

## **BAKASSI BOYS, JUNGLE JUSTICE AND EXTRA JUDICIAL KILLING IN ABA, 1999-2007**

**Angela O. Odo**

Department of History and Strategic Studies,  
Alex Ekwueme Federal University,  
Ndufu-Alike, Ikwo, Ebonyi State.

[angelamichael300@gmail.com](mailto:angelamichael300@gmail.com); [angela.ogochukwu@funai.edu.ng](mailto:angela.ogochukwu@funai.edu.ng)

**Chinedu J. Uzochi**

Department of History and Strategic Studies,  
Alex Ekwueme Federal University,  
Ndufu-Alike, Ikwo, Ebonyi State.

### **ABSTRACT**

The industrial and commercial nature of Aba town had, by the close of 1998 led to an upsurge in the population of the town as people from other parts of Nigeria became migrants including the Yoruba, Hausa, Ibibio, Kalabari, all for their commercial interests. Even foreigners from within and outside Africa converged in the town for trade. With the steady rise in population coupled with the attendant hike in unemployment rate, poverty and high economic depreciation, Aba town gradually became a harbor for educated but unemployed youths who took to robbery, thuggery, violence and other social vices as means of survival in the face of the harsh economic conditions. This led to an escalation in organized crime with heavy consequences such as unprecedented loss of lives and properties. The Bakassi Boys security outfit which was formed to curb the rising menace of heightened insecurity was short-lived as it metamorphosed into a group of hardened criminals. This paper seeks to investigate the formation and operations of the notorious Bakassi Boys security outfit, the reasons for its disbandment and the inception of the Abia State Vigilante Service. The paper adopts a narrative and analytical methodology

**Keywords:** *Armed robbery, Bakassi Boys, Vigilante group, Aba*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Security is indispensable in the development of every Nation. Security depends on the

machineries put in place by the Government of that Nation and the effectiveness of the security is promulgated and ensured by the

extent of gadgets available to the security agents and their dedication to duty. These empower them to discharge their responsive duties effectively and diligently.

Prior to 1999, insecurity challenges in Aba were quite alarming. Between 1990 to early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, insecurity in Aba was at its peak. Unlike the predominant Nigerian town by the 20<sup>th</sup> century that was troubled with uncertainties. Aba was not an exception as a whole lot had occurred before the formation of an anti-crime group in Aba which later spread out to other parts of the south-south and south-eastern Nigeria by the year 1998 under the political administration of the then military administration of Anthony Obi. Insecurity remains the bane of any nation's socio-economic and political development. Insecurity may be present in various forms such as armed robber, abduction, etc. One thing is clear, Insecurity in whatever form retards development. In Aba precisely, Insecurity has disrupted the socio-economic and political achievements of the inhabitants. Kidnapping, robbery, cultism and religious crisis had been a source of discomfort to Aba people for several years until the formation

of the Aba Bakassi Group. There was physical brutality, assault, murder, armed robbery, pick pocketing, rape and other dastardly acts by hoodlums in broad-day light. An intense search for a lasting solution led to the formation of the Bakassi Boys' security outfit. But the Bakassi boys employed extra-judicial means in fighting crime and ultimately became a threat to Aba residents. They were later phased out and were replaced with the people friendly Abia State Vigilante Group.

The industrial and commercial nature of Aba had, by the close of 1998 led to an upsurge in the population of Aba as people from different places became migrants including the Yoruba, Hausa, Ibibio, Kalabari... and even foreigners from within and outside Africa as a matter of fact, "Aba-made products" have become a household name with the excessive rise in population coupled with the attendant hike in unemployment rate.

Consequent upon the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) which was introduced by the General Sani Abacha administration which was characterized by excess rate of unemployment, poverty and high

economic depreciation, Aba gradually became a harbour for qualified unemployed youths who took to robbery, thuggery, violence and other social vices as means of survival in the face of hardship during the military era. This led to an escalation in organized crime with heavy consequences such as unprecedented loss of lives and properties (Chinedu John, 2023)

This study may be considered a trailblazer in documentation of the activities of the Bakassi Boys security outfit which has formed an indelible part of the history of Aba city and indeed Igbo land. Subsequent efforts made by individuals and the government of Abia state to curb insecurity in that mega commercial city also make headlines in this research. Hence, this study will contribute to the growing literature on the subject of jungle justice and extrajudicial killings in parts of the world. Hopefully, an exposure of the disastrous consequences of such practice will instill some sanity into new generations of Nigerian youths with the lesson that unemployment is no rationale for violence and murder.

### **Methodology and Scope of the**

### **Study**

This research covers the period from 1999-2007. Following the high rate of Insecurity by the late 1998, and the agreement by the union of traders (Bakassi Shoe Makers) to form and build a wall of defense for themselves. By this time, traders were being terrorized, kidnapped, and robbed at gun point, killed in droves. The female ones were sexually abused and molested. In order to checkmate the excesses of the criminals, the traders formed the Bakassi boys. By the year 2007, the Abia State government had recognized these traders and their security group and by extension the Bakassi Group had taken all-over Aba and has spread to other South –Eastern States like Anambra. The Abia State government led by Theodore Orji, know moved for motion for the name to be changed and rebranded to the” Abia State Vigilante Group”.

### **Socio-Economic History of Aba**

Aba is a major Southeast City in Nigeria and the commercial nerve center of Abia State. Upon the creation of Abia State in 1999, Aba was divided into two Local governments areas namely: Aba South and Aba North. Aba South is the main City center and the commercial heartbeat of Abia

State, Southeast Nigeria. It is located on the Aba River. Aba consists of many communities from Ohazu merged for administrative convenience (Alulor interview, 2022).

Aba was established by the people of Igbo land as a commercial city and then later a military post was placed there by the British colonial administration in 1901. It lies along the west bank of the Aba River, and is at the intersection of roads leading to Port-Harcourt, Umuahia, Owerri, Ikot-Ekpene and Ikot-Abasi. The city became a major depot for agricultural produce following the British made railway which passed through it to Port-Harcourt. Aba is a major urban settlement and commercial center in a region that is surrounded by small villages and towns. The dominant group in Aba are the Ngwa people. Aba is well known for its craftsmen notably shoe and fabric and also the most popular city in the Southeastern Nigeria. Aba has estimated population of about 2,534'265. The State's slogan is "God's Own State". Location in Nigeria: Coordinates: 5<sup>^</sup>7N, 7<sup>^</sup>22E, Country-Nigeria. It comprises of two Local Government Area namely; Aba South and Aba North<sup>1</sup> Aba

development has expended to Osisioma Ngwa, Obi Ngwa, and Ugwunagbo.

