be established by toppling the corrupt ruling class.

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Governors have tried to integrate independent Sharia vigilantes into state-controlled Hisba groups. In Kano, both organisations existed side by side until a new governor, elected on a pro-Sharia ticket, put the more radical elements on the payroll of the state. Nine thousand volunteers were trained and given a wide mandate to prosecute "anti-Islamic behaviour". They have been authorised to arrest thieves and robbers, suppress traditional music and magic, counsel women on marriage issues and stop usury, speculation and lending money at interest.¹⁰⁸ Their activities are supervised, at state and local government levels, by Sharia Implementation Committees which are manned by Islamic scholars, imams and political office holders. Among them are also representatives of the police. Nevertheless, relations between Islamic vigilantes and the police have been tense from the beginning. Police officers have been accused of sabotaging Sharia by converting their stations into beer parlours and by providing armed guards for trucks which brought beer into Kano.¹⁰⁹ In return, police officers and other critics accused Hisba groups of colluding with criminals. Among the volunteers who have joined the Sharia guards are members of *yan daba*, i.e. street gangs that played a prominent role in clashes with Christians. Overlapping membership and informal contacts between both types of groups have facilitated complicity and a division of labour: "*Hisba* preached to unmarried women, arranging for marriages for them, while silently encouraging and openly condemning '*yan daba*' attacks and rapes of Muslim women, married and unmarried, who ventured out of their homes unaccompanied".¹¹⁰

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President Obasanjo had taken care that police commissioners posted to crisis areas were opposed to Sharia, so the police often acted as a check against Hisba excesses. In Kano, two Hisba leaders were arrested in early 2006, though this step was only taken after the Sharia monitors had lost public support. They had provoked violent resistance when they had tried to stop women from riding on motorcycle taxis. Women's groups and human rights groups had protested only feebly and unsuccessfully against this restriction of personal liberties. Those who risked a confrontation with the Sharia authorities were the motorcycle drivers who saw their commercial interests at risk. After Hisba members had confiscated more than 2000 motorcycles, the taxi drivers attacked them and destroyed dozens of official Hisba vehicles.¹¹¹

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In general, the federal government has been reluctant to interfere in Hisba activities, because the Sharia controversy threatens to aggravate religious divisions within the police and the army. Some officers participated actively in the Islamisation drive, without regard to orders from above. In Zamfara State, a Christian woman was detained for eleven days, after a policeman, a soldier and an administrative officer invaded her house and found a carton of beer in her sleeping room.¹¹² With a plurality of conflicting secular and religious laws, the behaviour of state agents becomes unpredictable, as they may decide individually, according to their personal conviction, which law to apply.

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Though Hisba members are supposed to hand over suspects to the police, they have often punished them on the spot. Flogging is a common means of dealing with offences, but I did not come across reports that they executed criminals. Compared with OPC vigilantes or the Bakassi Boys, Hisba groups acted with much restraint – and with little success in curbing violent crime.¹¹³ More militant forms of crime fighting are sometimes practised by informal

vigilantes. A Fulani leader in Gombe State, with good contacts to the political establishment, instructed his followers to chop off the hands of armed robbers. In his court, he conducted "trial by ordeal after reading verses from the Holy Quran".¹¹⁴ A more comprehensive form of Islamic justice was pursued by Islamic rebels, mostly students and graduates, who have been called Taliban by the media. They attacked some rural police stations and local government buildings, raised flags inscribed with 'Afghanistan' and began to impose on local peasants a pure form of Islamic life. In order to dislodge them from their lairs at the border to Cameroon and Niger, the army deployed heavy artillery.¹¹⁵

5. Crime Fighting and Self-Determination in Igboland

5.1. Bakassi Boys

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When Muslims killed hundreds of Igbo during Sharia clashes in Northern Nigeria, the governor of Abia, one of the five Igbo states, announced: "If they kill an Igboman, we will retaliate immediately".¹¹⁶ On the following day, armed gangs, led by the Bakassi Boys, erected roadblocks and, within 24 hours, killed more than 300 Northerners who had been living in various Igbo towns.¹¹⁷ No Igbo leader wanted to take responsibility for the actions of their boys, but they advised their opponents in the North to take the 300 dead as a "warning signal".¹¹⁸ Their belligerent mood was expressed by ex-General Ojukwu, the former Biafra leader, who in 1967 had dragged the country into a civil war: "there is nothing actually wrong with vengeance. It is the national policy of Israel you know, ours cannot be different. [...] I am a Roman Catholic. Every time, you hear Muslims say we want *jihad*, we want *jihad*. When did *Jihad* start frightening Christians?"¹¹⁹

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In a moment of crisis, the Bakassi Boys were employed as an ethnic militia, but this was a singular event. In their area of operation, there was no demand for an armed group that attacked or intimidated ethnic minorities. Igbo have been reluctant to retaliate. Millions of them are living in cities of the North, while just a few Hausa-Fulani are residing in Igboland. If mutual killings escalated, Igbo would be the losers, like in 1966, when tens of thousands of them were killed and more than a million fled back to the Southeast. The Biafra War that started in 1967, after Igbo leaders proclaimed their own independent republic, serves as a constant reminder to the Igbo (and to the liberation movements in the Niger Delta) that secession may end in a disaster. Though the federal government had been incapable or unwilling to protect the Igbo while they were massacred in the North, it did not accept that they split from federation. Federal troops invaded the secessionist Republic of Biafra, and the international community stood by and watched how a million Biafrans were killed.

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Ethnic hostilities played no role when the Bakassi Boys were formed in 1998. The group started as a security organisation, founded by traders in Aba who had no interest in scaring away potential customers from other parts of the country.¹²⁰ The initiative to take up arms and free the city from criminals came from a group of shoe producers in the Bakassi area of Aba's international market. Their security outfit, initially 45 men, operated so successfully that it was gradually enlarged and used to 'cleanse' the whole of Abia State. In mid-2000 they performed the same feat in Anambra State where they had been invited by the governor and local traders' associations. The traders, who controlled the Boys initially, had given them a code of conduct that set clear limits for their operations. They were paid to chase thieves and robbers, not to meddle into personal disputes. And they had to destroy all property confiscated from criminals.¹²¹ As long as they stuck to these regulations, they performed their mission very efficiently. After only half a year of their operations, the state of Anambra was declared by a commission of journalists "the most crime-free state in Nigeria".¹²² However, such success had its price. According to a report by the Civil Liberties Organisation, the Bakassi

Boys may have executed more than 2000 citizens between April 2000 and January 2002 in Anambra State alone.¹²³ This display of ruthlessness intimidated not just ordinary criminals but also rival militias and local vigilantes. Thus they established among armed gangs in Anambra and Abia State a virtual monopoly on violence.

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Their "enormous popular support"¹²⁴ was only possible because they were perceived as incorruptible. Kate Meagher, who was in Aba during the formative period of the vigilante, noted: "I came across no reports of unjustified killings during the first fifteen months of Bakassi's operation".¹²⁵ It is still a mystery how they could resist being dragged into local feuds. What made them so committed to their mission that they did nothing but pursue the common good? The great advantage of vigilantes seems to be that they are closer to the people and more accountable to them than federal police officers who may hail from other parts of the country. Yet the Bakassi Boys often operated far from home, and they did not submit to democratic control. The famous First Batch that 'sanitized' Nnewi and Onitsha, the commercial centres of Anambra State, had been sent there from neighbouring Abia State. They stayed apart from the rest of the population, guarded by a number of taboos and bound to the organisation by secret oaths which obliged them not to reveal anything about their activities.

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When trying to ensure that vigilantes serve their community and not rival politicians or warlords, one may choose between two strategies: Institutionalise some kind of democratic control by making vigilante activities transparent and open to all. Or the reverse strategy: Isolate the group from its social surrounding. The Bakassi leaders who chose the second option were inspired by traditional forms of community policing. They drew on the model of secret societies, which had never quite disappeared in Eastern Nigeria.¹²⁶ Moreover, they attended local shrines and fortified themselves with charms. Their intention, however, was not to revive Igbo culture and promote ethnic nationalism. They rather followed pragmatic considerations, and this pragmatism suggested that traditional forms of organisation were well-suited to solve some of the problems which the Bakassi Boys faced: In order to pacify society, it was essential for such a violent actor to be perceived as non-partisan, otherwise they would have exacerbated local feuds and fuelled the cycle of violence and counter-violence. However, impartiality is difficult to achieve when societies are reverting to segmentary structures. Precolonial village-groups had supervised their warriors by religious cults and secret societies which brought together elders from rival clans, families and villages. Secrecy helped all those involved to distance themselves from sectional loyalties and reach impartial decisions: "it protects those engaged in the deliberations against pressure from their various lineages. This makes it easier for them to consider any situation on its merits, and to avoid taking up positions inspired by purely sectional interests. [And] it enables the society to announce its decisions to the public at large as things collective and unanimous".¹²⁷

