

THE SEARCH FOR SECURITY, THE EVOLUTION OF THE BAKASSI BOYS AND THE ANAMBRA STATE EXPERIENCE; 1998-2004: LESSON FOR TODAY'S SECURITY AGENTS

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Abstract

The development of any nation depends principally on its security. Security depends on the machinery put in place by the government of that nation and the effectiveness of the security is determined by the extent of motivation given to the security agents and their dedication to duty that enable them discharge their duties effectively. In recent time, insecurity has taken the place of security in Nigeria and the consequences are overwhelming. Between 1998 and 2004, insecurity in Anambra state was at the climax. What have government done and is doing to ensure that security of life and property of its citizens are guaranteed. In 2000, the Anambra state Government enacted a law transforming the dreaded Onitsha Vigilante Services (OVS) into the Anambra state Vigilante Service (AVS) to end the high level of insecurity, thus giving birth to the popular "Bakassi Boys" Vigilante Service in Anambra State. Methodologically, the paper adopts the historical analysis approach to analyse the state of insecurity in the state in the period under study. Data was collected via primary and secondary sources. The paper concludes that even though the method of punishment adopted by the Bakassi boys (AVS) was non-conventional, it achieved the purpose for which it was established, while the conventional security outfits turned to be problems themselves to be solved. It therefore called on government at all levels to motivate and equip their security agencies to work more effectively like the defunct Anambra Vigilante Services in order to end the spate of insecurity in Nigeria.

Keywords: Anambra state, Security agents, Vigilante, Insecurity, Bakassi boys

Introduction

Insecurity remains the bane of any nations' socio-economic and political development. Insecurity comes in different shapes, forms and type. One thing is clear, insecurity no matter the shape, form or type retards development. In Nigeria, insecurity has murdered the socio-economic and political achievements of the nation since inception in a twinkling of an eye. Boko haram insurgents, Fulani herdsmen attacks, Niger Delta militancy, kidnapping, armed robbery, cultism and religious crisis has rocked the country in recent years like never before.

In Anambra state, between 1998 and 2004, the security situation was quite overwhelming. The Upper Iwaka and the down fly over axis of Onitsha was a night mare. There were physical brutality, assault and murder, armed robbery, picking pocket, rape and other unholy acts by hoodlums in broad day light. In general, security in Anambra and environs was watered down

by the activities of this hoodlums whose activities defies the powers of our constituted security authorities (Igwe, 2000)

On daily basis in Anambra, corpses of people killed by armed robbers are discovered, homes were attacked and shops broken into, while the die-hard ones among them reserved the effrontery to write notice letters to residents informing them of their intention to visit them (Nnaemeka & Onele, 2014). They were so sure that they conclude in their letters to their victims that they need not bother to inform the police because even the police cannot stop them. The situation became so pathetic that people are not sure of their safety at any moment. Carrying a black nylon, a brief case or the popular 'Ghana must go' bag becomes an invitation to instant death if you are unlucky not to have your hand cut off with machete by the hoodlums while trying to snatch the property from you.

It was in this terrible situation that the good people of Anambra state found themselves until when in 2000 a group of Aba based security agency popularly known as the Bakassi boys were invited to Anambra state by the then state Governor Dr. Chinwoke Mbadinuju to help combat the rising crime wave as they successfully did in Aba, Abia state. Although, in the eyes of the law, the security outfit was unlawful and had some challenges, it was able to succeed where the acclaimed legal security agents woefully failed. This paper examines the evolution of the Bakassi Boys security outfit, today's security challenges and how today's security agents should confront such challenges as it was done in the past. It specifically discussed the evolution of the Bakassi boys as a security outfit into Anambra state and how it helped to restored security in Anambra state. It also advocates that today's security agents should learn from the way the Bakassi boys operated by being dedicated to their duties, as accepting bribes and extortion of the citizens was unheard of. Complaining of no fuel in the security van or flat tyre like our todays security agencies was never imagined at the time.

Historical Evolution of the Bakassi Boys' Security Outfit

The 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 situates within the Southern Senatorial district of the state. With the birth of Abia State in 1991, Aba came to be the commercial nerve centre of the state owing to its booming commercial activities while Umuahia became the administrative headquarters of the state. Aba South is the main city centre and the heartbeat of Abia state, south-east Nigeria.