Aba is among the major producers of Agricultural palm produce like: Palm oil and palm kernel oil. It comprises smaller communities namely, Aba-Ukwu, Eziukwu, Obuda-Aba, Umuokpoji-Aba, but the villages in Ohazu have been merged with Aba so as to achieve administrative convenience. Aba-Ukwu is apparently the primer village in Aba, little wonder the late Eze W. E Ukaegbu of Aba-Ukwu was known and referred to as the 9<sup>th</sup> grandson of Aba. It eventually became an administrative center of British Colonial government. Aba has been a major commercial center since it became part of old eastern region.

The *Aro* Expedition, which was part of a larger military plan to quell anti-colonial sentiment in the region, this military action, the British easily, conquered the native *Aro* people with heavy casualties. In 1901, the British founded a military post in Aba and later in 1915, a railway was constructed to link it to Part-Harcourt, which transported agricultural goods such as palm oil, palm kernel and gins. By

1929, Aba was the site of a revolt by Igbo women, historically known as “The Aba Women Riot”, a protest of the colonial taxation policy. The riot started first as a peaceful protest against the initial census of women in the region and subsequent assumed taxation of the women based upon rumour. The protest spread throughout the palm oil belt, but remained peaceful until a pregnant woman was knocked over during a scuffle and the lady losing her child. After more deaths, some accidental, others planned, occurred, a mass of about 10,000 women revolted in Aba. Aba was becoming a large urban community with an established Industrial Complex. During the height of Nigerian Civil War in 1967, the capital of Biafra was moved to Umuahia from Enugu. Aba was very strategic in the old Biafra area and was heavily bombed and air raided during the Biafra War (Itiri & Onele). Aba is the home of many distinguished families such as the popular Ezijiaka Egbu family of Aba La Ohazu, Ogbonna family of Eziukwu-Aba, the prestigious Ichita family of Umuokpoji-Aba, the Omenihu family of Obud- Aba the Ugbor Family of Aba-Ukwu, the Ugwuzor Family of Umuokpoji-Aba, the Ihemadu family of

Ahunanya family of Ohabiam and so forth.

Economically, Aba is capable of generating 80% of the funds required to finance the Annual budget of a fiscal year of Abia State, this is possible due to the variety of economic activities done in Aba and it is believed that Ariaria International Market alone could do that, this is because its products are been distributed and consumed by several other African countries. Aba is surrounded by oil wells which distinguish it from the city of Port-Harcourt. A 30 kilometres pipeline powers Aba with gas from the Imo River natural gas repository. Aba’s major economic contributions are textiles and palm oil along with pharmaceuticals, plastic, cement and cosmetics like in the Ariaria International Market, Ahia Ehere and Eziukwu Road Market respectively. This trade makes the Ariaria International Market the second largest market in Nigeria after the Onitsha Main Market. There is also the Heineken brewery, a glass company and distillery within the city. Aba is famous for its craftsmen, notably the shoemakers and vehicle mechanics. The following are some of the markets situated in Aba; Ariaria, Eziukwu Road

Market, Ngwa Road Market, School Road Market, Ahia Alein, Ogbo-Osisi Market, to mention but a few.

The city has played a lasting role in the Christian evangelism of the Southeast of Nigeria since the British brought the Church Missionary Society (CMS), an evangelism vehicle of the church of England used to plant what today has become the Anglican Church of Nigeria. The Church named All Saints emerged from the Evangelical Initiative of three oil traders from Opopo namely Joseph Cookey, Gabriel Cookey and Zedekiah Cookey. These men sealed up the Aba, Azumini, Blue River in 1896 for their trading and also for the planting of the Christian religion. In 1897, they negotiated with Abayi and Umuocham people for A piece of land to establish their oil business at two beaches, which they built at Abayi and Umuocham Waterside. As a result of the population density of Aba city, it has diverse cultures and religion and has been that way since the Nigerian Civil War. Most of the migrants came for business.

The city has played a lasting role in the Christian evangelism of the Southeast of Nigeria since the British brought the Church

Missionary Society (CMS), an evangelism vehicle of the church of England used to plant what today has become the Anglican Church of Nigeria. The Church named All the Saints, originated out of the Evangelical Initiative of three oil traders from Opopo-Joseph Cookey, Gabriel Cookey and Zedekiah Cookey. These men sealed up the Aba, Azumini, Blue River in 1896 for their trading and also for the planting of the Christain religion. In 1897, they negotiated with Abayi and Umuocham people for land to establish their oil business at two beaches, which they built at Abayi and Umuocham Waterside. Muslim and Mosques are also present in Aba; the largest mosque is the Hospital Road Mosque. A chief Imam is resident among the Hausa-speaking settlement in the heart of the city himself. Due to the population density of Aba, it has diverse cultures and religion inherent in it since after the Nigerian Civil War.

### **Insecurity and Justice System in Aba**

In general, Security in Aba, and environs was watered down by the activities of Hoodlums whose activities defied the powers of constituted authority and the state government in general. On a

regular basis, corpses of people killed by armed robbers were seen scattered along refuse dump and in some streets in Aba like: Emejiaka street, where majority of the culprits came from. Also, homes, shops especially the ones within the market axis and major streets were vandalized, while the die-hard ones (capon as they were popularly called) among them refined themselves to writing notice letters to residents informing them of their intention to “visit” them. This period was a very severe one that both the rich and the poor had no hiding place. (Egwu John, interview, 2022).

Aba was faced with an unprecedented wave of different but overlapping security crises – from kidnapping to extremist insurgencies – almost every corner of the state was affected by violence and crime. The scale of the insecurity threatened the very fabric of the people’s life. **With every attack, human lives were lost or permanently damaged.**

Instructively, national security is a panacea for national economic growth and development of nations. This is because peaceful nations attract foreign investors while the domestic investors freely operate within the economy with little or no tensions and

apprehensions. Poverty rate was so high that many residents could not afford standard primary and secondary schools to enrol their wards in Aba.

