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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Vigilantism and Policing In Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria, 1987 – 1999

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### | ABSTRACT

The rise in crime and insecurity in Akwa Ibom State from 1987 to 1999, led to the proliferation of several non-state armed groups like Vigilante Groups of Nigeria, among others. In spite of this development, however, issues and concerns were constantly being raised about them regarding whether they could really be agents of policing against the backdrop of their penchant for human rights violations and extra-judicial killings. It is against this background that this article examines the role of vigilante groups in policing Akwa Ibom State. Using a content analysis method, and drawing information from both primary and secondary sources, the research observed that the activities of vigilante groups between 1987 and 1999 were not guided by a body of law nor did it conform to the principles of rule of law and constitutionalism, hence their services were not accepted by the general public in Akwa Ibom State. The paper concludes that as long as the vigilante groups, like the formal policing establishments, remained the instruments of intimidation of political opponents by the politicians that control them; the terrain of vigilantism would continue to be in the realm of dejection; hence the need to set up a body of law that guards the conduct of Vigilantism and activities of vigilante groups in Akwa Ibom State.

### | KEYWORDS

Vigilantism, Police, Policing, Community Policing, Security, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria

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## 1. Introduction

Before the advent of colonialism in Nigeria, the various indigenous communities, like elsewhere in Africa, had evolved various self-help institutions (vigilante groups in modern sense) for maintaining public order. For instance, *Ekpo* and several other age-grade groups were responsible for the policing of pre-colonial Ibibio society. With the emergence of the colonial state and all its coercive paraphernalia, these traditional institutions of public order management, that had existed for centuries were relegated to the background, as the modern police force, the precursor of the present day Nigerian Police, under the direction of the colonial authorities, became the *primus inter pares*, in the internal security architecture of the colony.<sup>1</sup> With this development, the communal/collectivist-oriented frameworks of policing that had existed for centuries and been part of the people's social existence now constituted the informal models of policing, rendering subsidiary roles.

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<sup>1</sup>P. T. Ahire, *Imperial Policing: The Emergence and Role of the Police in Colonial Nigeria*. (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1991) p. 18

Instructively, at independence, the colonial arrangement, rather than being transformed to reflect the country's new status, as a sovereign nation, was further strengthened by the post-colonial ruling elites.<sup>2</sup> As the country evolved politically, socially and economically, aside being confronted with legion of socio-economic and political challenges, it was confronted with myriads of violent crimes some of which posed serious threats to its survival.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, the responses of the Nigerian Police Force, the formal policing establishment, to these challenges, despite continuous flow of funds from the governments at the federal, state and local levels, appeared less than optimal. This circumstance prompted the Federal Government to establish the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC) and other law enforcement agencies to assist the Nigerian Police Force, in the process of law enforcement and maintenance of order in the country.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, the environment of public policing in the country, despite the measures put in place by the Federal Government, seemed not to have fared better, as incidences of crimes and violence, including those of lethal proportions, increased at all corners of the nation.<sup>5</sup> More worrisomely was the seeming lethargic attitude shown over the years by the Federal Government towards salvaging public policing in the country.<sup>6</sup> At a point, state governments that did not have constitutional roles in public policing, had to step in to salvage public policing in the country by providing funding and other logistical supports to the Nigerian Police Force.<sup>7</sup> In spite of these, crisis of public policing in the country continued to fester.<sup>8</sup> Remarkably, the seeming ineptitude of the Federal Government to effectively deal with the crisis of public order management appeared to have compelled the citizens to resort to self-help measures and whereupon, vigilante groups, militia and neighbourhood watch of various genres, once vilified, proliferated throughout the country.<sup>9</sup> In Nigeria, the issue seemed no longer to be whether these groups should exist or not, but what would become of security at the national level if they are put out of existence.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, for many years, it appeared that many state governments did not legalized vigilante groups to bolster the security of lives and properties in the states.<sup>11</sup>

However, in spite of their growing numbers (after the Nigeria Civil War) and seeming popularity, issues were constantly being raised regarding whether they could really be agents of state policing, against the background of their penchants for lawlessness, wanton violence, human rights violations and extra-judicial killings.<sup>12</sup> To this end, there was increasing concerns in policy and academic circles if vigilante groups are not themselves threats to the security, not only of the communities where they operate but the country as a whole. Against this background this article examines the place of vigilante groups in Akwa Ibom State from 1987 to 1999.

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<sup>2</sup>I. Chukwuma, "Police Powers and Human Rights in Nigeria," *Law Enforcement Review. Lagos*, (1998), p.26.

<sup>3</sup>G. Otto and W. I. Upkere, "National Security and Development in Nigeria" *African Journal of Business Management*, Volume 6, No. 23 (2012), p. 6765-6770.

<sup>4</sup>D. Wisler and D. I. Onwudiwe, Editorial: Plural Policing in Africa, *International Police Executive Symposium Working Papers Series*, No 6-10 (2005), p. 13

<sup>5</sup>E. Alemika, and I. C. Chukwuma, The Poor and Informal Policing in Nigeria: A Report on the Peoples' Perceptions and Priorities on Safety, *Security and Informal Policing in the A2J Focal States in Nigeria. Lagos: CLEEN* (2004), p. 14.