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Secrecy was also helpful when investigating crimes. The Bakassi Boys relied heavily on local information, particularly by traders and taxi drivers, but they did not expose their informants.¹²⁸ Instead they masked their sources of information behind a façade of supernatural forces: "While 20 per cent of our operations depend on information, 80 per cent is based on our secret system".¹²⁹ The most famous occult technique was the 'lab test': A special chain with a tortoise was hung around a suspect's neck during interrogations which made it impossible for the person to lie.¹³⁰ The Boys also possessed a sword that reputedly killed only when it came into contact with a murderer or robber.¹³¹ The use of such supernatural means gave them an air of invincibility, and it helped to distract from the fact that many confessions had been extracted under torture.¹³²

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Some observers had the impression that "the character of the vigilante group began to degenerate" when it was "hijacked by opportunistic political officials".¹³³ Paid and supervised by the governors, the Boys were used to suppress a strike by the Nigerian Labour Congress, and some even acted as "political killer squads".¹³⁴ However, politicians were not the only group of persons trying to use the vigilante in order to fight their opponents. The traders' milieu in which the Bakassi Boys were rooted is ridden by faction fighting. Rival unions have often clashed, so it is unlikely that in the long run, market organisations (and other parts of civil society) could have checked the vigilante violence and served as a kind of democratic safeguard. Tensions had already mounted, before the group was taken over by politicians. The rise of Nigeria's most brutal vigilante, initially composed of Aba's shoe producers, had raised anxieties in other sections of the market, particularly among the wealthier traders.¹³⁵ So various power blocks tried to get control over them. In the end individual Bakassi members accepted 'jobs' from clients who had no better intentions than to settle personal scores. Like the police, they made arbitrary arrests and extorted money. The population that had supplied them freely with information stopped cooperating with them, and when the police stormed their offices in August and September 2002, the inhabitants of Aba and Onitsha no longer rose in their defence.¹³⁶

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The original Bakassi Boys, however, have remained legendary figures. Their charisma is attached to the group as a whole, not to individual leaders (as is the case with the OPC and the Niger Delta militias). This has made it easier for newly formed gangs in various parts of Igboland to operate under the label of Bakassi. Despite a ban by the federal government, the parliament of Abia has reconstituted an official Bakassi vigilante in January 2006. Among its members are some of the original fighters, but they have lost the aura of invincibility. Their group is just one of many armed gangs, involved in vendettas with their rivals and dependent on political patronage. In Anambra State, Governor Chris Ngige recruited some Boys as his body guards, and his successor used them to fight the National Association of Road Transport Owners, a gang of thugs funded by a rival to the governor. In a few local disputes, the Bakassi Boys also fought against MASSOB, the major Igbo liberation movement,¹³⁷ though a MASSOB member assured me that they had only clashed with fake Bakassi.

5.2. Movement for the Actualisation of a Sovereign State of Biafra

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Ralph Uwazuruike, the founder of MASSOB, was a member of the ruling People's Democratic Party. He supported Olusegun Obasanjo during his election campaign in 1999, but was soon disappointed with his policy. When making federal appointments, the Yoruba president did not give the Igbo their "due", though they had supported him in the election with 70 percent of their votes.¹³⁸ The Igbo, Nigeria's third biggest ethnic group, have been marginalized for decades, and the transition to democracy has not changed their fate. President Obasanjo, who had to step down in 2007 after two terms in office, did not hand over power to an Igbo president but made sure that power returned to the North. Ralph Uwazuruike had predicted that the Igbo can wait for another 50 years and participate in 'democratic' elections, without ever ruling Nigeria.¹³⁹ Why should they be part of a country that excluded them from ruling it? Uwazuruike's campaign for secession was not taken seriously at first. It looked like a one-man-show, but when hundreds of Igbo died during Sharia clashes in February 2000, the agitation for Biafra fell on fertile ground.

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Uwazuruike has burned his Nigerian passport, but how serious is he about Biafra? The war of secession, 1967–1970, was the most traumatic event in Igbo history. The Nigerian army, in alliance with Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Middle Belt politicians, instituted a hunger blockade in order to starve millions of people into submission. The prospect of living through such

horrors again is not acceptable to the survivors, but the MASSOB leader has assured them that they can win Biafra without a war: "No soul will be lost, not a single one. It will just be like waking up from a dream".¹⁴⁰ Uwazuruike, who lived in India for ten years, relies on Mahatma Gandhi's strategy of non-violence and passive resistance. The Igbo shall gradually opt out of Nigeria and establish their own political structures in a long process passing through 25 stages. MASSOB has already introduced a new currency, the Biafra Pound, it has opened a Biafra House in Washington D.C., and it is broadcasting news through its radio station Voice of Biafra. Its activists are hoisting the old separatist flag and patrolling the streets in the uniform of the former Biafra police. Yet they do not carry arms, as they are not meant to chase robbers or to intimidate members of other ethnic groups. Unlike Yoruba in Lagos or Hausa in Kano, the Igbo are not afraid that non-indigenes may take over parts of their land and their economy. Since the five Igbo states are densely populated, with little industry to offer employment, they have not attracted but a few Nigerians from other areas.

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Separatists parading as Biafra police are a bizarre masquerade, meant to impress politicians from other parts of Nigeria. By displaying more and more symbols of national sovereignty, they are trying to give the impression that Igboland is in fact drifting towards secession. For Igbo nationalists, this is the only way to force Hausa-Fulani and Yoruba politicians to pay attention to the plight of the Igbo. Ralph Uwazuruike would probably stop the count-down to independence, if his people were given access to the machinery of government. Before the elections in 2003, MASSOB activists demonstrated under the slogan: "Igbo Presidency 2003 or Biafra".¹⁴¹ With one of their politicians on top, Igbo could secure their share of the 'national cake', yet their campaign for an Igbo president is not just about money. Their most pressing problem is that successive governments have failed to give them security. For those living outside Igboland, discrimination and the threat of massacres have become a regular feature of life: "anytime there is a problem in the north, they begin to kill the Igbo".¹⁴² When Muslim youths protested against the Mohammed caricatures in a Danish newspaper, they vented their anger on Igbo churches and businesses. Whenever they celebrated Jerusalem Day to show solidarity with the Palestinian people, Igbo had to fear for their lives.

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What drives Igbo separatism is a sense of complete unfairness. When MASSOB organised a stay-at-home strike against the federation on August 26, 2004, it was followed in all parts of Igboland. Even in Lagos and Kano, Igbo traders kept their shops closed. This does not mean that they have all joined the fight for Biafra. Most Igbo assume that the federal government will not allow them to secede, because their territory is too close to the Niger Delta and its oil fields. And even if Biafra could be achieved, it is not desirable to many.¹⁴³ Millions of Igbo, living as traders and artisans in other parts of the country, would have to abandon their investments and return to their overpopulated homeland. Despite their resentment against the Nigerian state, they do not have a genuine interest in secession, confederation or 'true federalism'. Since they form substantial 'settler' communities all over Nigeria, their interests would be protected best by a strong central government which guaranteed that citizens in all parts of the federation are treated equally. In principle, the present constitution would suit them well, if only they could force their way into the mainstream of Nigerian politics. Other Nigerians are, of course, aware that the Igbo would lose massively if Nigeria broke apart, so the campaign for Biafra is often dismissed as an empty threat. Igbo have little bargaining power. They are the first to be attacked and driven away, when communal clashes erupt in the North, but they have always returned. As a Northern magazine put it: "You can kill them easier than send them home. [...] they are essentially parasites. They only serve as middle men, buying from A to sell to B. 'So if they all go home who will buy from whom?'"¹⁴⁴

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MASSOB's strategy of non-violence has led into a dead end. The federal government did not make any concessions; instead it deployed anti-riot police and army units which killed

hundreds of MASSOB members. Ralph Uwaruikie assured his followers that help will come from abroad, since he is in close contact with Western governments and some friendly African countries. Representatives of Biafra will be granted observer status at the United Nations, and UN officials will come to hold a referendum. However, the international community does not care about Igbo marginalisation; its main concern is that Nigeria does not fall apart. From a MASSOB perspective it looks as if Western governments are denying them their rights. The European Union and the US made it possible for Montenegro with its 600,000 inhabitants to gain independence, while they force 25 million Igbo to live in a country where they are discriminated and prosecuted. Among all Nigerian peoples, the Igbo have the strongest attachment to Western civilisation, but – as a MASSOB functionary complained – the West does not appreciate that: "When some Palestinians are killed, it makes headlines in the Western media, but when 700 Igbo are executed, as happened in Onitsha last September and October [2006], the West looks the other way. The Whites do not help, when you are friendly to them. You have to attack them, like the Arabs do, before they send aid and seek to solve your conflicts".¹⁴⁵

