

Anti-Bullet Charms, Lie-Detectors and Street Justice: the Nigerian Youth and the Ambiguities of Self-Remaking

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Abstract

The failure of the Nigerian state, its police and judiciary to provide security has eroded citizenship trust. But this failure has tended to implicate the so-called 'elders' normally in charge of village, township and urban life-worlds. Disappointedly, Nigeria's 'young generations' creatively assume unofficial yet central positions of ambiguity in the restoration of social order and security. In urban, peri-urban and rural locations ethnic militias and private youth gangs operate as alternative police and adjunct judiciary in place of the state's failed institutions. These militia and youth gangs use guns, charms and violence to contest pressing concerns and negotiate contemporary realities. While processes of political economy and globalization remain unfavourable, youths – as *agents* and *subjects* of social change – are able to subvert status quo by deploying materials appropriated from the *local* and the *global* to define ambiguous positions. In one such hybridised situation, youths in Obudu¹ have created a device they term 'lie-detector' – by fusing ideas gleaned from *local* and *global* media spaces. Using this device as central but unconventional social equipment and, drawing validation from traditional social systems, these youths are negotiating new selves in a contemporary milieu. Using the analysis of social practice and popular representation of youth roles, activities and initiatives in Nigeria, this paper shows *how* sociality and its contestation in urban life moves the Nigerian youth from the periphery to the centre of social, political and economic nationalisms.

Introduction

It has been said severally that there is a problem of leadership that exacerbates social, political and economic challenges of contemporary Nigeria (Achebe 1983, Asobie 1998, GPAC et al 2004). At any rate, it is difficult to expect years of militarization and lack of effective democracy to generate responsible leadership. For, in the years after 1960's independence, a succession of military dictators took hold of Nigeria. And, the national economy was squandered and looted by a cabal of privileged people. By the end of the 70s decade, Nigeria's vibrant petrodollar economy had collapsed and mass pauperisation set in. Policies like General Babangida's Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), enforced in 1986, did nothing but aggravate national pauperisation processes by eradicating the abilities of small and medium-scale industries (SMEs) to survive. Dwindling economic fortunes led to increased poverty with a reduction in access to basic social services like health, education and employment (NCEMA 2003). With the entrenchment of militarization in Nigeria, "corruption became pervasive, ethnicity more pronounced, and the economy ruined" (Ostergard 2002:3). And, since the national economy was starved of funds, there were mass retrenchments in public and private corporations, including the severe breakdown in productive capacities. The worst hit was the informal sector, which employed (and still does) a larger chunk of Nigeria's teeming population. Masses of jobless and restive youths were thus poured into the streets of

¹ Fieldwork for this paper was done in 2005 and 2006 at Obudu, a peri-urban settlement in Cross River State, Nigeria.

urban centres. At the moment, cities like Lagos, Ibadan, Benin, Onitsha, Aba, Warri and Port Harcourt are busting at the seams from the criminality of youths searching for alternative means of survival. Although the so-called cross-boarder process of globalization is held to move people and capacities into better economic spaces (Appadurai 2000), globality has not been of particular benefit to Nigeria's unemployed youths. On the one hand, they can circulate only within the perimeters of the *local* (rural, urban and peri-urban) economies – migrating to the attractive *global* West being very unaffordable. On another hand, the influx of *global* economic interests does not impact appreciably on the socioeconomic conditions of the Nigerian youths. Rather, global multinational interests merely fuse with local machineries of crass exploitation as it is in the Niger Delta. In the end, the affectations of local big men and multinational corporations dictate the direction of Nigeria's monetary economy. And, there is a severe disparity between the opulence of multinational expatriates and political classes, on the one hand, and the squalor of millions of everyday people, on the other. It is this obnoxious economic disparity between everyday social reality and the lifestyle of local and global 'big men' that catalyses youth restiveness in the Niger Delta, for example. With the rise in unemployment, underemployment, denial and social frustration, youth restiveness has become a national reality in most parts of Nigeria today. Conversely, Nigerian youths have become very creative in contesting, re-inventing and reinserting themselves into the mainstreams of national economic and social life-worlds. What this paper does is to show *how* sociality and its contestation in urban life moves the Nigerian youth from the periphery to the centre of social, political and economic nationalisms.