<sup>6</sup>D. M. Jemibowon, *The Nigeria Police in Transition: Issues, Problems and Prospect* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2003), p. 13.

<sup>7</sup>For instance, the special crime fighting outfit, Rapid Response Squad (RRS), since the return of democracy in 1999 has been funded by Lagos State Government. In: A. S. Basiru and O. A. Osunkoya, Vigilante Groups and Policing in a Democratizing Nigeria: Navigating the Context and Issues, *Brazilian Journal of African Studies, Porto Alegre*, Volume. 4, No. 8 (2019), pp. 179-19

<sup>8</sup>K. Adebakin and L. Raimi, "National Security Challenges and Sustainable economic Development: Evidence from Nigeria," *Journal of Studies in Social Sciences*, Volume 1, No. (2012), pp.1-8.

<sup>9</sup>B. Baker, "When the Bakassi Boys came: Eastern Nigeria Confronts Vigilantism," *Journal of Contemporary African Affairs*, Volume 20 (2002), pp. 223-244; A. Higazi, "Social Mobilization and Collective Violence: Vigilantes and Militias in the Lowlands of Plateau State, Central Nigeria," *Africa*, Volume 1 No. 78 (2008); F. Adamu, "Gender, Hisba and the Enforcement of Morality in Northern Nigeria," *Africa*, Vol. 1, No. 78 (2008), pp. 136-152.

<sup>10</sup>C. Kwaja, Informal Security Provision in Nigeria: Implications for Security Sector Governance. *Kitchener: Security Sector Reform Centre* (2014), p. 5

<sup>11</sup>For example, the Kaduna State House of Assembly, on June 6, 2013, Promulgated the State Vigilante Service Law, which legalized the operation of vigilante groups. In: A. S. Basiru and O. A. Osunkoya, Vigilante Groups and Policing in a Democratizing Nigeria: Navigating the Context and Issues, *Brazilian Journal of African Studies, Porto Alegre*, Volume. 4, No. 8 (2019), pp. 179-19

<sup>12</sup>Amnesty International, "Nigeria: Vigilante violence in the south and southeast," London: Amnesty International, 2002.

## 2. Police, Policing, Vigilantism and Vigilante Groups: A Conceptual Discourse

The four concepts that are central to this article, policing, police, vigilantism and vigilante groups, indeed, like their peers in security studies cannot be pinned down to one specific definition as they conjure different meanings. In other words, they are, to borrow Gallie's phrase, essentially contested concepts.<sup>13</sup> To this end, the approach that is adopted in this article is to conceptualize and discuss their meanings from the perspective of the nexus connecting them. First, the concept of policing is defined as the process of safeguarding the individuals and groups in a community, it must be stressed; the term is old as the man itself. Indeed, even in the pre-state social formation in which life was nasty, brutish and short, as Hobbes and other the social contract philosophers theorized, policing, even though egocentric, was an integral part of the social processes.<sup>14</sup>

However, the concept assumed modern connotation, wider acceptability and popularity against the background of the monumental disorder arising from population explosion, urbanization, and industrialization brought about by modernity, which led to the advent of the Weberian<sup>15</sup> centralized state structures. Consequently, policing, which acquired public character, did not only emerge as the key parameter for defining Weberian statehood but, most importantly, as activities undertaken by a specialized body of men established by law.<sup>16</sup> In the words of Alemika and Chukwuma, 'the emergence of the state as an entity with claim to the monopoly over the means of legitimate violence in society resulted into the creation of specialized agencies such as the police.'<sup>17</sup> In this wise, police is defined in relation to modern statehood. According to the Oxford Dictionary of Current English, police is defined as an official group of people employed by state to prevent and solve crime and keep public order.<sup>18</sup> In their contribution to the meaning of police, Alemika and Chukwuma see police as a socio-political and quasi-legal institution-state agencies charged primarily with the enforcement of criminal law and the maintenance of order.<sup>19</sup> The duo further adds that definition of police go beyond the constabulary sector to include other state agencies that are also involved in fighting crime and maintenance of law and order, such as the customs and immigration.<sup>20</sup>

The point being made here is that the concept of policing differs conceptually and analytically from that of police, even though, the duos are part of the social control processes. The former broadly depicts control mechanisms deployed by societal institutions, state and non-states to regulate the conduct of individuals and groups in order to bring them in conformity with acceptable norms and values. In other words, policing does not only entail law and order maintenance through the instrumentality of the state (public policing) but also through other non-state actors. Framed in this context, therefore, the police, the institutional edifice for operationalizing public policing, is one of the several strategies deployed by modern societies to maintain law and order.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, in this understanding, Baker and Lar, in their notions of plural policing and multi-choice policing contend that in modern societies, diverse networks of groups-commercial bodies, voluntary and community groups, individual citizens, national and local governmental regulatory agencies, as well as the public police deliver policing services to the citizen.<sup>22</sup> Specifically, it is in lieu of this broad conceptualization of policing that the concept of vigilantism and by extension, vigilante groups seem to derive their conceptual significance.