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The crack-down on MASSOB has demoralised many of its members. They have been exposed to police brutality, but are not allowed to strike back. Moreover, their sacrifices for the Igbo cause seem to be in vain, since they have not got closer to any of their aims, be it Igbo presidency or Biafra. Some have given up nationalist politics, while others are demanding a revision of the strategy of non-violence. Leaders of the Eastern Peoples' Congress, who have split from MASSOB, insist that their members should have the right to defend themselves when hunted down by the police. Uwaruikie himself has never ruled out the option of taking up arms: "If the Yoruba start burning the houses of Igbo in Lagos, we shall raze the whole of Lagos and teach them that nobody has a monopoly of violence".¹⁴⁶ When his idol, ex-General Ojukwu, was about to be arrested by the State Security Service, a MASSOB speaker threatened to make Nigeria ungovernable.¹⁴⁷ However, nationalists in Igboland do not have the means to blackmail the federal government. A few kilometres to the south, in the Niger Delta, ethnic militias can put pressure on the president in Abuja by blowing up pipelines and other installations belonging to oil companies. The Igbo, in contrast, could only destroy their own infrastructure: government buildings and schools, power lines and bridges. They could also stage demonstrations and go on strike. But who in Abuja would care? When people in Southwest Nigeria embarked on a general strike, which paralysed much of Yorubaland in 1994, the central government remained unimpressed: "killings and economic sabotage caused by the south-west [...] only succeeded in affecting them. Who was killed? Whose houses were destroyed? Whose economy was destroyed? [...] We are thankful to them for killing themselves and crippling their economy".¹⁴⁸

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Igbo separatists could attack targets outside Igboland, but this would jeopardise their kith and kin in Lagos, Abuja and Kano. The Eastern Peoples Congress suggested to start evacuating the Igbo diaspora and then take the decisive steps for secession: "When you are challenging [...] the Nigerian nation, you don't allow your people to remain in the North and Western parts of the country, which we regard as enemy territories. [...] We don't want a situation where our people would be killed while trying to cross River Benue or River Niger, as was the case before the civil war [1967]".¹⁴⁹ It is most likely that a dismemberment of Nigeria would lead to large-scale hostilities and ethnic cleansing. For the Igbo who are major actors in a commercial network that stretches all over Nigeria, this would be a disaster, so they would be well advised not to pursue their Biafra project in earnest. However, their future will not be determined by a rational calculation of Igbo interests. MASSOB's call for secession has mobilised many young men who feel they have nothing to lose. The transition to democracy has not bettered the living conditions of ordinary Nigerians. Though government budgets are bigger than ever, thanks to the high prices for crude oil, an estimated 70 percent of Nigerians

are living on less than one dollar a day.¹⁵⁰ Something drastic has to happen, and the most radical break with the past would be the dissolution of Nigeria: "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".¹⁵¹ Nigeria has come to symbolise what is holding the Igbo back, while the short-lived Republic of Biafra which was destroyed in 1970 signifies the very opposite: all the achievements the Igbo could have made, if they had been allowed to develop on their own. Nationalist rhetoric gives an explanation for the failures of the past; it provides an answer to the disturbing question why millions of talented and industrious people cannot get out of their misery: "Left alone, the Igbo would soar to the stars. Nigeria has almost destroyed the Igbo dream".¹⁵² This dream has no specific African features. An independent Biafra, freed from the retarding influence of Nigeria and its Muslim oligarchy, would look like a "developed" European state: "very rich", with social welfare for the unemployed, pensions which are paid promptly, and old people's homes for the aged.¹⁵³

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The agitation for Biafra draws much support from Igbo émigrés in America and Europe who would not bear the costs of civil war. Within Igboland, the most enthusiastic MASSOB supporters are the urban poor, mostly young men who did not experience the horrors of the war.¹⁵⁴ Nationalist politics is attractive to them because it can be used, among others, to put popular pressure on the Igbo elite. Fighting for a common national interest presupposes "unity of mind, thoughts and aspiration for the entire Igbo race".¹⁵⁵ Igbo leaders should close ranks, put their personal interests behind and devote their political activities to the welfare of their people. Without such a commitment to a common cause, they will always use their political positions and business contracts with the Nigerian state to enrich themselves. In their villages, where they have redistributed parts of their ill-gotten wealth, they may be honoured for their generosity, but from a nationalist perspective they are sell-outs who profit from their collaboration with Igbo enemies. The split between youths and elders came to the fore during the 2007 elections, when Ohanaeze, together with the World Igbo Congress, endorsed the presidential campaign of Orji Kalu, the governor of Abia. Kalu was well-known as a sworn enemy of MASSOB, and notorious for his corruption. According to a report by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission which leaked to the press, he embezzled one-third of all the money that flowed from the federation account into the state coffers of Abia State.¹⁵⁶

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MASSOB's rejection of the Nigerian federation has deepened the divide between the young radicals and the political establishment. All Igbo in public offices have sworn loyalty to the state; they cannot declare openly for secession. Ralph Uwazuruike claimed: that the Igbo elite "condemn MASSOB in the open and come in the midnight to tell me to pardon them".¹⁵⁷ However, he is not in close contact with the political establishment. Most elders feel threatened by radical separatism: "Those of us who profess one Nigeria are in danger. The youths may eliminate us".¹⁵⁸ Separatist leaders have framed the struggle for Igbo interests in a way that makes the political elite, who has to participate in Nigerian politics, look like traitors. If MASSOB were just campaigning for a confederation, the elders could cooperate with them, make use of their militancy and try to protect them from state repression. However, as long as the youth insist on secession they make it easy for the central government to play them off against their elders. As a means to deepen the divisions between them, President Obasanjo gave order to the security forces to arrest any Igbo chief in whose area a Biafra flag is hoisted.¹⁵⁹

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Critics suggested that MASSOB leaders should give up their strategy of confrontation. As a first step towards autonomy, they should foster Igbo unity by reviving the cultural heritage, as the OPC has done in collaboration with Yoruba elders. However, the Igbo never had a strong

common tradition. What is labelled today a nation was in precolonial times just an accumulation of autonomous village groups, without any overarching religious or political institutions.¹⁶⁰ The only institution whose influence extended into much of Igboland, the oracle of Arochukwu, is seen today by most Igbo as a big fraud. For Igbo nationalists who are largely Christians, tradition is a divisive issue. When thousands of MASSOB followers assembled in Kano to pray for the release of their detained leader Uwazuruike, they allegedly had more than a hundred church ministers in attendance who confirmed the Igbo covenant with God and renounced their 'heathen' past: "We [...] have loved idols, worshipped money, shed blood, practised deception, maltreated widows, used sorcery, manifested pride, practiced enchantment and pulled each other down".¹⁶¹ Traditional forms of magic and religion which are identified with occult forms of aggression appear like an obstacle to Igbo nationalism, as they weaken Igbo unity and undermine social development. Many activists see the future Biafra as a "Christian State"¹⁶² and its inhabitants as the chosen people of God. MASSOB propaganda has revived the idea that the Igbo are one of the lost tribes of Israel. Having their roots outside Africa, it seems to be their destiny to attract hostilities at the hands of their neighbours: "The Igbos were branded as thieves, being greedy and clannish by their Nigeria brothers. In the same way in Europe, Hitler gave the Jews a bad name in order that he may exterminate them. The Igbos and the Jews have the same ancestral lineage and that is why they have similar experience".¹⁶³

6. Fighting for Resource Control in the Niger Delta

6.1. Inter-Ethnic Rivalry

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Since 1956, when oil production in the Delta started, Nigeria's government has earned more than 400 billion dollars in oil revenues, yet most people in the oil-producing areas live in poverty, with a decaying infrastructure. Peaceful protests did not impress the federal authorities; politicians in Abuja only began to make concessions when militants occupied oil platforms and blew up pipelines. With the beginning of democracy in 1999, the six Delta states have been allotted far more money from the federation account,¹⁶⁴ but most of it has been embezzled. Liberation movements, though they enjoyed a lot of popular support, were not able to use the new democratic institutions to bring their governors and local government chairmen to book. The additional payments, amounting to billions of dollars, have only intensified the reckless struggle for a share of the oil wealth.