One direct result of Nigeria's leadership crisis is that the state has been severely weakened. And, the state's weakening has also broken down social and cultural institutions. Thus, whole groups of people – youths, the old, women, children and vast millions of the poor – are compelled to the margins of economic life, where nothing seems to work. Furthermore, there often seems to be no clear lines between urban criminality and the state's security agencies like the police. Perhaps an example will suffice here. In the city of Benin, a man whose car was snatched recounted his experience. The robbers gave him an appointment to pick his car at a certain location the next day. At gunpoint they forbade him from making a report to the police. He swore to keep the gentlemanly agreement. But he later went to the police to lodge a written complaint about his stolen car. The police on duty were very cooperative and promised to recover the car. Not trusting too much in the police to recover his car, he kept the appointment with the robbers. The car was there as agreed. But, as he made to open the car, one of the robbers came out of the surrounding bush and scolded him for breaking the agreement by going to the police. The man swore again that he did not go to the police. Thereupon, the robber brought out and showed him the original handwritten statement he had made to the police. Owing to this erosion of police/criminal (security/insecurity) divide, citizenship, political and kingship authorities are continually deconstructed and challenged at every perceivable level in Nigeria today. Thus previous authorities wielded by politicians and traditional elders who normally take charge of decision-making at the village, township and urban life-worlds are being contested in the contemporary urban world. At the core of this contestation are the youths who are struggling to define self-identities while, at the same time, saddled with the futile responsibility of fending for extended families. This cyclic condition of futility is aptly captured in the popular saying: "*poor man de suffer – monkey de work, baboon de chop*". This Pidgin English² phrase means that, while millions of hardworking citizens are toiling in futility, the 'baboonic' categories of Nigerian leaders feast on the national wealth. The fact – by the way – that the wealth stolen by Nigerian leaders is kept in Western banks rather than invested in the country has also contributed to the economic

² Pidgin English is an Africanised and popular 'English' spoken in West Africa.

crises. It is however evident that this kleptocratic nationalism has unmade the Nigerian youth by denying social equity and access to life's basic necessities.

Although life looks very bleak from the periphery, the Nigerian youths have not remained silent and complacent in the drift towards social abyss. Nigeria's disappointed 'young generations' are creatively assuming unofficial yet central positions of ambiguity in the restoration of social order and security. And, the core methodology for this ambiguous restoration of social order is the privatisation of power for the provision of security and street justice. For, after years of military rule in Nigeria, the use of force and brutality has become normal in social discourse and practice(s). Expectedly, the Nigerian youths have appropriated violence and force as metalanguages of self consciousness and self-remaking – from the social periphery. At a Nigerian University campus, for instance, the student union slogan is “Aluta Corrosive Battalion” (plate 1). In a very telling way, this slogan significantly demonstrates how forces of social decay have engineered the play ground of the Nigerian youth psyche. Youths have come to appropriate military sloganeering and ammunition to contest oil wealth, security, survival and whatever else they hold dear. In seeking contemporary ways out of pressing concerns at the social periphery, Nigerian youths have come to occupy positions of relevance in new kinds of ambiguous ways. In the cities and urban centres millions of youths have sought economic survival in alternative forms of activities unaccredited by the state. While many take to criminality like armed robbery, ‘419’ scam e-mails, including hostage-taking in the oil Creeks, other youths have gained employment as vigilante – contesting and hunting-down their own kind. This youth contestation happens outside of state control and in the realms of unconstitutionality, where arms and charms – the *local* and the *global* – play active roles. In Nigeria, anti-bullet charms are believed to be very efficient in stopping bullets (Adeyeye 2004). These ambivalent charms, concocted from ingredients and rituals known only to the initiate, serve the interest of criminals and militias alike. Perhaps the example of three youth organisations: (1) the Bakassi Boys, (2) Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force and (3) the Obudu Youth Movement will suffice to demonstrate how contemporary sociality remakes and moves the Nigerian youth from the periphery to the centre of social, political and economic nationalisms.