<sup>13</sup>W.B. Gallie, "Essentially Contested Concepts" In: M. Black, (ed), *The Importance of Language* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall Press, 1962)

<sup>14</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>15</sup>Based on the theory of modern state proposed by Max Weber who was a German economist, philosopher and one of the founders of sociology. Max Weber's theory provides insight into how a state should be organized in order to serve its people. Coming from this theory, bureaucracy is a structure that believed to be an important aspect for a modern state to be successful. This bureaucracy includes trained persons that are solely in charge of maintaining and managing the state structure. Available at: <https://study.com/lesson/theory-of-the-modern-state-summary-origin-a->

<sup>16</sup>I. Loader, "Plural Policing and Democratic Governance," *Social and Legal Studies*, Volume 9, No. 3 (2000), p. 325.

<sup>17</sup>E. Alemika and I. C. Chukwuma, *Analysis of Police and Policing in Nigeria: A desk Study on the Role of Police as a Barrier to Change or Driver of Change in Nigeria* (Lagos: CLEEN, 2004), p. 2

<sup>18</sup>Catherine Soanes...2001, p. 692,

<sup>19</sup>E. Alemika and I. C. Chukwuma, *The Poor and Informal Policing in Nigeria: A Report on the Peoples' Perceptions and Priorities on Safety, Security and Informal Policing in the A2J Focal States in Nigeria* (Lagos: CLEEN, 2004) p. 3

<sup>20</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>21</sup>L. Johnston, *The Rebirth of Private Policing* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>22</sup>B. Baker, *Multi Choice Policing in Africa* (Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute, 2008); J. T. Lar, *Vigilantism, state and society: A History of Plural Policing in Plateau State, Nigeria, 1950 to the Present*. Doctoral, Thesis, Bayreuth International Graduate School for African Studies (BIGSAS), University of Bayreuth, Germany 2015.

However, it is to be stressed that the concept of vigilantism, in modern policing literature, though in the last few decades has assumed wider popularity, conjures up divergent interpretations. As Lar affirms, 'there is as yet no scholarly consensus on what vigilantism is – especially as regards the nature of its relationship with the state.'<sup>23</sup> But for the purpose of this article, Fourchard's perspective is apt. In relation to policing, he opines that, vigilantism is "an organized attempt by a group of ordinary citizens to enforce norms and maintain law and order on behalf of their communities, often by resorting to violence, in the perceived absence of effective official state action through the police and courts.'<sup>24</sup> Viewed this way, vigilantism would depict organized efforts on the parts of citizens (individual and corporate) towards fighting criminal activities that threaten social order at the sub-state level. Flowing from the foregoing, vigilante groups would, thus, appear to suggest a voluntary group of individuals organized, usually at the communal/provincial level, for the purpose of policing. In the context of the above, therefore, it may be posited that not all groups that parade themselves, especially in contemporary Nigeria, as vigilantes are, conceptually so. Reinforcing this contention, Shaw posits that:

Care must be taken not to generalize on the subject of vigilante groups. Some seek to provide due process for arrested criminals in the absence of any viable state institutions in many areas. Some of the groups that have been labeled as vigilante groups range from neighborhood watches, communal guards, age grades, masquerade cults to hunters' guilds.<sup>25</sup>

In the context of the foregoing and for the purpose of this article, therefore, vigilante groups are conceptualized loosely, following Alemika and Chukwuma, as a generic term in describing the different types of sub-state policing system of a country.<sup>26</sup> In the Nigeria's informal policing system, Chukwuma identifies four typologies of vigilantism and vigilante groups, vis: religious, ethnic, state-sponsored and neighborhood/ community.<sup>27</sup>

### **3. Origin and Evolution of Vigilante Groups and Vigilantism in Nigeria**

It has to be stressed that the idea of vigilantism and by extension, existence of vigilante groups, predated the Nigerian state.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the conclusion in most studies on the evolution of policing in Nigeria is that vigilantes of all shades, performing a myriad of policing functions in their communities, preceded the establishment of the colonial police.<sup>29</sup> For instance, in the eastern part of the country, before the advent of modern police establishment, there existed groups known as 'Ndinche' (community guards). They were put in place by villagers to arrest and bring suspected criminals before the 'Amala' (village council) for trials. As a matter of fact, Ndinche like the 'Olodes' (Hunter Guild) and the 'Yan Banga' in the western and northern parts respectively, for centuries, superintended public order management in the various jurisdictions.<sup>30</sup>

However, it has been pointed out that irrespective of the modus operandi of these indigenous pre-colonial vigilantes, they were structured within each community's existing political structures and values. Fourchard in an insightful study of vigilante structure in pre-colonial Yorubaland, with reference to Ibadan, recounts an interview with a respondent thus:

There was a chain of transmission of orders coming from the Olubadan and from heads of powerful lineages associated to the Olubadan (the Mogaji) who transmitted information to

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<sup>23</sup>J.T.Lar, *Vigilantism, State and Society: A History of Plural Policing in Plateau State, Nigeria, 1950 to the Present*. Doctoral Thesis, Bayreuth International Graduate School for African Studies (BIGSAS), University of Bayreuth Germany, 2015., p. 54.