The industrial nature of Aba had by the close of 1998 led to an upsurge in the population of Aba as people from different places migrated to the area. However, due to its enterprising nature, Aba has been fondly referred to as the 'Japan of Africa' (Nnaemeka & Onele, 2014), while the name 'Aba made' has become a popular Nigerian expression for cheap local manufactures. Thus, any material which appears to be cheap is termed Aba made owing to the fact that our people prefer foreign materials to our local manufactures. But that does not imply that Aba products are cheap or inferior as the name suggests. The major economic contributions of Aba people are textiles, garments, shoes, pharmaceuticals, plastics, cement and cosmetics. There is also a brewery and distillery within the city which is famous for its handicrafts.

The upsurge of people in the Enyimba city and following the commercial prowess of the city, the population of Aba swelled that artisans and expatriates of non-Igbo origins settled temporarily, if not permanently in Aba. The natives and people of other tribes like

Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba, Efik, Ibibio, Kalabari, Opobo, Benin, Tiv, Idoma and foreign nationals from Africa and other continents constituted part of the population of Aba till this day. With the rise in population coupled with the attendant consequences of the Structural Adjustment Programme (unemployment and economic difficulties), Aba gradually became a 'harbour' for unemployed youths who took to robbery, gangsterism and thuggery as survival options in the face of hardship during the era of the military. As a result, a serious escalation of organised crime began to rear its ugly head.

These organised crimes were carried out by a group of armed gangs who believed that through crime they could make life better in the face of economic difficulties. A chunk of Mafians also known 'Mafs' terrorised Aba and traders whose livelihoods depended on trade with traders from outside Aba. Thus, lives and property 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. Moreover, the level 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 the appointed day, they would force their way into the houses they had earmarked, 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 book called "One week, one trouble" as no day could pass by without shootouts, killings, rapes and robbery incidents. These crimes happened in seconds and minutes, and people lived in fear, (the fear of armed robbers and Mafs), who had killed about two hundred people in the city between 1997 and 1999 (Ekekwe, 2019).

As a measure of self-defence, people became their own security forces, taking up the security role of the police which the later 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 Mafs. It appears that 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.

The incessant harassment and intimidation of the residents and traders in broad day light by the so called Mafs had left the traders with no option than to devise a means of settling them. 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. But in the past, criminals are known to fear and tremble when they see the owners of the house they have come to rob, but nowadays, the owners fear, tremble and run away for the strangers. The condition of life of the people there could be attributed to what Thomas Hobbes describe as been nasty, brutish and short, because everyone was in fear and in doubt of what will happen the next minute.

On November 6, 1998, in a bid to shake off the chains of oppression by these hoodlums, the traders decided to confront the Mafians. When the traders got to Aba Mosque, a serious fight had developed. 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 traders continued their onslaught against the Mafs and their accomplices in such a way that some die-hard ones among them like GOC and Jango were killed and burnt while others were forced into exile.

The traders continued with their fight against the Mafs until Aba became a safe place for human activities as against what it used to be (a den of robbers). It was at this point that they deemed it a nice idea 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. According to Rebecca Jones, the traders vowed to embark on an operation of seizing and executing suspected armed robbers until nearly all suspected criminals had been executed or had fled the state (Rebecca, 2008).

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 Carmel'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. While the importance of these events cannot be denied, they may be regarded as the remote factors in the emergence of the Bakassi Boys.

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 rise 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 honour 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 summarised that, threatened with criminal activities and the minimal provision of security by the Police or better still deprivation of security which the populace were entitled to, the Ariaria traders with the majority of them coming from among shoe makers banded together in a collective action to wage a war against organised 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 activities of the Bakassi Boys Vigilante were extended to Anambra and Imo States on July 12, 2000 and 22 December 2000 respectively. The activities of the Boys which centred largely on jungle justice with tips of information provided by the populace about criminals and their activities ensured that between 1998 and 2002, armed robbery activities to a greater extent, ended with the violent death, exile or detention of the perpetrators and their accomplices.

The Bakassi Boys for their own safety had to operate in a "military style" – carrying small arms and light weapons as if they were a conventional and institutionalised security outfit.