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Although freedom fighters all over the Niger Delta confront the same enemy and although they articulate similar demands, they are organised along ethnic lines, as Ijaw National Congress, Urhobo National Assembly or Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People. Only a few self-determination groups claim to fight for the whole Delta population, among them the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force. Its leader, however, also posed as president of the Ijaw Youth Congress, and in a recent interview he called for an Ijaw state, not a Niger Delta Republic.¹⁶⁵ With about five million members, the Ijaw are the dominant group in large parts of the Delta, and their militias have been involved in various boundary wars: "Particularly, the Binis, Elemes, Ilajes, Itsekiris and Ikwerres have separately accused the Ijaws of using the *Egbesu Boys* to acquire oil rich lands belonging to others".¹⁶⁶ Ijaw nationalists declared that most of Nigeria's coastline, from Akwa Ibom in the east to Epe local government area in Lagos State, is Ijaw territory.¹⁶⁷ Members of other ethnic groups living in this area are regarded as settlers, without any right to the oil wealth: "All land and natural resources [...] within the Ijaw territory belong to the Ijaw communities".¹⁶⁸ Fear of Ijaw domination was the main reason why Ken Saro-Wiwa and other Ogoni leaders rejected the idea of a multi-ethnic Niger Delta Republic. As a minority within the Southern minorities, the Ogoni could not expect to be fairly treated. Lumped together with their rivals in one

administrative unit, Ogoni politicians have always felt being sidelined: "when elections come, the Ijaw always win".¹⁶⁹ Of course, both sides could agree upon mechanisms of power sharing, but where people do not trust each other, it seems better to disengage and let each nationality rule itself: "nobody should take care of the other; let everyone care for himself. [...] I would like to see [...] one Hausa state, one Tiv state, Idoma state, Ijaw state, one Ogoni state".¹⁷⁰

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According to Ken Saro-Wiwa, who was one of the first to call for a national conference, a restructured federation could work on a simple principle: "The only law to be in Nigeria is: You are free to rule yourself".¹⁷¹ However, the right of ethnic nationalities to be autonomous does not necessarily lead to a peaceful and equitable coexistence. Minority leaders pleaded that all ethnic groups, no matter how small, must enjoy the same rights. But who shall guarantee these rights, if power is decentralised? Without protection from the federation, the small Ogoni nation might learn that 20 million Igbo living North of them would not treat them on the basis of equality. Signs of future conflicts are already on the horizon. While campaigning for Igbo secession, MASSOB members circulated maps of a future Biafra Republic which encompassed five of the six Delta states. Representatives of the minorities warned Igbo nationalists not to include any Ijaw or Ibibio villages in their Biafra project, but MASSOB leader Uwazuruike insisted, at least initially, on his annexation plan: His organisation is going to liberate not only the Igbo but also the coastal people.¹⁷²

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When the Igbo made their first attempt at secession in 1967, they forcefully integrated most Delta communities into their Republic. Igbo hegemony only ended when federal troops, recruited mostly from Northern Nigeria, defeated the Biafran army. Since then, Igbo influence over the oil region has been kept in check by the other big ethnic groups in the federation, the Yoruba and Hausa-Fulani. For the minorities, it would be extremely risky to give up this protection, so Ken Saro-Wiwa and most other Niger Delta leaders never advocated a complete break-up of the federation. Their relationship towards the Nigerian state has been highly ambivalent. They resent the security forces which tend to behave like an army of occupation; at the same time they need the federation and its army in order to be protected from Igbo 'colonialism' and from their own inter-ethnic hostilities.

6.2. Fragmentation into Local Gangs

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Many Ijaw fighters have sworn allegiance to Egbesu, the Ijaw god of war, but such vows have not created much unity.¹⁷³ Ijaw communities are "culturally diverse", speaking some seven "mutually unintelligible languages", and despite attempts to forge them into a common front, it seems as if the scramble for oil money has "fragmented local identities" even further.¹⁷⁴ Villages, on whose territory oil is produced, do not want to share ownership of their resources with neighbouring communities, but try to market their property autonomously. With the help of armed youth, they put pressure on oil companies to enter into a 'partnership' with the local population and provide them with funds for development and social services. In return, they promise a conducive business environment where oil workers do not have to fear kidnapping and acts of sabotage. However, such cooperation between multinational companies and local communities does not bring much security; the influx of money has rather fuelled hostilities within clans and villages. Development projects, scholarships or cash payments have been handed over to 'representatives of the host community', but not all community members are content with the way benefits are distributed. Factions, who feel sidelined, invade the offices of Shell or Agip and inform the managers that their companies' payments were not sufficient or that they paid the wrong people.

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The right to control one's resources can be invoked by all sorts of groups and individuals. It does not help establishing any legitimate local authority, but serves to justify plunder. The governors of the Delta states whose administrations have embezzled billions of dollars are in the forefront of the struggle for self-determination and resource control: Violence in the Delta will only end, they say, when the state governments are allowed to market their resources autonomously and retain 50 percent of the rents paid by the oil companies. The greed of government officials has, of course, provoked popular anger. Young militants resent the political establishment that appropriates what belongs to the people; yet their militancy is just another way of achieving a similar aim: "those leading the violence do not necessarily have any commitment to a more equitable distribution of resources, beyond securing their own share".¹⁷⁵ Gang members who attack oil installations or take hostages try to open a 'dialogue' with oil companies in order to get a contract as security personnel or to be employed as 'ghost workers' who are paid for doing nothing. Bigger gangs often prefer a 'direct' form of 'resource control' which does not need negotiations with foreign managers. They simply tap pipelines and sell the stolen oil or petrol. Or they try to control trade routes and extort taxes.

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Gang leaders are under pressure to keep the loyalty of their followers and to attract new ones. In order to generate income and improve the status of the group, they may be forced to seek alliances with politicians or traditional rulers, with oil companies or liberation movements. Even the most militant youth leaders who abuse the ruling elite as traitors and collaborators can be quite pragmatic. Asari Dokubo, who led the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force, was hailed as the "Mandela of the Ijaw people"¹⁷⁶ or as an African "Robin Hood",¹⁷⁷ yet he was a member of the ruling PDP, with close contacts to the governor of Rivers State. During the election campaign in early 2003, Governor Odili armed him and his boys to intimidate members of the opposition.¹⁷⁸ After the elections, the governor fell out with him and sided with a rival warlord, while Asari took a radical secessionist stance, hostile to all authorities which were collaborating with the federation: "Nigeria [...] only exists in the imagination of the bandits".¹⁷⁹ Pacts between politicians and armed gangs are fragile, based on short-term interests, not on ideological convictions. Each actor can enter into an alliance with anybody else, so there is not much scope for loyalty and trust. As militia leaders act unpredictably, depending on their personal fortunes, they come to resemble tricksters. The most famous freedom fighter, Asari Dokubo, is a case in point: Born as the first son of a high court judge, he studied law but had to leave university because of "academic deficiency". While still at university, he became a reborn Christian and joined the Deeper Life Bible Church, later set his eyes on Marxist literature, then converted to Islam and assumed the name Mujahid: fighter in a jihad. He said that the money he made from oil smuggling and extortion rackets only served to finance the fight for the survival of the Ijaw people. But he drove a Hummer jeep and lived in a luxury villa, when he was not in the bush with his boys.¹⁸⁰

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Before Asari Dokubo was arrested in September 2005, he claimed to have 2000 fighters at his disposal. In areas under his control he could decide which elder became a chief.¹⁸¹ Yet he was not the commander of a disciplined rebel army but the leader of a loose coalition of local gangs. In Rivers State alone there are more than a hundred gangs operating under bizarre names, like Icelanders, Greenlanders, Palace Boys, Ku Klux Klan, Germans or Vultures.¹⁸² Some of them were formed by students in the 1990s, as campus cults whose members were tied to each other by oaths of secrecy. They never had a strong commitment to any political cause, and when they joined a liberation movement like the NDPVF, it may have been "in an effort to increase their access to weapons" which they could use for their own operations.¹⁸³ Since Asari Dokubo had to consider the diverse interests of his allies, he was not a reliable political actor who could honour agreements. When he returned from the federal capital Abuja, where he had signed a peace deal with president Obasanjo, his boys received

him with mistrust. They assumed that the government had bribed him and that he had pocketed all the money for himself.¹⁸⁴

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The escalation of violence may force the oil companies to abandon their investments in Nigeria, but their withdrawal would not benefit any party. Many militants, it seems, are aware that their rebellion has gone out of control, so there are attempts to restrain the use of violence. The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) which started operations in January 2006 has condemned all commercial forms of hostage taking and sabotage. Oil installation must not be vandalised to extort a few jobs or some money from oil managers. Violence is only legitimate if it helps the Niger Delta people to negotiate a political solution, i.e. to extract concessions which improve the living conditions of all inhabitants. MEND activists have kidnapped a number of expatriates, but refused to release them for a ransom; instead they insisted on their political demands. Moreover, they announced a principled stand when dealing with the local political elite: "we shall kidnap our governors one by one. [...] They can go and buy all the aircraft, we will use our rocket launchers to bring them down, we will start to hold them and their accomplices hostage until they bring all the money they have stolen back to the masses".¹⁸⁵ However, such declarations were not followed by a consistent strategy. Instead of insisting on public accountability, MEND fought for the release of a former governor of Bayelsa State, an Ijaw, who had been arrested in London for money laundering and extradited to the Nigerian authorities.