<sup>24</sup>L. Fourchard, "The Politics of Mobilization for Security in South African Townships," *African Affairs* Volume 110, No. 441 (2011) p. 609

<sup>25</sup>M. Shaw, *Crime and Policing in Transitions: Comparative Perspectives* (Johannesburg: Princeville, 2000) p. 48.

<sup>26</sup>E. Alemika and I. C. Chukwuma, *The Poor and Informal Policing in Nigeria: A Report on the Peoples' Perceptions and Priorities on Safety, Security and Informal Policing in the A2J Focal States in Nigeria*(Lagos: CLEEN, 2004), p. 14

<sup>27</sup>I. C. Chukwuma, "Responding to Vigilantism," *Human Rights Dialogue*, Series 2, No. 8.(2002), pp. 11-12.

<sup>28</sup>D. Pratten, "Perspectives on Vigilantism in Nigeria," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 78 No.1 (2008), pp. 1-15.

<sup>29</sup>T. Tamuno, *The Police in Modern Nigeria 1861-1965*(Ibadan: University Press Ibadan, 1970); T. Tamuno, *et al.Policing Nigeria, Past, Present and Future* (Lagos: Malthouse Press Limited, 1993); S. Nwanze, *In: T. Timothy, Thy Hands oh God: The Man, the Cop, the Preacher* (Lagos: Nio Publishers, 1999); K. Rotimi, *The Police in a Federal State: The Nigerian experience*(Ibadan: College Press, 2001).

<sup>30</sup>E. Ogbosor, *Understanding the Informal Security Sector in Nigeria* (Washington: United States Institute of Peace, 2016), p. 3.

heads of compound (Baale). The Mogaji were in charge of sode; they will call the head of each household, then they will tell them about the need to keep watch on the surroundings. In each household, the Baale will volunteer at least one or two people.<sup>31</sup>

The point here is that the indigenous vigilante groups, before the foray of colonialism into the various communities that were later amalgamated to become Nigeria, did not operate in a vacuum but interfaced with the various communities to provide policing to their people. In other words, they functioned as self-help entities at the peripheral level of the communities (towns/kingdoms), assisting 'stately' institutions in discharging policing duties. For example, in pre-colonial Hausa Emirate state system, the vigilantes at the local level complemented the Dogaris-palace police in maintaining law and order within the Emirate. Similar patterns operated among the Ijebu, a Yoruba sub-ethnic group, in which the various vigilantes complemented the Odis-palace police in policing the centre and the peripheries of the Ijebu state system under the Awujale.<sup>32</sup> It is worthy to note that this dual system of policing involving the vigilantes and the Kings' police was, however, transformed by colonial rule, which added another framework of policing, leading to a tripartite system involving the vigilantes, the palace police and the colonial police.<sup>33</sup>

It must be stressed, however, that in spite of their relegation to the background in the colonial tripartite policing architecture, vigilante groups continued to attract the patronages of the people in various communities, as a result of growing crime rates brought about by rapid urbanization.<sup>34</sup> For example, in Ibadan and other Yoruba communities, in the second half of the 20th century, the night guard system (vigilantes), that had been suppressed, for decades, by colonial officials for being 'dangerous', was re-invigorated, under strict supervision. Fourchard adumbrates the five guidelines that a Colonial Resident in 1948, in Oyo, gave for the operation of the night guards within his domain as follow: (i). that a roster of Night Guards is kept; (ii). that a head hunter is appointed whose duties are to supervise the arrangements made and be responsible to the local Baale (Chief) for the conduct of the guards; (iii). that each hunter guard is clearly informed that firearms must only be used in self-defense; (iv). If a hunter guard catches a thief or suspect, he should take him to the nearest police station at once and hand him over to the police; (v). that no form of uniform is used by hunter.<sup>35</sup>

Instructively, this was the model of vigilantism in most communities before the country's independence in 1960. Put differently, vigilante groups like the Night Guard system in the Oyo Province, mentioned above, while being allowed to operate because of the limited coverage of the colonial policing apparatus, were strictly under the supervision of the colonial authorities. However, with the attainment of independence in 1960, the character of vigilante groups changed from those established to promote community interests to those that now served the interests of the dominant party in the three regions of the country. For example, in the Western Region, the night guards and other informal policing groups, especially in Ibadan, the seat of the regional government, became instruments of political intimidation and harassment of perceived political opponents by the Akintola-led government, until the fall of the Republic on January 15th, 1966.<sup>36</sup>

Indeed, for the complementary roles that these vigilante groups played, especially in the Western Region, in instigating the collapse of the first republic, the new military regime, upon assuming power, did not only suppress the politicized vigilante groups but also guillotined their authority to vigilantism. Although, in the 1970s, due to the oil boom which led to rising incidence of armed robbery and other allied crimes, there were increasing proliferation of neighbourhood watches and guard companies, the dispositions of the military regimes that superintended the country during the period, towards vigilante groups appeared not have changed. But, by the mid 1980s, the volte

<sup>31</sup>L. Fourchard, "The Politics of Mobilization for Security in South African Townships," *African Affairs* Volume 110, No. 441 (2011)

<sup>32</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>33</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>34</sup>R. Watson, *Civil Disorder is the Disease of Ibadan, Chieftaincy and Civic Culture in a Yoruba City* (Oxford: James Currey, 2003), p.76.