Prior to the inception of democracy into the Nigerian political space, the Igbo communities already practiced aspects of democracy which made it difficult for the British to successfully subjugate them at the onset of colonization. Aba was no exception to this direct democracy where people gathered to elect individuals who would represent them at the council of *Umunna*. This council at each point acted as a judicial council in the different communities where they exist. An average setting comprised of; the Age grade, the deities/oracles, the *umuada*, the council of elders. These groups had their functions clearly stipulated and there was no conflict so far, of functions rather they complimented each other and ensured no group dominated the other even though boundaries were set. (Wood, 2009). The functions of these groups are expounded below

### **The Age grades**

This was organized on a village basis. The association or age grade grew from boyhood and took a common name to

commemorate an event associated with the time of their birth. When they grew up, they would appoint a leader. The age grade was strongly organized among the north and southern Igbo and Cross River peoples. The non-centralized communities organized themselves through the age grade for war, work and government. Those who were still youths cleared paths and public places, streams and also served as “police.” The adults enforced the decisions reached by the elders and in war, guarded the settlement and fought on the battlefields.

### **The Titleholders**

The titleholders were regarded as men of character, able to build up some following and contribute to project of the community. Titled men were called *Ndinze* and they virtually monopolized authority in their wards or villages. Their functions include providing law and order as they took part in the process of promulgating laws and regulating customs and had positions in the council which exercised jurisdiction in “civil and criminal cases.” They helped in reducing stress and strains in the society. They equally aided in instilling discipline in the inhabitants, particularly the men.

### **The Umuada**

They played a very vital role in the maintenance of peace, law and order and co-operate existence of the society. The institution as the name implies was made up of married women from a particular town or community but whose matrimonial homes were outside their ancestral home. Their role can be said to have started from curbing the excesses of its members to those of non-members in their ancestral home. Cases that appeared to be intractable or not easily resolved by other institutions were always referred to the *Umuada*. It was in this way that they helped in sustaining peace, law and order and a co-operate existence of their ancestral home. In Igbo land, the *Umuada* is an institution that is always called upon to hear and try cases between couples and other members of the community. They have therefore, brought their influence to bear on the course of “Justice” between villages or families.

### **The Chief Priest, deities/oracles**

Deities in Igbo land acted as the Supreme Court in the cases of intractable dispute. In Igbo land, cases that defied human solution/judgments were referred to deities for arbitration. In some circumstances, cases were instituted before oracles or deities



to determine the innocence of an accused. Famous among these deities included; the *ibini-ukpabi*, *amadioha*, *ilgweka-ala*. These deities/oracles continue to hold sway in Igbo Justice System.

Aba is a town that has over-time faced enormous security challenge ranging from local community insecurity which took different forms and shapes such as kidnapping, ritual killing, human trafficking, rape, stealing, armed robbery, etc. These were some of the issues that affected Aba and posed a challenge on her peace and security.

### **The Concept and Practice of Jungle Justice in Aba**

The phrase “Jungle justice or mob justice” is a form of open extrajudicial killings prevalent in Sub-Saharan Africa, and most notably Nigeria and Cameroon, where an alleged criminal is humiliated, beaten and summarily executed by a crowd or vigilantes. Some scholars had further explained that the causes of jungle justice are illiteracy, anger due to the economic realities, the flaccid court system, disregard for human rights, Lack of Trust in the Police and other law enforcers are reasons given for jungle justice. Though it is in human and barbaric, the harmful effects of

criminal elements on innocent citizens in recent times has led to the rise in execution by jungle justice extra-judicial killing (Amnesty International, 2007) Only in May 2022, 32 cases of jungle justice were reported in Nigeria. Most of these mob actions have resulted in gruesome, inhumane torture and extra-judicial killing of people accused of committing an offence. Dozens have suffered death through beatings or burning.

The recent lynching of David Imoh in Lagos has once again centered jungle justice in the national discourse, leading to concerned citizens calling on authorities to make committed efforts to end this barbarous practice. Mob actions have had a long history and predate Nigeria. It was pervasive in the United States as a tool white America used in terrorizing its black population.<sup>7</sup> This system of extra-judicial execution sometimes based on false accusations, such as the case of the Aluu 4, oron flimsy arguments like the dispute over a N100 change that cost Mr Imoh his life in Lagos, has become the bane of the Nigerian state and its woeful justice system (Nonyelum Ossai, interview, 2022).

The cases have been exacerbated by state-sanctioned extra-judicial killings. In the early 2000s, state-backed vigilantes in the southeast, otherwise called Bakassi Boys, went on a public lynching spree of suspects after they were given a free rein by the governors in the region to help curb crime. It was the clearest demonstration of the failings of the justice system up to that point. While these extra-judicial killings often drag out for hours, its perpetrators believe that the police are hardly ever at hand to stop them. In other instances, it would appear the police directly sanction the killings.

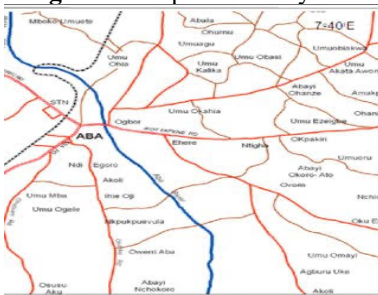
Miss Ibisobia Elkannah for instance, witnessed the murder of her own brother and his friends in Aluu, Rivers State, in 2012, when on a visit to a friend she heard a commotion outside. Upon investigation, she found her brother and three others being tortured by a crowd for alleged robbery, a false accusation from a debtor they had gone to collect money from. Her attempts to speak for her brother led to direct threats against her own life and in an interview, she recounts how the police arrived at the scene, talked with the mob and then drove off laughing, just before her brother and his friends were burnt alive. The increasing spread of

jungle justice in the country and recourse to it is a clear signal for authorities to wake up to their responsibility of ensuring law and order and upholding justice. These actions, if left unchecked, could trigger widespread conflicts, as demonstrated in the Dei-Dei market recently, where reckless driving and lynching led to a violent confrontation between different groups. The resultant deaths and losses in business may seem small compared to other violent clashes in the country, but it is a warning of the anarchy to come if this dangerous impulse is not contained.