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Another key demand of MEND and affiliated groups like the Joint Revolutionary Council and the Martyrs Brigades was the release of Asari Dokubo. When he was set free after two years in detention, he called upon the militants to renounce hostage-taking and suspend the armed struggle. He even promised to act as "star prosecution witness" in a trial against Henry Okah, the leader of a MEND faction.¹⁸⁶ Like other militants who have been co-opted by the state, Asari has lost influence on the fighters in the creeks. A group calling itself 'Authentic MEND' distanced itself from leaders who rode to prominence on the back of their groups' militancy and used this prestige to enter into shady deals with government: "The so-called leaders of our group have betrayed our cause using the platform [of MEND] to negotiate their ways to offices (and) lining their pockets with millions, while we remain in the creeks as soldiers of circumstance. They say kidnapping is now criminal because they dine and wine with government officials".¹⁸⁷

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Without reliable leaders, the liberation movements have been disintegrating further. Federal government and the oil companies have enhanced this process of fragmentation by offering material inducements to leaders who are willing to cooperate. Some of them were given scholarships to study in England or USA, others were appointed to government committees or offered electoral tickets by the ruling People's Democratic Party to become local government chairmen.¹⁸⁸ Favouring some of the militant groups by giving them contracts to protect oil installations has been another way of creating disunity. Gangs of unemployed youth, desperate to generate income, compete with each other for privileged access to oil companies and government patronage. Thus they set aside political goals and pursue their immediate particularistic interests. This pragmatic or cynical attitude towards the 'struggle' is a major impediment to a political solution. In order to negotiate a settlement with politicians from other parts of Nigeria, militant youths and their elders would have to present a strong, united front, based on common interests and demands. Without a reform agenda to which all armed gangs are committed, leaders cannot guarantee that their followers will adhere to agreements reached with the federal government.¹⁸⁹

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Due to the proliferation of gang violence, the Nigerian federation has lost about 60 billion dollars in oil revenues in the last nine years.¹⁹⁰ If this money had been used to develop the infrastructure of the Niger Delta, its inhabitants would have had little reason to take up arms. However, it is unlikely that militants will submit to a peace deal that allows oil companies to resume production at full capacity, in return for massive investments in schools, hospitals and other public utilities. Gang leaders that can extort money by hostage-taking, oil-bunkering or sabotage have decoupled themselves from the interests of local communities. As they do not depend on support of the population, they turn into warlords who do not have to listen to the people on whose territory they operate.¹⁹¹

7. In Search of Common Rules

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Intellectuals speaking in support of ethnic militias present them as civil society organisations which fight in concert with "other progressive social forces" for the liberation of all oppressed peoples: "ethnic militancy is a contribution to democracy and diversity".¹⁹² Western concepts of citizenship and individual human rights are not suited to solve the country's crisis. Nigerians have experimented for decades with constitutional models imported from the West, but did not succeed in managing ethnic diversity. Their Fourth Republic, like its predecessors, has failed to "organize a cultural hodgepodge into a workable polity".¹⁹³ So the advocates of a National Conference have good reasons to call for a fundamental revision of the constitutional order. Democracy may work better in smaller communities which are ethnically homogeneous, with common traditions and ties of moral obligations. Moreover, ethnic autonomy looks like a solid basis for a peaceful federation: "if an ethnic group is treated justly and democratically, it does not usually contemplate secession".¹⁹⁴ Niger Delta activists, for instance, suggested solving the controversy over oil resources fairly and "democratically".¹⁹⁵ However, when dealing with autonomous ethnic and religious groups, democratic solutions do not work. The inhabitants of the Delta states form less than 20 percent of Nigeria's population. If a referendum were held, they would be outvoted with their demand that 50 percent of the oil revenues should be remitted to the oil producing areas. When the Obasanjo government organised a National Political Reform Conference to discuss possible changes of the constitution, a majority of the delegates rejected the 50 percent quota. In protest, the representatives of the Delta people staged a walk out, and the conference ended in July 2005 without a solution to Nigeria's most pressing problems. After the talks had ended, some political leaders in the Delta approached Asari Dokubo to resume the armed struggle.¹⁹⁶ Violence is an essential element in their bargaining strategy. To gain concessions, they have to convince the majority groups that it will be too costly for them to disregard the interests of the oil minorities.

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Nigeria's fractured elites are in an unenviable position. They cannot settle their conflicts through the present democratic institutions, but taking ethnic autonomy as the basis for a new constitution is not a realistic alternative, as it makes agreements even more difficult. If ethnic nationalities are free to decide how they want to associate with others, they can not be expected to accept majority decisions. Why should they submit to the will of other peoples? A new social contract which stipulates rights and duties of autonomous groups could only be entered on the basis of voluntary decisions: "if Nigeria is desirable, it has to be negotiated, not imposed".¹⁹⁷ Delegates of a National Conference would have to design a political order acceptable to all, but this is not achievable.

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Leaders of ethnic militias and other self-determination groups have met occasionally in order to coordinate their campaign for a National Conference. As they have all suffered from state repression, they conjure mutual solidarity, but there is not much trust between them. Most

militias have clashed with others, and their leaders have freely accused rival ethnic groups of planning genocide.¹⁹⁸ Ralph Uwazuruike and Asari Dokubo, who are united in their demand to break up the federation, claimed to have a "perfect working relationship", yet they admitted that their alliance rests on shaky ground: "The enemy of my enemy is my best friend."¹⁹⁹ Both are aware that ethnic autonomy is not a recipe for peace. With the end of the federation, they would still face the same controversial issues: What is the legal status of settlers? Who will protect ethnic diasporas? Who controls natural resources and trade routes? Without a third party that can guarantee an agreement, Ijaw and Igbo politicians would find it difficult to settle their differences. Their first battle ground could be Port Harcourt which belongs to one of the Delta states, but has a large population of Igbo-speakers. Meetings of self-determination groups have not produced agreements on how to contain the violence between them. No prominent leader has ruled out ethnic cleansing against 'settler' communities.²⁰⁰ They risk large-scale violence, without having mechanisms for conflict resolution that could replace the present democratic institutions, yet they continue their campaign for autonomy. When I asked how ethnic republics or autonomous regions will solve their conflicts, I was told: by dialogue.

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The chance to reach a consensus decreases when some actors define self-determination in religious terms. Sharia activists who declare that God's law is supreme are not obliged to follow any man-made law which is not in line with their divine rules. They may sign treaties with non-Muslims, but legal and constitutional concessions to infidels will bind them at best temporarily, so agreements with them can not be trusted. Moreover, Sharia enthusiasts renounce those 'pagan' African traditions which they used to have in common with their fellow-citizens. This further erodes trust. Citizens are losing the feeling that they share moral and legal convictions on which a common polity can be built. Among self-determination groups in the South and the Middle Belt, African traditions are more appreciated, yet they are not of much help when looking for alternatives to European models of statehood. They are used to harden communal identities and to forge together militiamen, but they do not provide any political models how autonomous ethnic groups can associate peacefully and equitably. The only precolonial systems which could pacify a large territory with a multitude of peoples, were empires or kingdoms like Oyo, Benin or Kwararafa. They were not built on consensus, but rested on ethnic hierarchies through which dominant groups at the centre ruled over weaker ones at the periphery. Representatives of ethnic minorities fear that such direct forms of subjugation may return in postmodern Nigeria: "One tribe can regard another as conquered people and make them subjects".²⁰¹

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Interest in African traditions is most pronounced among Yoruba nationalists. The OPC national anthem focuses on the idea of a cultural revival: "Time to go back home, Oduduwa sons/ If we can't see the way forward/ Ought we not to go back home?"²⁰² However, Yoruba patriots are aware that their precolonial past was overshadowed by civil war and that they may descend into violence again. By propagating a national culture, they aspire to an 'unflinching unity' that never existed. Given the strife and fragmentation of the past, Yoruba nationalism is faced with a paradoxical task: revive common traditions to make sure that history does not repeat itself. OPC leader Fasehun strongly identifies with modernity and enlightenment, defining his people as part of Nigeria's "westernised progressive South" whose culture is "irreconcilable" with the "traditionalist, conservative North".²⁰³ For him as for other nationalists, African traditions have a very limited function. They are not a guide for the future but a "resource for political engineering" used to construct some sense of belonging.²⁰⁴

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Among the myths which inspire OPC members are ideas about their ancient warrior culture. Physical strength, courage and other martial virtues have become precious means of protecting one's dignity and independence, hence conflict 'resolution' by violence is widely accepted.²⁰⁵ Ruthless fighters like the original Bakassi Boys are seen as heroic figures, whose

warrior ethos is celebrated in popular video productions.²⁰⁶ Nigerians who reflect on the changing attitudes towards violence are insecure how to assess them: "Is it a shift 'back' to the values of the world of warlords?"²⁰⁷ Pride about the resurrection of a warrior culture is often mixed with a sense of gloom, as people fear that violence will get out of control: "we may inexorably be gravitating back into barbarism reminiscen[t] of the pre-colonial era".²⁰⁸

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Nigeria's academics and human rights activists are divided when assessing the consequences of ethnic nationalism. Some want to "minimize the political importance of ethnicity and other sectional or particularistic identities",²⁰⁹ arguing that it is better "to replace cultural rights with civic rights"²¹⁰ and push for nation-building as the only way to create bonds of trust and reciprocity that will overcome ethnic and religious animosities. They agree to some extent with Western critics of autochthony discourses who see the discrimination against ethnic outsiders as "shameful" and "perverse".²¹¹ In order to prevent communal conflicts over citizenship rights, a Human Rights Watch report has urged Nigeria's government to delete all references to indigenes and non-indigenes from the constitution.²¹² Yet it is unlikely that Nigerians will grant each other equal rights. There is, as Human Rights Watch acknowledges, an "increasingly widespread notion that only indigenes of any given place have the right to hold political power".²¹³

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Among the Yoruba, the "sovereignty of the original indigenes of the land" is so widely accepted that it was included in the Yoruba Agenda.²¹⁴ The rift between indigenes and non-indigenes has widened in all parts of Nigeria, yet there are forces which work against an escalation of communal violence. Politicians in Yoruba-, Igbo- and Hausaland have lost interest in ethnic and religious mobilisation. Thanks to the high prices for crude oil, they are profiting from Nigeria's oil rents like never before. The opportunity to embezzle billions of dollars each year has generated a strong interest in stabilising the federation. Under military rule, large sections of the elites felt excluded from the wealth of the nation, whereas today no major region or ethnic elite is left out. Olusegun Obasanjo did not rule as a Yoruba president or as a Christian president; his government distributed the state resources more or less evenly and sought to balance ethno-religious interests.