<sup>35</sup>L. Fourchard, "The Politics of Mobilization for Security in South African Townships..."; K. Rotimi, *The Police in a Federal State: The Nigerian Experience* (Ibadan: College Press, 2011).

<sup>36</sup>*ibid.*, p. 140.

face attitude of the military juntas towards vigilantes and other informal policing groups in the country changed. On why this changed attitude should not detain us here as there are abundant of studies to that effect.<sup>37</sup>

Specifically, in 1986, the Federal Military Government of Nigeria, through its representatives at the state levels, in order to improve the battered image of the Nigerian Police Force, formally embraced vigilante groups as part of the country's policing structure. In April 1987, in Oyo State, the Military Governor, Col. Adetunji Olurin, by virtue of the Mobilization Community Development Committee Edict (1987), gave legal backing to vigilantism in the state when he officially launched vigilante groups (OYSG, 1987). Legitimizing vigilantism, the Governor had said, 'unlike the previous vigilante groups, the activities of the groups being inaugurated were protected by the law.'<sup>38</sup> With such terse statement coming from a key member of a military junta, the environment of vigilantism in the country would appear to have changed, whereupon, the number of groups engaged in vigilantism, across the country increased. Interestingly, it was, perhaps, this legacy of government's tacit support for vigilante groups that snowballed into the fourth republic that commenced on May 29th, 1999.

### **3.1 Origin and Development of Vigilantism and Vigilante Groups in Akwa Ibom State**

Akwa Ibom State is located at the southeastern part of Nigeria. It is bounded by Cross River State on the east, by the Gulf of Guinea on the south, by Rivers State on the west, by Abia State on the north.<sup>39</sup> Its major cities include Uyo (the state capital), Eket, Ikot Abasi, Ikot-Ekpene, and Oron.<sup>40</sup> Akwa Ibom State is divided into thirty-one (31) local government political units, also referred to as local government areas (LGAs); these are: Abak, Eastern Obolo, Eket, Esit Eket, Essien Udim, Etim Ekpo, Etinan, Ibeno, Ibesikpo-Asutan, Ibiono-Ibom, Ika, Ikono, Ikot Ekpene, Ikot-Abasi, Ini, Itu, Mbo, Mkpat-Enin, Nsit-Atai, Nsit-Ibom, Nsit-Ubium, Obot-Akara, Okobo, Onna, Oron, OrukAnam, Udung-Uko, Ukanafun, Uruan, Urue-Offong/Oruko and Uyo.<sup>41</sup>

Long before the institutionalization of constitutional-oriented security agencies, communities scattered across the length and breadth of Akwa Ibom area had devised means of keeping their communities safe, especially from sporadic crimes and criminality. Some of these strategic methods have been described either as "hunter-guards system, or the night guard system," which had its roots in the socio-cultural fabric of the Ibibio society.<sup>42</sup> However, as colonial rule sets in, both – night guard and hunter-guards – systems came to be known as vigilantism. The history of vigilante groups in Akwa Ibom State is embedded in the trajectories of the people's sociocultural and political histories, which span several decades before 1987, which is the originating chronology for this research.

It is pertinent to note that what is known as 'vigilante' metamorphosed in varying stages, beginning with the age-grade system and thereafter into the hunter-guard or night-guard system. Quite a number of scholars have shed light on varying issues relating to the age-grade system, securitization of community and the socio-economic and political advancement of the Akwa Ibom region. Some of the landmark works in that respects include those of: Monday Abasiattai,<sup>43</sup> Monday Noah,<sup>44</sup> E. Ukpong,<sup>45</sup> and Uwem J. Akpan.<sup>46</sup> Fundamentally, these works demonstrates in a historical sense, the functionality of the age-grade in not just on issues of security, but also in carrying out the judgments of the socio-political class. Uwem J. Akpan elaborately shows the functions of age-grades in Ibibioland.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>S. Fabiyi, *Gated Neighbourhoods and Privatization of Urban Security in Ibadan Metropolis* (Ibadan: Institute Français de Recherche en Afrique; Fourchard, 2011).

<sup>38</sup>Tribune, 07/04/87.

<sup>39</sup>Encyclopædia Britannica, Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/place/Akwa-Ibom>

<sup>40</sup>Encyclopædia Britannica, Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/place/Akwa-Ibom>.

<sup>41</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>42</sup>L. Fourchard, "The Politics of Mobilization for Security in South African Townships..."

<sup>43</sup>Monday B. Abasiattai (ed.), *A History of the Cross River Region of Nigeria* (Enugu: Harris Publishers Ltd in Association with University of Calabar Press, 1990); Monday B. Abasiattai, *Akwa Ibom and Cross River State: The Land, the People and their Culture* (Calabar: Wusen Press Ltd., 1987); Monday B. Abasiattai, *The Ibibio: An Introduction of the Land, the People and their Culture* (Calabar: Alphonsus Akpan Press, 1991).