Plate 1: The official vehicle of the Student Union of Cross River University of Technology, Calabar. The “SUG” on the number plate is “Student Union Government”.

1. The Bakassi Boys

Bakassi Boys is the name of an ethnic militia who, from 1998, privatised sovereign power and became *the* alternative law enforcers in the geographic space of the Nigerian Igbos. They arrested and publicly executed suspected criminals in direct contradiction of the Nigerian law and independently of the police and the judiciary (HRW/CLEEN 2002, Nwana 2000). Victims were usually youths that purportedly engaged in criminality of sorts, with the

complicity of the police. Citizenship lost faith in the law because armed robbers and criminals were able to bribe both the police and the judiciary. Civil Igbo populations then clamoured for and constituted a gang of paid youths to provide the security that the state had failed to provide. Since the state had failed, Bakassi was the alternative popular law (Ajibade 2006). Bakassi Boys had sovereign power – to investigate, arrest, judge and execute suspects in the streets. Owing to the group’s initial success in Abia state – where they started out – they were invited into other Igbo states to rid society of criminals. In terms of methodology Bakassi Boys employed either of two traditional cultic devices to determine the innocence or guilt of any suspect. In one method, a necklace of charms placed around the neck is reputed to disable the suspect from lying (plate 2). The second method involves a ritual cutlass placed across the upper chest, and which glowed ‘red’ only when the suspect was guilty of bloodshed. In general the operations of both the Bakassi Boys and their presumed criminals were a hectic blend of tradition and modernity – magical charms and pump-action guns. As soon as any of the cultic methodologies established “guilt”, the suspect is bound and taken to the streets where the broadest spectatorship is guaranteed. At the street-side public sphere the suspects are hacked to death with machetes and, their remains, burnt with car tyres and petrol (Harnischfeger 25-26). With the financial support of state governments, Bakassi justice was able to rid the Igbo societies of crime and criminality in just a few weeks – what the police could not do in several decades. However, by early 2002, Bakassi Boys had become number one enemy to the same popular public that inaugurated them. The vigilante youths became implicated in robberies, extortion and politically motivated murders of innocent people. This could not possibly have been otherwise since absolute power corrupts – not only absolutely but also self-destructively. In October 2002 government outlawed and disbanded the Bakassi militia in response to pressures from local politicians and Human Rights activists. This disbanding achieved very little because the Nigerian government took action against popular street justice without first providing constitutional security and effective justice systems. The police were (and still are) unprepared to assume security functions. Thus, as soon as Bakassi Boys were officially disbanded, criminality retook the region. And, as many of my interviewees tell me, crime has become worse than it was in the pre-Bakassi era in the Igbo states³. Streets, whole neighbourhoods and highways in the Igbo states have again become sites of terror because robbery gangs of desperate youths have retaken the society.



Plate 2: A scene from the popular video, *Issakaba*. This 4-part video narrates the escapades of the Bakassi Boys. The video’s title is in fact ‘Bakassi’ spelt backwards. In this picture Bakassi Boys have put a lie-detecting necklace on a suspect to compel him to speak the truth.

³ Charles Nwokoma told me this in a personal communication. He is an Igbo who lived in Onitsha and Aba.

2. Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force

The largest bulk of Nigeria's wealth comes from the oil-rich Niger Delta. A substantial part of this wealth should normally be deployed to develop host communities. But this has not been the case, after decades of oil production in Nigeria. Nigeria's oil wealth is distributed "on the basis of population". And, population determines "revenue allocation, provision of social services, legislative representation, and the establishment of everything from schools to roads to factories to post offices" (Maier 2000: 54). Thus, since the Niger Delta people are ethnic minorities in Nigeria, they have very little to show for decades of oil devastation. Rather, Niger Delta's petrodollar is used to develop other parts of the country. Painfully too, the rule of law and legal channels of redress have not been effective in addressing the peoples' concerns. There have been concerns about the shady liaison between oil multinationals and corrupt elements in government, which deploys armed soldiers and brute force in suppressing the dissenting voices of Niger Delta communities (Panter-Brick 1978, Okongwu 1986, Adams 1991, Human Rights Watch 1999a&b, Fleshman 1999). In such suppressive instances whole communities have been wiped out, civilians murdered by federal soldiers and others incarcerated.⁴ In direct response to this bastardisation of society the youths in the oil-producing communities have organised themselves into myriad militias armed with guns and charms. While they fight with contemporary ammunitions they also use traditional anti-bullet charms (plate 3). Although these armed militias privatise power to contest ethnic domination and oil exploitation, there are evident criminalities in their general methodologies. In contrast to Ken Saro Wiwa's⁵ preference for dialoguing the Niger Delta problems, the youth militias deploy arms to loot, vandalise oil installations and kidnap Western personnel.