The authorities must draw a line in the sand and make clear examples of recent incidents by diligently hunting down leaders of such ravenous mobs, and making a public example of their trial and sentencing. This should serve as a deterrent to others. In the short term, the public information organs of the government must create and design a campaign to sensitize Nigerians, through TV, radio, social media and face-to-face engagements at markets, motor parks and other spots, on how to report offenders, handle them and surrender them to the authorities. In the medium term, civic education and human rights must be properly taught in

schools and through public awareness campaigns. While these steps are crucial, authorities must do the most important aspect on their part. This is to bolster the police to provide adequate security cover to the country, train and retrain the police on suspect handling in a fair, just and transparent fashion, and the importance of being accountable to the people they are sworn to protect. The justice system as a whole must be reformed to deliver justice with a swift and steady hand and in a transparent manner that will remove doubt from the minds of citizens and engender trust in the process. Authorities must act now before these extra-judicial killings and self-help 'justice' snowball into a dangerous avalanche that could consume thousands of lives and lead to a complete breakdown of law and order.<sup>9</sup>

**Figure 1:** Map of Aba city



Source Wikipedia

Jungle justice is becoming an epidemic in Nigeria. With the lynching of Deborah Samuel and David Imoh still fresh in our minds; we are left to wonder if there is any hope left. The youths are the major victims and culprits in extrajudicial killings. Images of the mob of young people excited and jubilant in the process of killing another human being in public leave one wondering if there is any humanity left in them. The frequent occurrence of jungle justice in Nigeria has shown that life has no value anymore. The situation is so bad that anything can trigger it. A mere accusation of blasphemy and a shout of *ole! ole!* (Thief! Thief!), can brutally end anyone's life in a few minutes. Jungle justice in Nigeria does not come without consequences, and it has taken Nigeria several centuries backward. The rest of the world now sees Nigerians as corrupt, uncultured, and primitive. With a population of over 250 million people, Nigeria's diversity has proven over time to be a burden rather than an asset to the country.

### **History of Jungle Justice in Nigeria**

Jungle justice in Nigeria has no particular history as it has been happening for decades. For record purposes, however, it can be

traced to the Bakassi Boys, a group established in 1999 by various associations of Igbo people of the South-East, Nigeria. Gilbert Okoye was the first leader of the association. Armed robbers and gangsters were terrorizing the region's people, especially Aba, Abia State, in the 1990s. So, the Bakassi Boys were introduced by the then governor, Orji Uzor Kalu, to stop the menace. Members of the association were armed with machetes, guns, and charms, which they wore around their bodies. It was said that the group lynched suspected petty thieves, armed robbers, ritual killers, murderers, corrupt persons, and anyone they considered evil. The Bakassi Boys enjoyed support from Igbo people because crimes greatly reduced after they began to operate. Other states in the region began to employ their services to help reduce crime. *Odeshi* became a popular term among the Igbo people, which means "It does not leak" or "it would not leak." The term actually means gunshot bullets wouldn't pierce the skin of the Bakassi Boys as they have already been fortified against them. The Bakassi Boys still exist today, but they have been renamed Anambra Vigilante Services, and their activities have reduced significantly (Osisi

Alulor John, interview, 2022)

Although they researcher did not always like to witness the execution of their victims but on that fateful day the researcher witnessed the killing of a young man at that Bakassi Market. Who they beheaded and took the other lady who also was a victim to Uratta Head office to behead her too. They were both tied up like a goat ready to be slaughtered that same day four able-bodied men were also killed by beheading also their place of execution was usually the Bakassi roundabout, where people usually gather to watch them been killed and die also it was generally believed that whoever they planned to execute, the parts were already sold out to human traffickers, ritualists and organ sellers. There and then people began to rumor that before mid-night they would still come and harvest the sensitive parts of those victims they had killed. This continued until the year 2002, when a motion was moved for the end in Bakassi operation which did not succeed because they had backing and support of the politicians who were in power, who had already lobbied the government also those human parts were also harvest for these politicians who were never seen but with the level of extra-judicial

killing with no response from the government to explain the whole situation and made the speculations clearer. These politicians used the Bakassi boys as trading channel and usually cut some percentage to them. This business continued and got so much engaged that the functions were delegated. They were the informant and the delivery guys. This business got linked to outside of Aba and Abia State. (Osisi, Alulor John interview, 2022)

#### **Formation and Activities of Bakassi Boys Security Outfit**

The Bakassi Boys group was created in 1998 by traders in the city of Aba who wanted to protect themselves from armed robbers and hoodlums who by that time had become a serious security threat to the inhabitants of the city. Having had success in curbing crime in Aba, the Bakassi Boys became in high demand and their activities spread to other cities in eastern Nigeria. Their activities include; fighting against robbery, ritual killing, as can be observed in the charismatic Eddy Nawgu, an alleged prophet and occultist was eventually apprehended and beheaded. These Bakassi Boys moved around with guns, machetes and usually operate with an array black magic

artifacts and juju which they wear round their waist and their manhood most times.

They usually operate in the Igbo area of the country and over time have been engaged in several extra-judicial killings of suspected armed robbers, ritual killers and murderers. The manner in which they know or discovered if anyone was evil or not was by the use of black magic in which they placed a magical silver-colure machete on the chest of any suspicious person and if the machete's color changed from silver to blood- red, it meant the person had committed a heinous crime at some point in their life, and invariably such a person would be killed immediately (Obinna Nna, interview, 2022)

They enjoyed popular support in the areas where they operated because criminal activities were greatly reduced since their inception in 1998. Their greatest mysterious power was their ability to evade gunshot, even when they are shot multiple times at close range, they wouldn't flinch nor sustain any injuries. This metaphysical power was referred to as *Odeshi* amongst the people. *Odeshi* is an Igbo word that meant "it does not leak" or "it would not leak", which meant if

anyone shot them with a gun it wouldn't pierce their skin hence their blood would not leak. Vigilante group otherwise known as the "Bakassi Boys" originated in Aba, a city made up of different autonomous communities. It is made up of two local governments of Aba North and South which situate within the Southern Senatorial district of the state. With the birth of Abia State in 1991, Aba became the commercial nerve center of the state owing to its booming commercial activities coupled with its centralized location and proximity to south-south states. Meanwhile, Umuahia is the administrative headquarters of the state. Aba South is the main city center and the heartbeat of Abia state, southeast Nigeria. The industrial nature of Aba had by the close of 1998 led to an upsurge in the population as people from different places migrated to the area. However, due to its enterprising nature, Aba town has been popularly referred to as the Japan of Africa, while the name "Aba made" has become a popular Nigerian expression for cheap local manufactures. But that did not imply that Aba products were cheap or inferior as the name suggests. In view of these economic factors and the rising insecurity in the town,

people's properties became unsafe and non-indigenes and traders were forced out of Aba in their numbers in search of safer places for their various economic activities.