<sup>44</sup>Monday Noah, *Ibibio Pioneers in Modern Nigerian History* (Uyo: Scholars Press, 1990)

<sup>45</sup>E. Ukpong, "The Age Grade System among the Ibibio: A Neglected Theme," *International Journal of African Culture, Politics and Development*, Volume 4, No.1(2009).

<sup>46</sup>Akpan Uwem J., *Law and Public Order in the Ibibio Traditional Society*,

<sup>47</sup>*ibid*

E. Ukpong gave a more definitive and deep-rooted exploration of the age-grade system in Ibibioland, and to some extent other lands, presently in Akwa Ibom State.<sup>48</sup> His summation was that age-grade played numerous roles from helping to educate, support, as well as enforce the judicial outcomes passed by the political elites on offenders.<sup>49</sup>

In spite of the robust body of literature that has proffer us with immeasurable insights on the role of the age-grade in the securitization of societies, not much have explored the role of hunter-guard in securitization of South-south pre-colonial Nigeria. The reason for such paucity could be due to the fact that it was not officially a recognized form of security, or as Fourchard reminds us "the movement [hunter-guard or night-guard] was initially unofficial before being authorized by the colonial administration during World War II."<sup>50</sup> Nonetheless, oral tradition suggests that long before the emergence of the Nigerian police, several forms of security were employed to guard societies. Their position, though not clearly stated, found supportive base Tamuno Tekena's argument that "hunters from the country (Akwa-Cross region inclusive) were often used as night guards...in the 19th century before being forbidden by the British administration."<sup>51</sup> Therefore, from this perspective, it can be said that the hunter-guard system was an effective security strategy used in curbing crimes in pre-colonial and early colonial Akwa Ibom society. It could be that its operation then was not in line with colonial interest, and as such was systematically brought to an end, since the NPF has been established by the British colonial government.

#### 4. Vigilante and Policing in Akwa Ibom State, 1987 – 1999

Before 1987, the Nigeria Police Force (NPF) in Akwa Ibom State was profiled with issues related to corruption, human rights, abuses associated with extortion and bribery, arbitrary arrests and detention, mass arrests and detention, prolonged unlawful detention, extortion using threats and acts of physical abuse, torture as a tool of extortion, sexual assault vulnerable women, extrajudicial killings at checkpoints, undermining the criminal investigation, justice for sale, requiring victims to fund criminal investigations, turning cases against complainants, police protection for sale, unequal protection under the law, among others. These cases led to lack of trust in the Nigeria Police Force. However, with the recognition and emergence of nightwatch groups in most communities, this alarming state of crime reduced.<sup>52</sup> Between 1987 and 1999, there was no organized vigilante group registered because the military regimes did not give them chance to operate, however, different communities formed local groups who secured their communities. These groups who operated under the guise of vigilante groups were constrained and were limited in scope of their operation. Most of them were mandated by traditional rulers and influential people in their communities. However, with the emergence of democracy, they began to gain more recognition by the government.

It cannot be stated exactly when communities in Akwa Ibom State began to form private "security groups" to protect themselves and their environment.

The mode of operation of vigilante groups in Akwa Ibom, between the period under review, varied from place to place depending on the circumstances that prevailed in their areas of operation. In some places, their attention was directed to road surveillance by day and night like the police, but generally, they kept night surveillance of their communities, halting suspicious movements from thieves and area-boys and making arrests. During the day, they retired to their offices, which were their constructions, where they continued to receive cases, conduct trials and administer punishment on convicts. According to them, cases that defied solution or required detention were sent to the police for appropriate actions. In other to keep the police abreast of their activities and progress, they submitted monthly progress reports to the police unit nearest to them, who evaluated the extent of the vigilantes' supplementary security services and made its observation available to the State Police Headquarters.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>48</sup>E. Ukpong, "The Age Grade System among the Ibibio: A Neglected Theme...

<sup>49</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>50</sup>Laurent Fourchard, "A New Name for an Old Practice: Vigilantes in South-Western Nigeria," *IAI (Africa)*, Vol. 78, Issue 1(2008).

<sup>51</sup>T. Tamuno, *The Police in Modern Nigeria 1861-1965...*

<sup>52</sup>Ubongabasi Israel, Community Policing Strategies in Akwa Ibom State, 1999-2019, *International Journal of History and Philosophical Research*, Volume 9, No.3 (2021), pp.9-27.

<sup>53</sup>*ibid.*

In terms of remuneration, the vigilante groups had no standing allowances, but in appreciation of their contributions to the maintenance of community security, members of their communities and other philanthropists made financial and material rewards to them. Also, the local government chairmen sometimes extended financial assistance to the groups in their local government area.