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When the government arrested the leaders of OPC, MASSOB and NDPVF in September and October 2006, they knew that they would not encounter much resistance (save in the Niger Delta). Militias and vigilantes had lost support among local elites and – most likely – among ordinary citizens as well. Whether ethnic and religious violence will flare up again, depends to a large extent on Nigeria's fragmented political class. Will they find ways of sharing power and resources, or will they resort to violence? Compromises can only emerge through informal, personal agreements which have to be renegotiated steadily. Without the security of institutions, it needs a lot of self-restraint to honour such agreements. President Obasanjo facilitated elite pacts since he acted, more than any other head of state before him, as a 'detribalised' politician. His successor Umaru Yar'Adua, whom Obasanjo had handpicked, has so far followed this policy of de-escalation.

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¹ Ukiwo 2003b: 115; Agbu 2004: 5, 13; Babawale 2001: 4-5.

² Agbu 2004: 5; Pratten 2008: 1; Guichaoua 2007: 92.

³ Kukah 2002: 23

⁴ Economist Intelligence Unit 2005: 13.

⁵ Sesay 2003: VII.

⁶ Sesay 2003: 78, 134, 135.

⁷ Sesay 2003: 23, 117, 119, 130-132, 137. – The data basis of the survey is probably too small for a detailed comparison between regions. But the figures indicate a broad trend which is noticeable in many parts of the country.

⁸ Sesay 2003: 104, 112.

⁹ Sesay 2003: 112; Agbu 2004: 28; Jinadu 2004: 15.

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- ¹⁰ Cf. Abrahams 2007: 410.
- ¹¹ Higazi 2008: 119, 132.
- ¹² Maier 2000: 180.
- ¹³ Press release by the Zamfara Government, in Hotline [a journal from Kaduna], 3 June 2000: 24.
- ¹⁴ Tell [Lagos], 26 March 2001: 43.
- ¹⁵ Hyden 1999: 189.
- ¹⁶ Osaghae 2005: 103; Jinadu 2004: 16.
- ¹⁷ Dibua 2005: 7; Nwankwor 2004: 318.
- ¹⁸ Jinadu 2004: 14.
- ¹⁹ Claude Ake, in The News [Lagos], 25 November 1996, quoted in Douglas/Ola 2003: 41.
- ²⁰ Campaign for Democracy, 1998, in Ibrahim 2002: 203; Adekson 2004: 66; Ejobowah 2000: 31; Sagay 2004: 95.
- ²¹ Ben Nwabueze, in Newswatch [Lagos], 23 October 2000: 12; Sklar 2004: 46.
- ²² Patriots 2001: 3; Sklar 2004: 46.
- ²³ Opata 2004: 49.
- ²⁴ The Week, 19 November 2001: 34.
- ²⁵ Dr. Joshua Maina, Leader of the Middle Belt Movement in Gombe State, in Our Vision. A Pan Middle-Belt News Magazine [Kaduna], January 2002: 23.
- ²⁶ Sagay 2004: 95.
- ²⁷ Ejobowah 2000: 32; Jinadu 2004: 15; Bach 1997.
- ²⁸ Nigeria's 1999 constitution gives official recognition to the popular distinction between 'indigenes' and 'non-indigenes'. Members of ethnic groups that 'belong' to a certain state or local government enjoy prerogatives in their home area. They are entitled to pass laws which discriminate against non-indigenes when filling administrative positions, granting scholarships and free schooling, or allocating housing and agricultural land (cf. Bach 1997: 337-342).
- ²⁹ Yoruba Agenda 2005: 32.
- ³⁰ The Sharia Penal Code of Zamfara, which was adopted with minor modifications in most other Sharia states, rules: "Whoever [...] takes part in the worship or invocation of any juju [...] shall be punished with death" (Zamfara State of Nigeria 2000: Section 406). The term 'juju' is defined in such a broad sense that it covers all sorts of African religious practices: "'Juju' includes the worship or invocation of any object or being other than Allah" (Zamfara State of Nigeria 2000: Section 405).
- ³¹ Tell, 17 April 2006: 35.
- ³² Newswatch [Lagos], 30 November 1998: 11.
- ³³ Africa Today [London], February 2000: 25.
- ³⁴ Tell [Lagos], 31 January 2000: 19.
- ³⁵ Tell, 13 December 1999: 19.
- ³⁶ Adekson 2004: 122; Akinyele 2001: 627; Human Rights Watch 2003a: 23.
- ³⁷ Adekson 2004: 133.
- ³⁸ Human Rights Watch 2003a: 14-16; Tell, 13 December 1999: 15.
- ³⁹ Adekson 2004: 122.
- ⁴⁰ Ikelegbe 2005: 500.
- ⁴¹ The Source [Lagos], 30 October 2000: 11; Newswatch, 6 November 2000: 23.
- ⁴² Newswatch, 30 October 2000: 22; Human Rights Watch 2003a: 16-18.
- ⁴³ Dr. Datti Ahmed, in The News, 15 May 2000: 25.
- ⁴⁴ Hotline, 18 February 2001: 14; Newswatch, 4 December 2000: 19.
- ⁴⁵ Dr. Datti Ahmed, in The News, 15 May 2000: 25.
- ⁴⁶ The News [Lagos], 31. 1. 2000: 19.
- ⁴⁷ Human Rights Watch 2003a: 1, 41, 43-44.
- ⁴⁸ Vanguard [Lagos], 31 March 2002: 21; Reno 2003: 297; Financial Times [London], 23/24 June 2001; Human Rights Watch 2003a: 49.
- ⁴⁹ Newswatch, 6 November 2000: 23.
- ⁵⁰ Tell, 31 January 2000: 16, 17, 19; Newswatch, 6 November 2000: 21, 23; cf. Guichaoua 2007: 100.
- ⁵¹ The News, 13 November 2000: 23.
- ⁵² Tell, 7 August 2000: 33; Newswatch, 6 November 2000: 23. – According to Dr. Fasehun, Wole Soyinka was a member of OPC's "intellectual vanguard" (Adekson 2004: 112).
- ⁵³ The News, 4 December 2000: 15.
- ⁵⁴ The News, 15 May 2000: 18, 20.
- ⁵⁵ Tell, 20 November 2000: 25.
- ⁵⁶ Nolte 2004: 77.