The Mafs were a cult group whose criminal activities disrupted the economic activities in Aba and her environs. They were the menacing cult group that hindered the growth, the economic and social welfare of Aba. However, the height of crime in Aba on the eve of the Fourth Republic can be likened to that of Onitsha where it was reported that criminals moved about with such confidence that on some occasions, they would tell people the exact date on which they would be robbed. On that same day, they would force their way into the houses they had earlier marked, regardless of whether the occupants had fled or not. Thus, by the close of the military era, Aba could be said to be likened with the novel as *One Week, One Trouble* as no day could pass by without shootouts, killings, rapes and robbery incidents. These crimes happened within few minutes, and people lived in fear, (the fear of armed robbers and Mafs a measure of self-defence, people became their own security forces, taking up the

security role of the police which they had abandoned. Among the self-defence security measures were the purchase of fire arms and other weapons, and the erection of high walls around residences. This situation however, brought a slow pace in the wealth making of the shoe and garment manufacturers in particular and the public at large, who were faced with the challenge of curbing armed robbery activities perpetrated by gangs of armed robbers popularly referred to as Mafias. It appeared as though the challenge was not only to put a stop to Robbery activities but also to lead the revolt against the excessive harassment and extortion by the hoodlums in the town. The leadership however came from the shoe makers of the 'Bakassi' area of Ariaria Market where the name was coined. Thus, they resorted to settling the hoodlums who have gained much control of the city by settling with money so as to appease them from taking it from them by force. In the remote past, criminals were known to fear and tremble when they see the owners of the house they have come to rob, but recently the owners fear, tremble and run away for the criminals.

By 1998, in a bid to shake off the

chains of oppression by these hoodlums, the traders decided to confront the Mafs. When the traders got to Aba Mosque, a serious fight had ensured. There were sporadic shootings from the two camps. The traders kept pressing on until they overran the Mosque area which forced the Mafs to leave Emejiaka's house which they used as their hideout. With the decimation of their hideouts, the trader continued their onslaught against the Mafs and their accomplices in such a way that some die-hard ones among them were killed and burnt while others were forced into exile. Mention the period that this happened (a den of robbers). It was at this point that they deemed it fit to establish a self-help security outfit to keep the Mafs permanently out of Aba as they promised to deal with armed criminals ruthlessly and decisively. The traders vowed to embark on an operation of capturing and executing suspected armed robbers until nearly all suspected criminals had been executed or had fled the state. (Obinna Nna, interview, 2022)

This could not have been possible if not for the support given to the Boys by the populace who always provided them with information concerning criminals and criminal

activities. There were many reasons for the formation of the group in Aba at the time, but the last straw that broke the camel's back was the murder of a pregnant Calabar woman in October 1999 and the inefficiency and widespread corruption of the police force which led them to mounting frustration with a steady increase in violent crimes. The Power Line contest between the traders and the Mafs that eventually saw to the 'eclipse' of the later was the immediate cause of the formation of the Bakassi Boys.

In appreciation of the efforts of the shoe makers from the Bakassi area in the campaign against the Mafs, the traders decided to honor the outfit with the name, the Bakassi Boys. The Bakassi Boys as an informal security outfit originated from the civil society who saw the need to establish a 'community police' to guard lives and property in a community where the security agents, the Police were unable to live up to their expectations. The Boys emerged as a result of lack of trust of the Aba populace in the existing formal criminal justice system and the lack of confidence in the Police as security providers. Thus, it can be rightly summarized that, threatened with

criminal activities and the minimal provision of security by the Police or better still deprivation of security which the populace was entitled to, the Ariaria traders with the majority of them coming from among shoe makers banded together in a collective action to wage war against organized crimes perpetrated by a group of armed gangs.

Like minded citizens from Ariaria Market and later other markets in Aba came together and formed the Bakassi Boys; a vigilante group which had the objective of fighting crime in Aba. It can also be said that the Bakassi Boys, as a 'self-help' security outfit developed amongst the Aba populace, against armed civilians (armed robbers) in the interest of the populace. With time, the Boys became an alternative security outfit in Nigeria's South-East zone, where law enforcement agents were performing below the expectations of the society.

The sudden exit of the military from power and the run-down police force that they bequeathed to the civilian regime made it impossible to cope with crime upsurge in the country. To fill the gap, people formed vigilante groups. These vigilante groups go



by different names across the country. The primary reason for setting them up was to protect the people from incessant raids by armed robbers in their neighbourhoods. These groups have usually been composed of individuals from the local community. They have derived their credibility, and unofficial authority, from the community in which they serve. One of the main purposes of these initiatives had been to complement the police in identifying and handing over criminal suspects to the appropriate judicial authorities. They have also sometimes tried to settle other conflicts between individuals in the community. Local leaders have on occasion abused their power and used these groups for other purposes.

The vigilantes rose to the challenge of combating the spiralling crime waves across many cities in the country especially in the early years of democratic transition. Initially there was a reduction in crime. Commercial activities picked up in the commercial cities of Aba, Onitsha, Lagos, etc. And people could move around freely once again. The acclaimed success of the Bakassi Boys in reducing crime in Aba, resulted to the clamour for and the introduction

of this group to Onitsha (Anambra state), and Owerri (Imo state). Their feat in catching and fishing-out criminals were legendary across the south-east. They won the admiration and goodwill of the people. However, with time these vigilante groups in most cases deviated from the original purpose for which they were formed to engage in other activities such as settling civil matters, recovering debts, ejecting tenants for landlords and in some cases meddling in husband-and-wife matters, and serving as ready hands to unleash violence during elections. In other words, they were sometimes recruited as political thugs. They were largely uneducated and so obeyed only the commands of whoever hired their services. Their nefarious operations revolved only around apprehension and cold-blooded murder of a supposed criminal.