Plate 3: Dokubu-Asari and members of the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force Source, armed with guns and charms.

SOURCE: Reuters < <http://www.alertnet.org>>



Plate 4: In the break down of law and order, angry youths other than militias also enact their own contestations.

SOURCE: Reuter 1999: 126.

There are also allegations of rape, murder and the victimisation of civilians. The Niger Delta fight is not just about crude oil. It is about clear indices of denial, that is, financial social and sexual power. It is the power to accumulate, oppress and control. More than anything else, it is lawlessness, state failure and oil multinational exploitation that have led to the formation of private militias and armed gangs that seek to challenge status quos while getting some of the

⁴ See Human Rights Watch's report, *Call For Action Against Abuses In The Niger Delta*. New York: Human Rights Watch, December 21 1999.

⁵ Saro-Wiwa and eight of his compatriots – unfoundedly accused of being guilty in the death of several conservative Ogoni chiefs – were executed by the Abacha junta in 1995. See Maier, 2000: 75-110. See also "The Ogoni Struggle." *Remember Saro-Wiwa*. <<http://www.remembersarowiwa.com/deathksw.htm>>. Nov 14, 2005.

oil wealth for themselves. Among these militias are MOSOP (which claims to be non-violent), National Youth Council of the Ogoni People (NYCOP) and Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF) headed by Mujahid Dokubu-Asari. Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force has been the most successful in generating the chaos and insecurity necessary for disrupting oil production in Nigeria. In the oil creeks, the group has been able to wage armed warfare with federal military. And, although Dokubu-Asari has been arrested, the war is still ongoing and civilians are suffering. As Maier says, Niger Delta populations have become "powerless victims of globalization...pitted in an unequal struggle against a corrupt" government and "uncaring transnational" oil companies (2000: 81). However, the situation is clearly not as simple. For, the Niger Delta is also *the* outplay of a malignant contestation where youths are using arms to renegotiate social, political, ethnic and economic identities. While the youths are contesting with government and oil multinationals, they do not fail to take sexual advantages of women. In this contestation, Niger Delta society is caught in the cross-fire – as the youths remake and insert themselves into social, economic and political prominence on local/global scales. In an ambiguous postcolony, Niger Delta youths are simply deploying the politics of crude-oil disruption to represent themselves and accumulate powers in financial, social and sexual dimensions.

3. The Obudu Youth Movement

Private militias and vigilantes are also very active as alternative police and judiciary at the rural hinterlands and peri-urban centres – far from major cities in Nigeria. Peri-urban⁶ settlements – dislocated from the cosmopolitan centre and, yet, fed by the urban economy, while maintaining rural roots – have become interactive sites for local and global forces that formulate the lives of the Nigerian youth today. Having been unmade by the disastrous decline of the national economy and the breakdown of social institutions, the militarised psyche of the Nigerian youth drifts from the city to peri-urban centres in its desperate search for new forms of identity. The city, with its crippling sense of denial – announced by glamorous skyscrapers, palatial houses and big cars – contrasts and highlights the daily plight of unwaged youths. On the contrary, peri-urban settlements maintain structural links with the rural and provide affordable food and shelter, including cheap traditional alcohol that helps, in no small way, to douse youth anger. Occasionally, however, not even cheap alcohol can keep the youths from venting layers of frustration on victims of vigilante activities. One such peri-urban settlement is Obudu Urban⁷, in Cross River State, southeast Nigeria, where the *local* and the *global*, the *urban* and the *rural* have been fluxed together by youths in the untidy matrix of self remaking.