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- ⁵⁷ The expansion of the OPC into the security sector was facilitated, since already existing groups of vigilantes, neighbourhood watches and night guards joined the OPC (Nolte 2008: 101; Fourchard 2008: 34-35).
- ⁵⁸ Human Rights Watch 2003a: 8; Guichaoua 2006: 13-14. – At the height of its war against criminals, the OPC claimed to keep 2000 suspects in detention. (The News, 13 November 2000: 23) According to Adebani (2005: 360) "extra-judicial killings of suspected armed robbers became the rule". A photo in The News (10 September 2001: 38, 41) showed OPC activists nailing a suspected robber to a cross. A detailed description of OPC methods is contained in Human Rights Watch 2003a: 10-35.
- ⁵⁹ Nigerian Tribune [Ibadan], 9 August 2001.
- ⁶⁰ Guardian [Lagos], 1 January 2006: 37.
- ⁶¹ Akinyele 2007: 147-148, 151.
- ⁶² Guichaoua 2006: 12-13.
- ⁶³ Guichaoua 2006: 14.
- ⁶⁴ Human Rights Watch 2003a: 8.
- ⁶⁵ Adekson 2004: 111; The Punch [Lagos], 4 November 2005: 16.
- ⁶⁶ Another explanation was given by an OPC activist interviewed by Guichaoua (2006: 12): When the military killed about 300 OPC members in Mushin, a suburb of Lagos, "we went back to recruit all sorts of people, area boys (street boys) and any kind of person that was interested".
- ⁶⁷ Nolte 2004: 78.
- ⁶⁸ Adebani 2005: 349; see also Ajala 2006: 140-141.
- ⁶⁹ Gani Adams, in Adebani 2005: 344.
- ⁷⁰ Adebani 2005: 351, 350.
- ⁷¹ Adebani 2005: 349.
- ⁷² Nolte 2007: 226-228.
- ⁷³ Colonel Abubakar Umar, in Tell, 13 November 2000: 25.
- ⁷⁴ Ajayi/Smith 1971: 9; Peel 2000: 27-46.
- ⁷⁵ Afolayan 2006: 302.
- ⁷⁶ Faseun 2002: 6.
- ⁷⁷ Adekson 2004: 113-114.
- ⁷⁸ Nigerian Tribune, 1 December 2005.
- ⁷⁹ Adebani 2005: 354. – Islamic and Christian piety have become such important elements of daily life that they cannot be eclipsed by a revival of African roots, but must be integrated into Yoruba nationalism. The OPC has founded units of Christian and Islamic Prayer Warriors with the sole aim of praying for Yoruba self-determination. A lot of social engineering is employed to neutralise the religious divide. Gani Adams, a practicing Muslim, has also a Christian prayer room in his house where he and his family observe night vigils. (Adebani 2005: 352-354).
- ⁸⁰ Governor Tinubu, in Tell, 23 September 2002: 46.
- ⁸¹ Quoted in Ado-Kurawa 2000: 194.
- ⁸² Tell, 17 April 2000, S. 48.
- ⁸³ Hotline, 9 April 2000, S. 37.
- ⁸⁴ Reno 2003: 296; Adekson 2004: 109.
- ⁸⁵ Hotline, 16 April 2000: 30.
- ⁸⁶ Wole Soyinka, in Freedom House 2002: 9, 56. – In Lagos, where an equal number of Muslims and Christians have to coexist, Sharia clashes could be far more destructive than in the cities of Northern Nigeria: "I can see the blood flowing in southern and northern Sudan being chickenfeed, compared to what will happen in this country" (Brigadier Benjamin Adekunle, in Tell, 27 March 2000: 17).
- ⁸⁷ Ado-Kurawa 2000: 271.
- ⁸⁸ Sulaiman 1986: 11.
- ⁸⁹ Reynolds 1997: 56-60.
- ⁹⁰ Committee 2000: 47, 17.
- ⁹¹ Sklar 2004: 43.
- ⁹² Last 2008: 58-60.
- ⁹³ Harnischfeger 2004.
- ⁹⁴ Casey 2007: 92-92.
- ⁹⁵ Alli 2005: 66.
- ⁹⁶ Albert 2001: 293.
- ⁹⁷ A director in the Ministry for Religious Affairs, Zamfara, in Maier 2000: 190.
- ⁹⁸ Tabiu 2001: 10. – It is disputed among Muslims in the North, to which extent their states shall be Islamized, yet there is not much controversy among them regarding the status of settlers from the South. Even Shehu

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- Sani, leader of the Civil Rights Congress in Kaduna, told me: Igbo have no right to meddle into politics. They are here as traders (personal communication, Kaduna, 3 March 2001).
- ⁹⁹ Mazrui 2001: 2, 4, 8; Ahmed Sani, Governor of Zamfara State, in Tell, 8 September 2003: 39.
- ¹⁰⁰ Casey 2007: 106; Last 2008: 51.
- ¹⁰¹ Miles 2003: 65-69. – "La culture domestique ,traditionelle' que j'ai connue il y a trente ans n'existe plus" (Last 2000: 148).
- ¹⁰² Tell, 10 April 2000: 25.
- ¹⁰³ The Emir of Gwandu, in The News, 24 April 2000: 18. – The Sharia Penal Code, on whose basis state-controlled Hisba operate, explicitly criminalises any behaviour that is interdicted in the holy texts of Islam: "Any act or omission which is not specifically mentioned in this Sharia Penal Code but is otherwise declared to be an offence under the Qur'an, Sunnah and Ijtihad of the Maliki school [...] shall be punishable: a) With imprisonment for a term which may extend to 5 years, or b) With caning, or c) With fine which may extend to N 5,000.00" (Zamfara State of Nigeria 2000: Section 92).
- ¹⁰⁴ Fwatshak 2003: 19; Tell, 16 February 2004: 24.
- ¹⁰⁵ Casey 2007: 104. – Murray Last (2008: 52) was told that "anti-*hisba* gangs are available for hire".
- ¹⁰⁶ Paden 2005: 166.
- ¹⁰⁷ Harnischfeger 2008: 119-154; Kukah 2002: 5; Mazrui 2001: 2.
- ¹⁰⁸ Olaniyi 2005: 60-63. – The Hisba in Zamfara was expected to enforce a "ban on gossiping, deceit, and distrust" (Maier 2000: 190).
- ¹⁰⁹ Peters 2003: 29; Gwarzo 2003: 307.
- ¹¹⁰ Casey 2007: 104.
- ¹¹¹ Adamu 2008: 148-149.
- ¹¹² Tell, 27 December 1999: 10.
- ¹¹³ At least 60 thieves were sentenced to amputation, but only three cases are known in which this sentence was carried out. (Human Rights Watch 2004: 36-37) Without its brutal punishments, Sharia did not work as an effective deterrent against violent crime. Governor Sani of Zamfara had to admit that his state was plagued by a "crime wave", though he blamed "some bad elements from outside the state" for it (Tell, 16 September 2002: 68).
- ¹¹⁴ Tell, 30 May 2005: 66-67.
- ¹¹⁵ Tell, 26 April 2004: 22-26; Newswatch, 11 October 2004: 22-25.
- ¹¹⁶ The News, 27 March 2000: 11.
- ¹¹⁷ Meagher 2007: 100, 102-103.
- ¹¹⁸ The News, 27 March 2000: 16.
- ¹¹⁹ Newswatch, 20 March 2000: 16.
- ¹²⁰ Meagher 2007: 96, 100, 102.
- ¹²¹ Williams 2003: 110; Meagher 2007: 98.
- ¹²² Newswatch, 14 May 2001: 42.
- ¹²³ Amnesty International 2002: 9.
- ¹²⁴ Meagher 2007: 97, 99; Baker 2002: 224; Smith 2007: 168.
- ¹²⁵ Meagher 2007: 98.
- ¹²⁶ McCall 2004: 59; Akaruese 2003: 215-216.
- ¹²⁷ Horton 1981: 96-97.
- ¹²⁸ Ekeh 2002: 5.
- ¹²⁹ Williams 2003: 111. Sgt. Obot Williams (rtd.) was Director of Operations of the Bakassi Boys in Abia.
- ¹³⁰ Tell 18 December 2000: 34.
- ¹³¹ Newswatch 18 September 2000: 16.
- ¹³² Onyeeonoru 2003: 375.
- ¹³³ Meagher 2007: 103, 89.
- ¹³⁴ Ukiwo 2003a: 146, 148.
- ¹³⁵ Dr. Ukiwo, personal communication, Port Harcourt, 17 January 2007.
- ¹³⁶ Smith 2004: 445.
- ¹³⁷ Human Rights Watch 2002: 36.
- ¹³⁸ The News, 17 April 2000: 16, 13.
- ¹³⁹ Insider Weekly [Lagos], 20 December 2004: 28.
- ¹⁴⁰ Ralph Uwazuruike, in The News, 17 April 2000: 14.
- ¹⁴¹ The News, 7 February 2005: 18 (photo).
- ¹⁴² M. C. K. Ajuluchuku, in Newswatch, 10 April 2000: 14; Onu 2001: 6.
- ¹⁴³ Smith 2007: 195, 205.
- ¹⁴⁴ Hotline, 3 April 2000: 20.