### **Recruitment and Training of the Bakassi Boys**

Bakassi Boys were primarily of the Igbo ethnicity and very few of settlers of another tribe resident in Aba. They are able-bodied young men in their 20s and 30s although there were instances where younger persons were considered and accepted into the organization. Members were usually recruited from traders

from different markets. Those markets were usually divided in zones with the Bakassi Boys situated systematically in these markets to ensure safety of lives and properties of people. New members receive months of training on the rules of the Bakassi Boys prior to participating in the group's operations.

Members of the Bakassi Boys join the organization voluntarily. Formal recruitment generally takes place at the age of seventeen, although many members are involved as informants at around the age of sixteen. The Bakassi Boys initially had about 500 members, but have since grown to approximately 3,500 members. According to Amnesty International, members of the local community believe that members of the Bakassi Boys group possessed magic powers and carry charms that made them invincible.

The only accepted young people whom they considered not to be a threat to them that is someone whom they can easily control. These persons must undergo series and rigorous trainings before they were allowed fully to parade himself as a member of the

group. They took oaths of secrecy not to expose their secrets which the consequence was death. Although not everybody was allowed to join, this is because before one could join; he must be brought or introduced by anybody considered to be influential in the society. This discouraged most persons from joining because it was very difficult for people who didn't have referees to help them join. This was because, it became a lucrative business. Also, educated people were considered who had the knowledge of reading and writing; that interacted with buyers outside the state. They would not accept an illiterate man. The educated persons had meetings and represented them in meetings with top government officials and also who received funds from business deals were distributed amongst them. There were ex-members of the Bakassi Boys that posed threat to the Abia State government. Like Osisikankwu who was later killed by the Abia State government in 2010 (Iri & Onele, 2009). Their mode of recruitment was through fortification: they take their new members to their specific native doctor to prepare charms for the person. Those charms resisted bullets from penetrating the bodies of their members in cases

of open fire with suspects and also disappearance charms. They were well fortified and equipped with charms and that was why they preferred to use machetes instead of guns (Rebecca, interview, 2022)

The Bakassi boys operate under a highly systematic and detailed administrative structure. The leader is the national chairman, who in 2002 was also the state chairman of Abia State. State chapters are autonomous yet cooperate with one another and make routine consultations with the national headquarters. State chairmen coordinates branches activities; branches are led by branch chairmen, although chairman may be considered as been in control of every major operation, this can vary in certain situations as some operations may be carried out under the command of the youth members but answerable to the state coordinator. According to the News release in 2005 identified “Kingsley Chimezie” as the leader of the Bakassi boys reported the murdered along with nineteen other persons by alleged members of the Bakassi Boys (Human Rights Watch & Cleen, 2002).

The Bakassi Boys now formed their own legal system and instituted judges, magistrates, and Barrister in their headquarters, who tried cases and convicted offenders. They even reduced to collecting fines and sanctions from offenders. They had two major head offices in Bakassi and Uratta road, off Port-Harcourt Road by Rail. The Bakassi Boys believed solely in the use of juju to administer justice, although nobody could say of a truth if those charms were potent or it was just mere instinct they worked with. On several occasions people were killed and their death weren't questioned and the Bakassi Boys weren't answerable to anybody except for their commanders. They had their own courts where their suspect was tried, once the person is tried and found guilty, they administered their own sanction which was usually death by beheading and thrown into the pit. They weren't working with the police; they were autonomous and they gradually began to carry fire arms. They had their units too but paid tribute to the commander in the headquarters at Bakassi Market.

### **Crime Reduction in Aba Under the Bakassi Boys**

The Bakassi Boys were

introduced in 1999 in response to the high levels of crime in the Southeastern part of Nigeria, particularly in the city of Aba, Abia State. The group was initially formed as a vigilante group but later took on the role of a law enforcement agency. The Bakassi Boys gained notoriety for their violent and extrajudicial methods of crime control, which included jungle justice, torture, and summary execution. Despite their violent tactics, the Bakassi Boys succeeded in significantly reducing crime rates in areas under their control. Their presence in Aba led to a drastic reduction in armed robbery and other violent crimes such as kidnapping and murder. According to a report by the Human Rights Watch, "The Bakassi Boys' enforcement of law and order in Onitsha was supported by many residents who were fed up with the rampant crime in the city which Aba was no exception". The Bakassi Boys' crime reduction efforts were also acknowledged by the Nigeria Police Force. A former Inspector General of Police, Sunday Adewusi, in an interview with Vanguard, stated that the Bakassi Boys helped to reduce the crime rate in Onitsha and environs significantly. He said, "When we went there, we found out that the

Bakassi Boys had done marvelously well. They had restored law and order, which the police had been unable to do" (Adigwe, 2005)

The Group Managing Director of the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), Mr. Andrew Yakubu, also commended the efforts of the Bakassi Boys in reducing crime in Aba. He said, "We commend the Bakassi Boys for their unwavering commitment to ensuring peace, security and stability in Aba and its environs." (Andrew Yakubu, interview, 2022)

### **Bakassi Boys as an Instrument of Retaliation**

The main aim of which this Bakassi Boys were formed was to help control the excesses of the different cult groups that operated in Aba in the 1990s, which they did their best in achieving until a certain stage when they turned against the people they were meant to protect and became a societal menace that needed to be stopped. Initially, the Bakassi Boys were welcomed by the people of the southeast who were tired of the high rate of crime in the region. However, the group soon became notorious for its brutal methods, including extra-

judicial killings and torture. Despite the criticisms and controversies surrounding the Bakassi Boys, they became an instrument of retaliation for many Nigerians who felt let down by the government's inability to tackle crime in the southeastern region. The group's tactics were seen as effective in reducing crime, and many people felt that the government had failed them, leading to a proliferation of vigilante groups across the country. Even years after the disbandment of the Bakassi Boys, the name remains a reference point in discussions around crime and security in Nigeria. Many people still see the group as a necessary evil, while others continue to criticize their methods and question the legitimacy of vigilante groups in maintaining law and order (Osisi Alulor John, interview, 2022).