They started with nothing but a 'cause' and quickly grew to become somewhat; a “Special Security Force” that relieved the injuries inflicted on the civil population by Mafians through organised criminal activities. They became, for the purpose of it a 'special security force' that fought against the Mafians. They possessed the qualities and skills required to rid the civil society of organised armed robbery activities and related crimes. However, the Bakassi Boys possessed charms which helped them ascertain whether a suspect is guilty or not. They used their lie detector apparatus in the form of a machete to identify criminals and used their charm-imbued necklace to which made it difficult for a suspect to lie. It should be noted that the Bakassi boys also set free, people who was accused of crime by their enemies and punish people who peddle lies against their perceived enemies. The administration of justice at the discovery of truth entailed torture and summary execution of a victim. The execution normally started with what the local people referred to as 'long sleeve' or 'short sleeve'.

The slang short sleeve and long sleeve entailed the amputation of the wrist or the elbow, respectively with the use of their 'Obejiri' (Machete) and subsequently, chopping off of other parts of the body after which they set the dismembered bodies ablaze. Probably, this strategy could have been adopted to serve as a deterrent to others who would be offenders among the crowd that normally watched the execution. The Bakassi Boys jungle justice strategy in fighting crime can therefore be seen as a synthesis of traditional practices and modernity. It is this strategy that helped them in overthrowing the reign of terror carried out by notorious armed robbers like Jango, GOC, Prophet Eddie, Derico and others whose 'protective charms' bowed to the 'protective and revelatory charms' of the Bakassi Boys (Akunne, 2015).

The Advent of the Bakassi Boys to Anambra State

Before the invitation of the Bakassi boys to Anambra state precisely in 2000, Anambra, Onitsha could be described as 'den of robbers' and haven for criminals. People were harassed and bullied on daily basis. It was only the uninformed that dared carry money or other valuables in the broad daylight. Notorious armed robbers were marauding the streets of Onitsha and having field days while the police were busy extorting and harassing innocent and unarmed youths. Armed robbers, ritualist, kidnappers and other hoodlums took over the city such that no one dared stay out beyond 7: pm. Travellers who mistakenly cross the bridge to Onitsha after 7: pm becomes a cheap prey to the criminal predators parading every nook and crannies of Onitsha and environs.

The security agents has become accustomed with the situation as they normally mind their business while the hoodlums perpetrate their evil acts. The police aloofness will not be unconnected with various experiences they have had with the hoodlums while trying to do their work. On many occasions the police have been ambushed and shot by the armed robbers for arresting their members as if they (robbers) were doing their lawful business. Although it should be noted that at a point, some policemen became agents and informants to the criminals and have aided them with guns and uniforms with which they carry their criminal acts.

Notorious criminals like **Okwudili Ndiwe**, a 22 year old, and popularly known as Derico nwa mama or simply Deri, Chiejina and Jonathan Uzoigwe (pulse.ng, 2018) were infamous for unleashing mayhem on the people of the state at large and Onitsha in particular. They were confident enough to recruit and operate a 'gangs' who were answerable to them by bringing 'returns' to them at the end of every operation. In those days, banks were robbed in their numbers and huge amount of money catered away without traces, apparently because some

influential people in the state are involved. Worst still they easily evade arrest and even when arrested, they don't spend a night in detention before they will be released via the connections they have with influential citizens who stood beside them in that criminal acts.

Apparently, about 1,500 criminals were killed by the Bakassi boys' vigilante group in Anambra especially in Onitsha and Nnewi as the case may be (All Africa.com, 2000). No matter how brutal, devilish and illegal their operation were, the truth remains that it brought peace and tranquillity to Anambra state between 1999 to 2003. They restored confidence in the people of Onitsha once again that people could sleep and have their eyes closed.

Before their arrival, all manner of crimes were being perpetrated in the state and covered by their perpetrators. Some of the police and house of Assembly members were indicted as their accomplices which always made their arrest and prosecution difficult (Ugonna, 2018) This assertion was buttressed by the confession of Derico when he alleged that some members of the Anambra state house of assembly and local government chairmen were his sponsors. Although, people may agree that he was under duress to speak, but we all know that in every lie, there is an element of truth. Why did the government and police not investigate the allegation? Why was it that the police kicked, arrested and detained some of the Bakassi boys for their role in the killing of Derico nwa mama? Why did the police and government prevailed on the boys when the popular prophet Edward Okeke (Eddie Nawgu) was arrested? Am also aware the police and the government officials were there and did not intervene when other criminals were arrested and killed by the Bakassi boys. This is an indication that crime persists because it has backups.