Obudu Urban, home to the famous Obudu Cattle Ranch⁸, is made up of five villages: Bebuabung, Abongkibi, Atiekpe, Bebuagam and Bebuawhuam. With an estimated 600, 000⁹ inhabitants, Obudu is about five hours drive from Calabar, the state capital. In postcolonial terms, this distance from the centre means less financing, less development and less government attention to the area. Thus, in Obudu, there is only one police station, very scarce electricity supply and no portable water. The roads and houses at the city centre – built in colonial times – are also in very bad condition in this town. However, the inhabitants are

⁶ I use this term to refer to settlements that are ostensibly urban but with social amenities less developed than at the core cities and metropolitan areas.

⁷ The inhabitants call Obudu 'Urban' to relish in the fact that their settlement was a colonial centre (with all the developments that came with this). They also seem to use the nomenclature to distinguish themselves from their more 'rural' neighbours.

⁸ Obudu Cattle Ranch Resort, up on a high mountain, has become a major tourist destination in Nigeria. Tourists come from Europe, Nigeria and other parts of Africa. There is a cable car to lift visitors up to the Ranch's temperate environment.

⁹ I found no government population record. This estimate is given by Mr Richard Ileti, current youth leader of Obudu and Councillor representing Obudu Urban at the local government legislature.

much undaunted about government's apparent neglect. They are very active in finding ways to develop and make life better for themselves. Obudu has a club, a number of petrol stations and about 10 sleepable hotels – all without government support. What is most striking about Obudu people's ability to take charge of their lives is the methodology by which the youths have become prominent in the provision of security, opinion formulation, political consciousness and ethno-nationalism.

Drawing membership from the five villages Obudu youths have formed a movement – organised in militia and vigilante style – that provides security and social cohesion. The Obudu youth movement is democratic because leadership is changed by election once every 3 years. This possibility for leadership change significantly differentiates the Obudu youth movement from other dictatorial groups like the Bakassi Boys and the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force. Frequent change in leadership provides for more accountability and prevents self-perpetration and abuse of power, which are problems encountered by Bakassi Boys and the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force.

The Obudu youth movement is also different from other Nigerian militias in that they have shifted from the social periphery and earned a prime place in ethno-national life. By being open to public scrutiny and democratic frameworks while performing their social functions, the youths have taken the 'eldership' position of social supremacy typically allocated to so-called 'elders' normally in charge of village, township and urban life-worlds. These traditional elders are usually composed of patrimonial old men who decide what happens in society, formulate public opinion and adjudicate social frictions. This traditional position of elders has been successfully contested and renegotiated in the society by the rise of the Obudu youth movement. What catalysed this upturning of social hegemony was the failure of the elders to stand up to contemporary problems and provide answers to emerging social questions. This failure is however linked to the filtering-down of the larger crises in Nigerian national leadership. In response to the failure of ethno-elder leadership, the young generation then formed the Obudu Youth Movement in 2000.¹⁰ The formulation of this movement has enabled the youths to upturn previous hegemony by taking central position in ethno-national currents – while confining former elders to the social periphery. From this new vantage position the youths in Obudu are employing conventional and unconventional methodologies to administer society.

Another significant difference from other militias is that the Obudu youth movement has been able to effectively work with the police in providing security and justice. They are organised into vigilante groups to take shifts during night and day patrols. Criminals and offenders are arrested, investigated and punished (in civil cases) or handed over to the police (in criminal cases). In terms of street patrols, the youth movement has virtually replaced the police.¹¹ And, knowing how corruption has infiltrated social institutions, the youths do extensive follow-up on every suspect handed over to the police. According to Richard Ileti, a youth leader:

When we hand over criminals to the police, we follow-up on the case to make sure the culprits are not unduly released. We even go as far as to meet with the magistrates to ensure that the law has taken its due course. When the police know that we are following up, they cannot practice corruption in the case. (*Personal Interview*)

¹⁰ This date was provided during a Personal Interview with M. C. Adaliku, an Obudu youth leader, on Thursday April 7, 2005 at Obudu.