### **Failure of The Bakassi Boys and Inception of the Abia State Vigilante Service**

Consequent upon the failure of the Bakassi Boys and their activities put to a stop due to the level of anarchy which took over the entire streets of Aba. This act discredited their further existence and their effort in reducing crime was totally forgotten. This prompted the inception of the

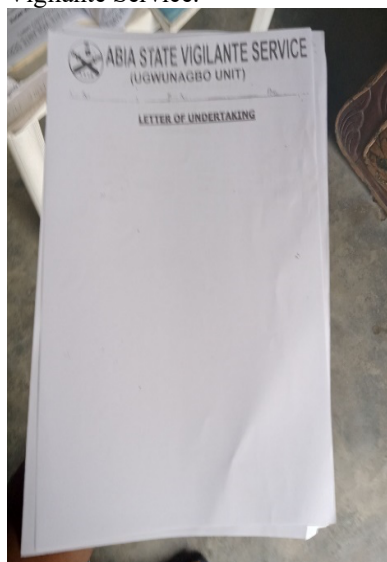
Abia State Vigilante Service although what changed particularly was just their name but gradually their mode of operation began to change positively

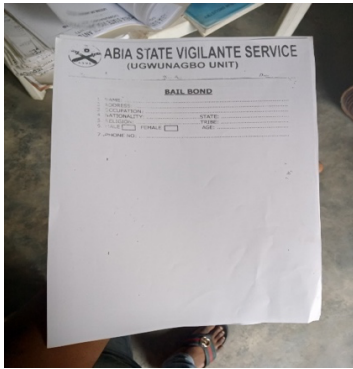
With the height of jungle justice and extra judicial killings in Aba and the communities within it, the government decided that there should be a stop to it and that the government should know about every case. They were now changed from Bakassi Boys Group to Abia State Vigilante Service in the year 2007. Since then, it has continued to exist and known as Abia State Vigilante Service. The new headquarters is at Amauba Estate Umuahia South Local Government Area of Abia State. It was the son of former Governor of Abia State Chief Theodore. A. Orji, famously known as Ikuku who made sure Bakassi is and has continued to be in existence even though another group called the Homeland Security that operate mostly in Umuahia seriously fought to replace the Abia State Vigilante Service. They were quite similar to the Abia State Vigilante Service, except that they didn't possess firearms while the Abia State Vigilante Service did. The payment system is that which we are been paid through them. They

are very powerful administratively. This is because the current administration led by Dr Okezie Victor Ikpeazu do not like them but because the former Governor's son instituted our Commander General by name Idika Martins Mbathat is why they are still in existence. The ASVS has helped in providing and guaranteeing safety of lives and properties of people of Aba. The unit with its Commander joined forces with the Nigerian Army to institute peace and capture Osisikankwu On several occasion, they had been attacked by the notorious Osisikankwu and his men. Now ASVS has spread to other cities and States of Southeast. Since that time till now crime reduced, whenever there is a problem within the villages under our unit; we were usually called upon and we invite them to our office to register the case. The new vigilante group worked under the police culprits were handed over to the police who took over the case Simple cases were settled within the group while complex ones were handed over to the police. They made sure suspects do not stay more than 24 hours in detention. They work with the police because sometimes the police don't really know these remote areas but we are closer to these villages than they are.

Simply put, we help the police in the discharge of their duties and they enjoy working with us. Also, we work with them because they government stopped us from executing judgments. One could say that ASVS is a well-organized service commission. (Udowa Victor interview in Aba)

**Figure 1:** Some official documents of the new Abia State Vigilante Service.

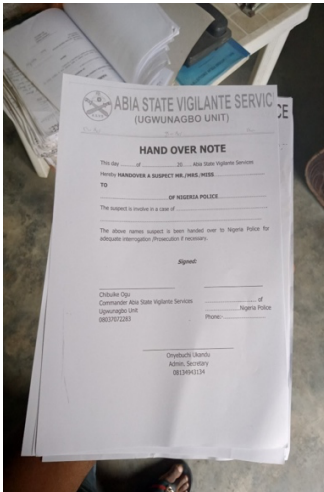




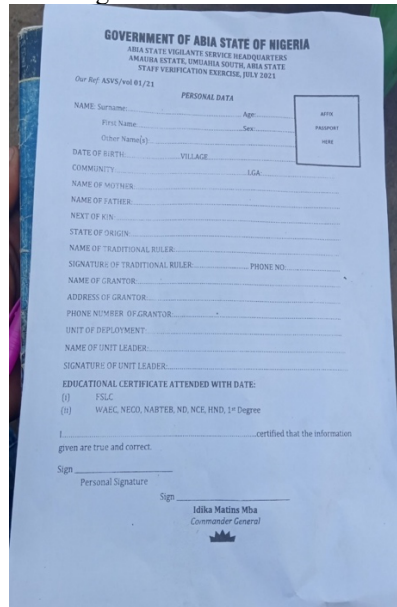
Source: researcher’s fieldwork

State Vigilante Service. Once an individual shows and indicates interest in joining the service, he would be issued a form which he has to fill and would be signed by the commander General Idika Martins Mba (Mr Ekene Ibe, interview at Ugwunagbo).

Official document of the Abia State Vigilante Service.



Source: Researcher’s fieldwork



Source: Researcher’s field work

### Recruitment and Structure of the Abia State Vigilante Service

Just as the law states once an individual is above 18 years of age he is been considered as an adult and can take decision for himself, the same applies in Abia

### Cases of Jungle Justice in Other Parts of Nigeria

Just like it was stated earlier it was just mere name that was changed in the Bakassi group and following the high level of

unemployment in Nigeria, the Abia State Vigilante Service is no exception because it's same people that make up the service. Also, with no arranged payment system stipulated for this group of people they still struggle to make ends meet for their families. This triggered them into doing all manner of evil for the purpose of making money. One could say that in the light of these they still indulge in acts of crime. Although the act of jungle justice has reduced among the Abia State Vigilante Group, they have already planted the seed in the minds of Aba citizens and across Aba, the citizens no longer have regard for human life. The ASVS have continued to perpetuate jungle justice presently, but at a minimized level.