In Anambra especially in Onitsha, before the advent of the Bakassi boys, buses were robbed in broad day light while security agents disguise themselves to avoid being sighted by the hoodlums who see police as the greatest obstacle to their freedom. Emeka Ugwuja (2010), a trader in the Relief Market area of Upper Iweka corroborates this issues. He observes that security agents especially the police on sighting the armed robbers will quickly remove their uniforms and hide their guns so that they will not be identified by the armed robbers. He also said that the armed robbers shot at the police at sight as they perceive them as enemy of progress.

The dump site in Okpoko known as 'Ikpo ahihia' was a major hideout for the criminals in Onitsha. People always complain upon passing the route that they were searched and robbed. In fact there was hardly any week that passed in Onitsha without serious armed robbery experience. The police were helpless as some of the armed robbers seems invincible. They equally attack police stations in a bid to acquire arms with which they rob banks and big companies.

Though thousands of criminals were brutally killed by these dreaded boys, the climax of their presence in Anambra was the killing of Derico nwa mama and Prophet Edward Okeke, alias (Eddie Nawgu). Their arrest and eventual execution was highly celebrated by residents of Onitsha and environs. Their death elicited jubilations from every corner as they heaved a sigh of relief. The boys were able to deliver where the army and police put together were helpless. According to Unegbu (2018) Eddy Okeke alias Eddie Nawgu was a prophet based in his home town Nawgu, operating a healing ministry known as the Anioma Healing Ministry. He was untouchable and had killed and maimed many people in the name of offering them solution to their problems. It was confirmed that there was a river where both men and women were bathed naked. According to him, this evil river was capable of healing any kind of sickness and including raising a dead man. That was where the source of his power emanates.

Chief Emeka, Ikeogu (2019) from Ukpo, a neighbouring village with Nawgu, observed that a lot of men lose their wife to the prophet who claims that god told him that it was the wife was the cause of their problems. Thus many unborn babies were removed by the prophet through ritual means. According to Nnadozie,

Eddy derailed from the path of truth and justice, and started doing all sorts of devilish and fetish things. He slipped from the path of decency, and became uncontrollable in doing evil (Nnadozie, 2008)

Nnadozie claimed that, at this point, the prophet perpetrated all kinds of malicious crimes ranging from armed robbery, ritual killing, beating of widows, violence acts against the people, and the people could no longer feel secure having the prophet and his ministry which had virtually become a den of thieves around them. He, like Derico, also had government backing. This could be seen when he was arrested by the Bakassi boys. Delegation from influential people in the state, Government House and Aso Rock were trooping the headquarters of the Bakassi boys at White House Onitsha, (Uzo, 2010). Pressures were mounted on them to release him but they boys acted swiftly and put an end to everything by sending him to the great beyond. Uzo (2010) an eye witness to his death said that he was embowelled and dismembered before setting his dismembered parts ablaze.

For his part, **Okwudili Ndiwe**, alias Derico rose from a random street urchin to become the leader of a ruthless armed robbery gang that was synonymous with blood in the eyes of the people. At the height of his notoriety, traders could hardly display their wares with any illusion of permanence for fear that the shout of "Derico" would rent the air and begin another chapter where some would lose their livelihoods and their lives. It was no different at night, many would say they could only sleep with one eye open because Derico would come when he would, night or day.

He and his gang would lay ambush, waiting for luxurious inter-state buses to rob. In December 2000, it was said that Derico attacked a 59-seater bus at the popular Upper Iweka. After robbing the passengers, they killed all the passengers. Only four people survived (Pulse.ng, 2018). After operations, he would often boast of his invincibility and that no man could kill him. But his power failed him and he was captured by the boys. An Igbo adage has it that every day is for the thief, but a day is for the owner. Thus, everything he labour vanished at the presence of the Bakassi boys. Thus, his exit and that of other criminals in Anambra became a relief to all Anambrarians both home and abroad who could attest to the superiority of the Bakassi boys over that of the hoodlums.