In recognition of the role of the vigilante groups, some State governments in Nigeria enacted laws legitimizing their functions. For example, the Anambra state government enacted the Vigilante Service Act (2000) to provide for the registration of vigilante groups in Anambra State.<sup>54</sup> The aim was to limit their size, structure and regulate their activities. Also in this vein, the Benue State government declares through the Community Volunteer Guards Law (2000) that there is need to legalize and regulate the activities of the vigilante in the state as they have been found to be helpful and complementary to the police in keeping peace and security." In Akwa Ibom state, no decree was made between 1987 and no bill was initiated until 2019 (beyond the scope of this study) as "Neighbourhood Safety Corps."<sup>55</sup>

### **5. Reasons for Vigilantism in Akwa Ibom**

High crime level between 1987 and 1999 was the main motivation behind people taking the law into their own hands. Several reasons gave rise to vigilante groups in Akwa Ibom State. These reasons range from insecurity, unemployment and idleness, corruption within the police service, youth empowerment to political reasons, corrupt and ineffective judicial justice systems, mistrust on the prosecution systems, easy or lenient bail conditions for the suspects and frustrations about rising criminal activities.<sup>56</sup>

The feeling of relative insecurity or deprivation in areas of significant safety inequality also encouraged poorer citizens to organize vigilance. Inequalities in security resulted from the use of private security and public security issues. With respect to private security, citizens who could not afford to take certain measures to combat crime. Furthermore, economic inequality led to organized surveillance in Akwa Ibom communities since inequality signified the distribution of labour which alleviates the problems of collective action in the formation of self-defense groups.

The expansion of slums and the rapid urbanization led to slums without basic services for instance lack of police presence. In place like Uyo village Road, Nwaniba Road, Ikpa Road saw the rise of vigilante groups because of the high rate of crime such as cultism, burglary, armed robbery, among others. The acuteness of crime challenge led to organized criminal groups and gangs filling this vacuum extorting, kidnapping and violently robbing the local population.<sup>57</sup> The ineffective Nigeria Police's crime response also resulted into public distrust and fear, bleeding state institutions of their legitimacy and undermined economic development of the society. The institution of police was underfunded, understaffed and majorities were not trained between 1987 and 1999.<sup>58</sup>

The increase in criminal acts and therefore insecurity raise fundamental questions on the capability of Akwa Ibom State and Nigeria to discharge her duties appropriately. The ever-increasing crime rate was attributed to low police to citizen ratio, inadequate resources for crime detection and prevention and poor public to police relationship of that era. Accordingly, the communities in Akwa Ibom State devised self-protection mechanisms. This self-protection mechanism mainly involved the formation of vigilante groups within the communities affected by crimes. When they believe, the government has failed to protect them and their community; vigilante groups took arms to protect themselves and their community.<sup>59</sup> Also, the ineffective service delivery, flaws in the justice system and processes, and police corruption all contribute to people supporting community justice and vigilante activities.

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<sup>54</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>55</sup>Soonest Nathaniel, "Akwa Ibom State House Of Assembly Initiates Bill To Establish Neighborhood Watch." Available at: <https://www.channelstv.com/2020/05/08/akwa-ibom-state-house-of-assembly-initiates-bill-to-establish-neighborhood-watch/>

<sup>56</sup>Felix Uyanna, 42 Years, Former Commissioner of Police, Akwa Ibom State Police Headquarter, Ikot Akpan Abia, No 161 Aka Etinan Rd, Uyo.

<sup>57</sup>Odiko Macdon, Police Public Relation Officer, Akwa Ibom State Police Headquarter, Ikot Akpan Abia, No 161 Aka Etinan Rd, Uyo

<sup>58</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>59</sup>*ibid.*

Additionally, surveillance was among the methods of crime detection in Akwa Ibom State within the period under review. This method was often used by vigilante groups if it is informed that a crime will occur at a particular location or if some people were allegedly involved in a crime. When a surveillance group suspects a crime or is about to take place it reported quickly to the nearest and most relevant safety training for the appropriate action. The first scenario was usually dealt with by a stakeout called fixed policing observation: The second circumstance also required mobile observation, maybe on foot, Okada (motorcycle) or by car.

## **6. Strategies Used by Vigilante in Provision of Security**

The method used by vigilante groups in Akwa Ibom State usually included surveillance of buildings and potential criminal persons. This method offered motorized patrols and foot patrols, including road and border patrols, to the police. This was the best way to collect intelligence from criminals. After 1999, this method was further utilized. Another strategy is cultivation of information since information is essential to all functional police activity. Intellectual ability reports on criminal individuals and associate recipients of loots were constantly collected. The cultivation of information is an essential part of police duties and this was achieved through the creation of relationships with members of the public with good intent to assist the police, police guards and victims of criminal activities, each investigation had a moral, professional and ethical obligation to protect the identity of informants.<sup>60</sup>

### **6.1 Challenges of the Strategies Used by Vigilante Groups**

These challenges include their faulty association with police and legal system; their legitimacy in the view of the communities they want to serve; recruitment and retention management; choice of appropriate operations and maintenance of resources, incentives and motivations to survive groups. Other challenges include inadequate government funding, police harassment in the performance of their tasks, lack of appropriate training and weapons, lack of basic operating equipment such as lamps, warm clothing, rain boots, rain coats, identity cards and whistles and uniforms, amongst others. Other weaknesses experienced by groups include poor monitoring of the new members and the presence of touts or "bad eggs" among the alert members, a wide range of institutions, and poor group accountability.