There were prevalent cases of this sickening act in the South-East. In July, 2005, about 10 cases of mob action were reported. Three suspected robbers in Anambra State were set ablaze by an angry mob. Last week, two of the suspected robbers were burnt and on July 14, the last member who was said to have escaped death by a whisker was caught and set ablaze by an irate mob. On July 4, in Aba, Abia state, three Point of Sale robbers were set ablaze by an angry mob. Also, on July 11, In

Akwa Ibom State, a fuel seller poured fuel and set fire to a university student who complained of being sold adulterated fuel. On June 8, an angry mob lynched a suspected cultist to death in Akwa Ibom. A few days after, in Lagos, a motorcyclist alleged of one-way driving and hitting a pedestrian was nearly lynched by an angry mob before policemen rescued him (Udowo Victor, interview in Aba).

In May 2022, mob violence was recorded in Lagos when commercial motorcycle riders lynched a sound engineer, David Imoh, a 200-level Home Economics student of the Shehu Shagari College of Education, Sokoto State, Deborah Samuel, lynched over alleged blasphemy and lynching of a motorcyclist at the Dei-Dei market, Abuja which later resulted into violence. The Nigeria Police Force in 2019, following a mob justice, meted out to 45-year-old Blessing Odugu, tweeted via its verified Twitter handle that the then Inspector General of Police, Mohammed Adamu expressed concerns over the increasing acts of impunity and jungle justice. However, from 2019 till now, several cases of mob actions which have led to gruesome death



or life-threatening injuries on hapless victims remained unchecked (COAV, 2005).

### **Guaranteed Peace and Security in Aba.**

To a large extent, the Abia State Vigilante Service have instilled peace and Security in ABA. Unlike in time past when traders could barely come to ABA to buy goods without either being attacked, or abducted with a demand for ransom but now just like the Bakassi boys started with guaranteeing peaceful economic activities, the Abia State Vigilante Service also has continued on that footpath they planted. This has been possible because following the number of Abia State Vigilante Service offices in ABA alone and are mostly situated near different market in Aba. Like the Ugwnagbo Unit covers the Alaoji Spare Parts Market, the Eziukwu Unit cover the Eziukwu Road Market (Cemetery Market ABA), The Ogboosisi Unit covers the Timber Market, The Ariaria Unit covers both the Bakassi Market and the Ariaria Main Market, to mention but a few (Ossai).

### **Conclusion**

The study focuses on Jungle Justice and extra judicial killing in Aba from 1999-2007, with a case study of the Bakassi Boys. It

aims to examine the prevalence of such acts in the area, the reasons for their occurrence, and the impact they had on the society. The Bakassi Boys, a vigilante group formed in response to rising crime rates in Aba, are used as a case study to understand the role of vigilante groups in perpetrating jungle justice and extra judicial killing. The project seeks to highlight the need for improved law enforcement and the dangers of allowing vigilante groups to take the law into their own hands.

The issue of Jungle Justice and Extra Judicial Killing in Aba is a complex and multifaceted problem that requires urgent attention. The case study of the Bakassi Boys highlights the role of vigilante groups in perpetuating this problem. While the group initially gained support due to high levels of crime in the area, their methods of extrajudicial killing and torture quickly spiralled out of control. The Nigerian government must take decisive action to address the problem of jungle justice and extra judicial killing. This includes not only holding perpetrators accountable for their actions but also addressing the underlying issues of crime and poverty that contribute to the

problem. There is also a need for greater transparency and accountability in the justice system to ensure that individuals are not subjected to arbitrary detention or punishment.

Additionally, there is a need for greater public awareness and education on human rights and the rule of law. This will help to

shift the culture away from violence and vigilantism towards a society that values human life and due process. Ultimately, the problem of jungle justice and extra judicial killing can only be fully addressed through a comprehensive and coordinated effort involving government, civil society organizations, and the public.

### Referencing

- Amnesty International | Working to Protect Human Rights Archived, at the Wayback Machine. August 10, 2007
- Amnesty International Members, (19 Nov. 2002; BBC 20 May, 2002)
- Azogu F. Adigwe\_ *Crime, vigilantism, and Electoral Violence in Nigeria;The roles of Vigilante group in Crime fighting*
- Berg, Manfred and Wendt, Simon,*Globalizing Lynching History :Vigilantism and Extralegal Punishment from an International Perspective.* Palgrave Macmillan. ISBN 978-0-230-11588-0,2011.
- COAV 2005, 254. 30 May 2005
- Human Rights Watch (HRW) and CLEEN. *Nigeria.21 The Bakassi Boys: The Legitimization of Murder and Torture.* 14 (5), May 2002.
- Human Rights Watch. *The Bakassi Boys: The Legitimization of Murder and Torture.*<https://www.hrw.org/legacy/backgrounder/africa/nigeria0502/bakassi.htm>
- Nnaemeka Ukakwe Itiri, Onele Jacob. *The Transformation of The Bakassi Boys Vigilante Group among the Igbo Ethnic Group Nigeria into a Community Police Force.* Rebecca, 2008.
- The Nation Online. “NNPC GMD commends Bakassi Boys”, 2013. <https://thenationonlineng.net/nnpc-gmd-commends-bakassi-boys/>
- Udowo Victor, Abia State Vigilante Service Office and Secretary Ugwunagbo Unit.
- Vanguard press release.2005
- Wood, Amy Louise. *Rough Justice: Lynching and American Society, 1874–1947.* North Carolina University” Press, 2009.

S/N	Name Of Informant	Age	Occupation of Informant	Place Of Interview	Date Of Interview
1	Chioma John	42	Trader	No_MbutuAlaoji, Ugwunagbo	03-06-2022
2	EkeneIbe	37	Bakassi Officer	Bakassi Office Ugwunagbor Unit	28-02-2023
3	ObinnaNna	30	Fashion Designer	Block C6, COLPAS; Michael Okpara University	27-12-2022
4	Udowo Victor	55	Sectary Abia State Vigilante Service, Ugwunagbor Unit	BakassiOffice, Ugwunagbor Unit	05-03-2023
5	OsisiAlulor John	72	Retired Priest	No 4_ Edu Avenue, Alaoji	03-03-2023
6	Chinedu John Nna	53	Trader	Block C3 Shop, Flyover Market Aba	12-01-2023
7	Ruth Chinedu	45	Trader	Mbutu-Alaoji	19-05-2023