¹¹ Since 2005 when I started my fieldwork in Obudu, I have never come across a policeman in the streets of the town. I usually find them in clusters around the police station itself.

However, while the police are equipped with guns, shields, batons, teargas canisters, handcuffs etc, the main equipment employed by the Obudu Youth Movement is a device called *liffung* or lie detecting machine. This machine was fabricated by combining ideas gleaned from *local* and *global* media. On the one hand, the Obudu youths encountered lie-detecting machines in detective films from Hollywood, where suspects are connected to equipment that determine when individuals tell lies. On another hand, the youths saw images of slave holding devices in some Nigerian video films¹² that they saw. From this eclectic hybrid of local and global images the Obudu youths then created the lie-detector. The youths employ this new device in social spaces, times and contexts different from the sources of the original ideas. This machine neither requires electricity nor the power of charms to operate. The lie-detector is, simply, an effective torture equipment – a long heavy wood with holes through which suspects are logged on (plates 5 & 6). The methodology of the lie-detector is to generate pain, excruciatingly beyond the bearable thresholds of the human nerves. For most individuals 2 minutes on the lie-detector is more than sufficient.¹³ In Obudu, it is believed that “no one can go into that machine without telling the truth”.¹⁴



Plate 5: The lie-detector. It is installed at several locations around Obudu. Each lie-detector centre is manned by appointed youths who report directly to the youth leader.



Plate 6: A suspect logged to the lie-detector. He stole some money and audiocassettes (exhibited on his head). Initially adamant about his innocence, it took a few seconds on the machine to get his confession and the stolen items.

The moment confession is made and the location of stolen goods is revealed, the suspect is released. Depending on the nature of the crime, suspects are logged on to the machine as follows:

- Lighter crimes – one leg
- Heavier crimes – both legs, with the weight on the arms
- Women – legs are not raised.

¹² Called Nigerian video films, these ‘films’ are features shot and sold to audiences in videotape and VCD formats. The films are becoming increasingly popular with audiences across Africa and its Diaspora.

¹³ Richard Ileti, Personal Interview.

¹⁴ Peter Undie, a University lecturer, in a Personal Interview at Obudu on Saturday June 24, 2006 at Obudu. Other interviewees reiterate this point. When I saw pictures of victims, and the machine was also demonstrated for me to see, I became convinced about its efficacy.

When confessions are made and suspects are logged out of the machine, they are fined or handed over to the police. In extreme cases offenders are banished from the community to maintain the purity of their ethnic nation.

Conclusion: Ambiguities of Self-remaking

It is evident that massive youth unemployment, urban criminality and lack of security and social justice has exacerbated citizenship distrust in the laws and agents of the Nigerian state. And, ethnicity has fed into this national mistrust as individual youth groups attempt to find alternative means for social cohesion. Although ethnicisation in Nigerian politics began prior to independence in 1960 (Barber, Collins and Ricard 1997), it is militarization, corruption and economic breakdown that have catalysed it in the years afterwards. And, since the state's laws have not seemed to work, Nigerian youths are defining new ways of contesting status quos and seeking self-representation and urban security in the emerging popular sphere. With *Bakassi* justice the Igbo youths, in the place of western police and judiciary, inaugurated self-help and traditional systems including the use of the occult to fight crime (Harnischfeger 2003). In the Niger Delta youths are using arms and charms to negotiate ethnic domination, environmental degradation and fairer deals in the distribution of oil wealth. At Obudu, youths have become very sensitive to the changing times and the failure of local elders to rise up to the challenges of the contemporary urban world. Whereas the Bakassi and Delta youths have depended on ammunition and charms to negotiate pressing concerns, Obudu youths have used the lie-detector device as central but unconventional social equipment in negotiating new selves in a contemporary milieu. Having been victims of state violence, Nigerian youths are now employing various forms of violence to fight violence (Human Rights Watch 2003). And, since the state and its judicial institutions have been no less violent, the distinction between legality and illegality becomes very blurred in this unconventional contestation of sociality in urban life-worlds. In negotiating the socioeconomic, political and cultural constraints of this urban world, sociality is reconstructed in us-against-them dichotomies. At one moment, the state and its multinational collaborators are *the* enemies; at other moments presumed criminals (that are themselves youths) are targets of youth anger and unconventional contestations. At both realms of contestation there are silent profiteers and non-participant losers. The sophistry in the militias' armoury suggest links to local big-men and politicians¹⁵ who, for personal profits, openly voice government's disdain while secretly funding social destabilisation. Also, there are unfortunate losers – women, children and the poor – that do not participate but yet fall victim to maiming, murder and rape. What remains an evident ambiguity is that both realms of criminality and militia movements are organised and maintained by the Nigerian youths – thrown to the streets by unemployment and other diverse forms of incapacitation. Criminality and vigilantism are then new forms of ambiguous and ambivalent urban employment, where the levels of proliferation are directly proportional to the level to which youth unemployment and social collapse pervade society. The unconventional formulations in the remaking of the Nigerian youths are then “sensitive barometers of cultural change which manifest in their heterogeneity and contradictoriness the often tentative, unfinished and messy nature of change.”¹⁶