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- ¹⁴⁵ Interview, Awka, 2 December 2006.
- ¹⁴⁶ The News, 22 May 2000: 18.
- ¹⁴⁷ The Week, 27 September 2004: 13. – A couple of times, MASSOB members were involved in armed clashes with the police, army and militant groups like the Bakassi Boys. Moreover, there are reports that they kidnapped wealthy Igbo, whom they accused of collaboration with the Nigerian state, though the leaders of the organization have denied these charges (Obianyo 2007: 8).
- ¹⁴⁸ Abubakar Buba Galadima, a Minister of the Abacha regime, in TSM. The Sunday Magazine [Lagos], 4 December 1994, S. 17.
- ¹⁴⁹ Longinus Orjiakor, in Insider Weekly, 19 January 2004: 32.
- ¹⁵⁰ Economist [London], 21 October 2006: 50.
- ¹⁵¹ Ralph Uwazuruike, in The News, 17 April 2000: 16.
- ¹⁵² Obi Nwakanma, in Smith 2007: 194.
- ¹⁵³ Weekly Hammer [an Igbo newsletter], Vol. 1 No. 3, 2000: 4.
- ¹⁵⁴ Obianyo 2007: 9.
- ¹⁵⁵ Obinna Uzoh, a politician from Anambra, in Newswatch, 1 April 2002: 31.
- ¹⁵⁶ Tell, 15 May 2006: 20.
- ¹⁵⁷ Tell, 15 November 2004: 34.
- ¹⁵⁸ Dr. Ezeife, in Tell, 11 October 2004: 21.
- ¹⁵⁹ The News, 7 February 2005: 18.
- ¹⁶⁰ Harneit-Sievers 2006: 16, 112.
- ¹⁶¹ Eastern Sunset [an Igbo newsletter], Vol. 3 No. 38: 6.
- ¹⁶² Pilot [an Igbo newsletter], Vol. 7 No. 14, 2004: 5.
- ¹⁶³ Ibid.:3; Smith 2007: 206-207.
- ¹⁶⁴ Given the high prices for crude oil, Nigeria has earned more than 50 billion Dollars in oil and gas revenues in 2006. (Economist, 26 April 2007) Thirteen percent of this amount is paid directly to the oil producing states. Under the military regime, the quota was only three percent.
- ¹⁶⁵ Asari Dokubo, in Tell, 2 July 2007: 32.
- ¹⁶⁶ Akaruese 2003: 223.
- ¹⁶⁷ Ijaw Ethnic Nationality Rights and Protection Organisation of Nigeria, in Akaruese 2003: 223.
- ¹⁶⁸ Kaiama Declaration, passed in 1998 by a meeting of 5000 Ijaw youth, in Agbu 2004: 52.
- ¹⁶⁹ Ken Saro-Wiwa, in Newswatch, 18 April 1994: 18; Saro-Wiwa 1998 [1993]: 356.
- ¹⁷⁰ Saro-Wiwa 1998 [1993]: 356, 357. – As owners of their aboriginal land, the Ogoni (or their leaders) claim the right to expel non-indigenes. When Ogoni militants clashed with neighbouring Andoni, Ken Saro Wiwa refused to sign a peace accord which would have allowed Andoni who had fled Ogoniland to return, arguing that "the Andoni and other ethnic groups with which the Ogoni have conflicts were being used by the federal government and the oil companies to set up the Ogoni for annihilation" (Newswatch, 18 April 1994: 12).
- ¹⁷¹ Saro-Wiwa 1998 [1993]: 355.
- ¹⁷² The News, 17 April 2000: 14-15; Newswatch, 29 May 2000: 13; The Source, 30 August 2004: 33.
- ¹⁷³ Ifeka 2006: 723-725, 732-733. – Ijaw nationalism, which revives elements of traditional religion, also draws on Christian motifs and a global ecological discourse. "Total freedom" from foreign oppression is linked to notions of ethnic purity, to religious millenarianism and to a reconciliation with nature: "PHARAOH let our people go! [...] A day shall come, the trees in the forest, the animals in the bush, and the fishes in the river will demand for their right, when the physical human beings refuse. The broad daylight will turn to darkness and there is going to be a big storm that will erase and up-root whatever that does not belong to the Ijo people out of their territory. Then the Ijo flag will be physically hoisted to fly that day – that is the solution to the Nigerian problem. God bless our fatherland. During this period the Ijo and all their neighbours – the Urhobo, the Isoko, and the Itsekiri will unite and hug one another for love, peace, prosperity, unity and true justice" (W. N. Digifa [2003: 123], Chairman of Supreme Egbesu Assembly; cf. Geschiere [2004], on how autochthony discourses were promoted by international NGOs).
- ¹⁷⁴ Nwajiaku 2005: 459-460.
- ¹⁷⁵ Human Rights Watch 2003b: 15.
- ¹⁷⁶ Comrade Joseph Eva, co-ordinator of Ijaw Monitoring Group, in Guardian, 20 January 2007: 52.
- ¹⁷⁷ Jimo 2005.
- ¹⁷⁸ Eberlein 2006: 587-589; Human Rights Watch 2007: 81; Isumonah/Tantua/James 2005: 78.
- ¹⁷⁹ Tell, 18 October 2004: 17.
- ¹⁸⁰ Tell, 18, 10. 2004: 15-18, 24, 26; Ghazvinian 2007: 54-60.
- ¹⁸¹ Tell, 27 September 2004: 16; Ekong 2004: 18.
- ¹⁸² Human Rights Watch 2005: 4.
- ¹⁸³ Human Rights Watch 2005: 4; Tell, 27 September 2004: 17.

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- ¹⁸⁴ Mason 2004: 2.
- ¹⁸⁵ Daily Sun [Lagos], 16 December 2006.
- ¹⁸⁶ Vanguard, 2 April 2008.
- ¹⁸⁷ Quoted in International Crisis Group 2007: 3.
- ¹⁸⁸ International Crisis Group 2007: 3; Ukiwo 2007: 604-605.
- ¹⁸⁹ International Crisis Group 2007: 3.
- ¹⁹⁰ Africa Research Bulletin. Economic Series, Oct. 16 – Nov. 15. 2007: 17581.
- ¹⁹¹ Vinci 2007: 320-321, 325-327.
- ¹⁹² Douglas/Ola 2003: 47, 42.
- ¹⁹³ Ilesanmi 1997: 163.
- ¹⁹⁴ Douglas/Ola 2003: 46-47.
- ¹⁹⁵ Douglas/Ola 1999: 337.
- ¹⁹⁶ This is what Asarai Dokubo claimed, in Tell, 26 September 2005: 28.
- ¹⁹⁷ Agbu 2004: 33.
- ¹⁹⁸ Ralph Uwazuruike spoke of a "conspiracy reached between the Hausa and the Yoruba [...] to exterminate the Igbo" (quoted in Adekson 2004: 94). Gani Adams (2003: 99) accused the "northern oligarchy" of proceeding "in a systematic extermination of peoples of other ethnic groups".
- ¹⁹⁹ Tell, 26 September 2005: 28.
- ²⁰⁰ Even if Gani Adams or Frederick Fasehun declared that their men will not participate in ethnic cleansing: who could rely on such promises? Yoruba nationalists with whom I talked in January 2007 assumed that the creation of an independent Yoruba republic would entail massive population shifts. One of them said: An Oodua Republic will not give visas to the Igbo living in Lagos; they can return to Igboland and do agriculture.
- ²⁰¹ Alfred Ilenre, Secretary General of Ethnic Minority and Indigenous Rights Organisation of Africa, in Tell, 2 December 2002: 28.
- ²⁰² Quoted in Olukotun 2003: 67.
- ²⁰³ Faseun 2002: 2; Adebani 2005: 348; Nolte 2007: 221, 224.
- ²⁰⁴ Adebani 2005: 341.
- ²⁰⁵ Ifeka 2000: 454.
- ²⁰⁶ McCall 2004: 55.
- ²⁰⁷ Adebani 2005: 357.
- ²⁰⁸ Akaruese 2003: 219, 222. – The ambivalence of fascination and horror which ethnic militancy inspires is expressed in a statement by Dayo Abaton, a former secretary of Afenifere, who justified the warrior ethos of Yoruba nationalists by claiming that it has been imposed on them by their rivals: "You non-Yoruba turned us into what we are today. You made us extremists [...] through injustice, deprivation, marginalisation and criminal denial of our rights [...] insulting us with comments such as 'the Yoruba are cowards, they cannot fight.' [...] See the Jews today, they have founded the state of Israel, the smallest but one of the most powerful nations on earth. Why they did it was because of the experiences they had in the gas chambers. So the Yorubas came to that conclusion that it is we that can protect ourselves. Our children have taken themselves back psychologically to five centuries. They were asking the elders: was Lisabi not a Yoruba man? How was he able to fight a war? They were recounting all our great generals. What did they find out? They discovered that what turned the Yorubas of this generation into something different from the generation of the Lisabis is that civilisation took away from us that sharp edge of self-interest that made it easy for other people to become aggressive while we would be patient. Now we are back. It is the psyche of our forefathers that now rules the youth" (The Week, 27 December 1999: 9).
- ²⁰⁹ Aka 2005: 61.
- ²¹⁰ Opata 2004: 52.
- ²¹¹ Human Rights Watch 2004: 3, 60.
- ²¹² Ibid.: 4, 62-64.
- ²¹³ Human Rights Watch 2004: 58.
- ²¹⁴ Yoruba Agenda 2005: 8. – Among the Igbo, whose economy depends on their huge diaspora of traders, attitudes towards the principle of indigeneity are more ambivalent. They condemn any discrimination against non-indigenes, when their people in Lagos or Kano are treated as 'second-class citizens'. In Igboland, however, they reserve the right to determine the future of their land autonomously, at the exclusion of others. Attitudes towards citizenship are less a matter of principle than of convenience. In their home territory, Yoruba patriots have no qualms discriminating against non-indigenes, but as immigrants in the USA they feel entitled to equal rights: "Africa, Europe, Asia and Oceania are largely indigenous societies, while North and South America are largely immigrant societies" (Yoruba Agenda 2005: 8).