Bakassi Boys' Vigilante Services and Conventional Security Agents: Lesson for our Security Agents

According to Okoye (2000) public servants regards government and public office as belonging to no one in particular, therefore they become mean and careless which gives room for corrupt practice. Similarly, the police and its sister security agencies pay little attention to the plight of the citizens unless it comes to where money is involved. They don't respond to distress calls and hardly care about the people which they are meant to protect the way that is expected of them. Investigation into a crime of murder, rape, assassination and other heinous crimes takes the police ages to come with report whether positive or negative, but when a police officer is shot by armed robbers, rapped or insulted, then the police will arrest and detain the perpetrators within two days of the incident.

The Bakassi boys, though used force and threat of it to arrest their victims, they were far from victimizing innocent people. The police were trained to investigate crime and arrest offenders, yet they arrest people indiscriminately with many innocent people detained. They even arrest people based on allegation and suspicion which makes it easy for them to harass innocent youths with the allegation that they are criminals. The security agent's attitude to the public is always that of nothing goes for nothing.

The Bakassi boys for the period they lasted in Anambra state and Aba, were never known for intimidating innocent people. Mr. Udo Hillary (2020) affirms that whenever the boys arrest a criminal, they will interview him and he will make his confession. He said that none of the people that was arrested and killed ever denied the fact that they were guilty of the crime accused them of. Their lie dictator was second to none. In saner climes, the government should have opted for the improvement of their kind of technology which gave them the upper hand above the police and the army. In fact the greatest of their security gadget was the instrument that makes a person who disappeared to reappear within some minutes. The instrument also makes it possible to import criminals who migrated to neighbouring states and towns on hearing the exploits of the boys.

The personal interest of the legitimate security agents as we are meant to know made them to be akin to bribery, intimidation, killing of innocent people via accidental discharge as they always claim. Extortion of unsuspecting members of the public such as the bus drivers, Indian hemp smokers, and petty criminals made them to be indifferent with big time armed robbers. At least to them, they have families and therefore should not risk their life for nothing.

We have not condemned the conventional security agents in its entirety. There are some, so many who are dedicated and willing to protect their father land. After all the police is your friend. All we are suggesting is that they should sit up to their duties and make the nation proud.

Conclusion

Security issues in Nigeria has gone beyond what our lukewarm security agents can tackle. Coupled with the politics which pervades every aspect of our national life, it becomes impossible to fight crime to a standstill because crimes are fought on ethnic basis. Boko haram, Fulani herdsmen, Niger Delta militants, armed robbers, kidnappers and so on are tackled on ethnic lines. This suggests why federal government pleads with Boko haram criminals to repent and embrace amnesty. When they falsely repent, they are subsequently enrolled into the army. How can a blind man lead a blind man? A criminal can never fight a criminal no matter how he pretends to do that.

The Bakassi boys was highly dedicated to the job they came to do. They did not combine their job with politics and did not abandon their task for bribes as the police do, neither did they operate on religious or ethnic lines. All they did was to call a spade a spade. They saw criminals as criminals and not as Igbo, Hausa or Yoruba or as pagan, Christian or Muslim. Security issues should be seen as a threat to the entire nation and should be tackled as such and not by asking about the source of their power and that it is against some religious beliefs. When the criminals strike, they don't kill based on religion or ethnic group and as such should be fought with every source that can defeat them. We have seen many times when criminals are handed over to the police and the police collect money from them and release them. The case of the notorious kidnapper Wadume, the police and the army is still fresh in our memory.

The Bakassi boys were able to achieve what they achieved within a short period of their stay because they meant business. After all the notorious Derico and Eddie Okeke were living with the police and security agencies and they never devised any means to arrest them or get them to behave properly. Rather they became friends with them so as to be free from their wrath. Security agents became friends with criminals so that the general public became enemy to the criminals, or should I say that this is also a security strategy.

We therefore suggest that the security agents should improve both in character and in equipment to be able to face the challenges of this hoodlums who have gone sophisticated. It is an irony for a criminal to carry Avtomat Kalashnikova (AK47) and pump action rifles while a legal security agents has with them pistol in the name of gun. The guns carried by our Fulani herdsmen are no match to what our security agents' parade as gun. So how will they cope? There must be a reverse of the trend if the war on insecurity must be won.

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