It was John Kennedy that said: “Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country”. Kennedy's nationalism seems incompatible with the postcolonial life-world. Using ambivalent and ambiguous methodologies, the Nigeria youths are actively engaged in performing popular opinion. They seem to be declaring: “Ask what your country can do for you”. And, until Nigeria – as a workable state – is able to quell social

¹⁵ That local politicians infiltrate and use militias is not in doubt. On one of my fieldwork nights at Obudu, a local politician that was gaining popularity was murdered by some young men. The manner of the murder suggest that the motive was political and that the murderers were persons familiar with the town's geography.

¹⁶ Norman Fairclough, *Media Discourse*. (London: Edward Arnold, 1995). 60.

desperation fuelled by layers of memory and severe economic disparities, the ambiguous processes of self-remaking among the youths shall continue to evolve new patterns and new fervours. We may then expect the ambiguous processes of youth formulation in Nigeria to imbibe the untidy social and political inconsistencies that may emerge in the larger society. This cannot possibly be otherwise, since aspects of society do not exist in isolation. On its part Nigerian popular opinion is not uninvolved in the ongoing social debates. For, a series of popular video films like *Issakaba* and *My Command*¹⁷ – seen and discussed by millions of locals – reconstruct popular notions about ethnic identity, insecurity, street justice and the contested spheres of the Nigerian city. These videos, produced and consumed outside the ability of the state to moderate, enables popular opinion to formulate alternative discourses about national life and social reality. By operating behind institutional frameworks, popular opinion and collective youth psyche – as *agents* and *subjects* of social change – are able to subvert status quo by deploying materials appropriated from the *local* and the *global* to define ambiguous and alternative positions. And, these positions formulated from ostensibly democratic but painful layers of public memories, offer us unique versions of social history. What remains to be answered is how to deal with or draft-in the new, popular and ambiguous positions of the Nigerian youth into the formulation of conceptual debates about society, politics and change in the contemporary global world. For, though globalisation is thought to share modernity around the world (Held et al 1999), the formulation of modernity in social contestation by Nigerian youths neither fits global frameworks nor does it contravene local tradition. It is creatively blended with religious rituals, anti-bullet charms and lie-detecting machines – reconstructed from mediated images. This new modernity, formulated around ambivalent paradigms – behind the back of the state – is as ambiguous as the collective psyche that produces it. These “modes of collective youth action” are contemporary bases for “access to resources and the distribution of power” (240). And, this new collective modernity is then an integral barometer of the unconventional, awry and ongoing processes that are remaking and inserting the Nigerian youths into vacated seats of postcolonial privilege. These privileges – of financial, social and sexual powers – are then the axes upon which the boundary of self-remaking shifts in very ambiguous ways. Through these ambiguities urban contestation moves the Nigerian youth from the periphery to the centre of social, political and economic nationalisms.

¹⁷ *Issakaba* is a video about the activities of the Bakassi Boys and *My Command* recounts the contestation of militias in the Niger Delta. Both videos were very popular with Nigerian audiences.

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