It was these "bad eggs" with criminal intention that gave vigilante groups a bad image in the eyes of the government, the police and the people living in the communities they operated. Most of the vigilante groups faced criticism in terms of their penchants for lawlessness, wanton violence, human rights violations and extra-judicial killings. In view of this, the government of Akwa Ibom refused to pass into law the bill that gave them the legitimacy to operate. One important problem of vigilante between 1987 and 1999 was their tendency to turn from good to bad and threaten the peace and stability of their communities of operation. Also, the problems between it group usually led to splinter group, as was seen in the case of MOSSOP, which led to its proliferation.

### **6.2 Impact on Akwa Ibom State**

The impact of vigilantism in communities in Akwa Ibom State was relative and differed from community to community, and the strategies adopted by different vigilante groups; while some of them were lofty other were short of expectation, or detrimental: On a more general note, the activities of the vigilante groups recorded the following impact:

- i. Due to the insufficient police force in the State to carry out their functions, the vigilante group and Neighbourhood Watch were introduced to assist in meeting this demand, and one of such demands was the protection of lives and properties. This function on the part of the vigilante group was very necessary, given the importance attached to human lives, and, much more importantly, their properties must be protected. The Akwa Ibom State vigilante group was functioning in protecting the lives of people living in the State and their properties.<sup>61</sup>
- ii. Vigilante Group Maintained Peace and Order: This aspect of function was attached to the vigilante group. It was expected of it to maintain peace and order within society. For instance, anytime there

<sup>60</sup>Felix Uyanna, 42 Years, Former Commissioner of Police, Akwa Ibom State Police Headquarter, Ikot Akpan Abia, No 161 Aka Etinan Rd, Uyo

<sup>61</sup>*ibid.*

were social functions or public functions, the services of the vigilante group were employed to assist in ensuring that, peace and order were maintained in order to guarantee the success of such event particularly, those recruited by the government.<sup>62</sup>

- iii. Vigilante Group Assisted in Combating Crimes: This was another function of the vigilante group they assisted in fighting crimes in the Akwa Ibom State, particularly, in the night. During the nighthours, the vigilante groups organized itself and go for patrolling for the purpose of ensuring that any robbery attempt is averted. By so doing villagers, whose family members of the vigilante group were among was being protected from robbery attack.
- iv. Vigilante Group Arrested Crime Offenders: The vigilante groups did not only prevent crimes, they could go as well as arresting any individual caught committing crime, because crime commission was invariably the same thing as encroaching or infringing the rights of the members of the public, and when caught by the group, the person was arrested by the vigilante group, and handed over to police for prosecution.
- v. Vigilante Groups handed over Everything Recovered during Operation to the Relevant Authority: Anything recovered during operations by the vigilante group in Akwa Ibom State was returned to the appropriate quarters (i.e., Police Stations), nothing recovered was expected to remain in the custody of the vigilante groups. Therefore, it was one of the major functions of the vigilante group to return all exhibits to help in further investigation purposes.

## **7. Conclusion**

The paper examines the role of the vigilante groups as an aspect of community policing in Akwa Ibom State. It was observed that, long before the institutionalization of constitutional-oriented security agencies, communities scattered across the length and breadth of Akwa Ibom area had devised means of keeping their communities safe, especially from sporadic crimes and criminality. With the emergence of the colonial state and all its coercive paraphernalia, these traditional institutions of public order management were relegated to the background. This situation continued even after Nigeria gained independence. It also noted that high crime level between 1987 and 1999 was the main motivation behind people taking the law into their own hands. Several reasons gave rise to vigilante groups in Akwa Ibom State. These reasons range from insecurity, unemployment and idleness, corruption within the police service, youth empowerment to political reasons, corrupt and ineffective judicial justice systems, mistrust on the prosecution systems, easy or lenient bail conditions for the suspects and frustrations about rising criminal activities. The method used by vigilante groups in Akwa Ibom State usually included surveillance of buildings and potential criminal persons. This method offered motorized patrols and foot patrols, including road and border patrols, to the police. The study observed that the "bad eggs" syndrome affected vigilante groups which along with their penchants for lawlessness, wanton violence, human rights violations and extra-judicial killings gave them many of their criticism. In the course of this research, few challenges were encountered, ranging from logistical issues which affected the overall process of managing available resources, documentation, and transportation to methodological issues. Conducting oral interviews with members of vigilante groups and other security agencies constituted some of the prevailing challenges as the people to be interviewed were not readily accessible or available. Some of the valuable documents needed for the research were highly classified which also affected the accessibility and profundity of information which would have added value to the research. With this, information for the study relied on solely on oral and secondary sources. It is suggested that future researchers may consider more written primary sources as this help to overcome the issues of reliability and objectivity. Also, future researchers may also consider the role of vigilantism in proliferation of small and light weapons in Akwa Ibom State and specific areas of the State.

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