

Interconnected Security: Non-State Informal Policing in Africa

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Author bio

Khadija Nda-Yakubu, is a researcher with expertise in security governance, informal policing, and development in Africa. Her doctoral research at SOAS University of London, funded by the prestigious Mo Ibrahim Foundation, examined the intersection of human development and security actors in Africa. In addition to her focus on security, Khadija's diverse body of work spans urban poverty, governance, and international development.

Abstract

The paper examines the role of non-state informal policing in Africa's crime prevention frameworks across multiple scales, focusing on sub-Saharan Africa, state-level dynamics, and community initiatives. Using Nigeria as a central case, with comparisons to Kenya, Tanzania, Ghana, and South Africa, the study explores how corruption, weak institutions, and insufficient resources have predominantly contributed to the rise and continued reliance on non-state actors, such as community policing groups, vigilante organisations, and private security firms, to fill critical security gaps left by the state. Employing a historical and qualitative approach, the research traces the evolution of governance and security from pre-colonial times through the post-independence era, analysing data from historical documents, scholarly literature, and case studies. The findings reveal the complex interactions between state and non-state actors, offering insights into hybrid security governance and its implications for sustainable development in Africa. This study highlights the importance of a multi-scalar approach to security governance, providing valuable strategies for improving security in contexts of state fragility.

Keywords: Non-state actors; Informal policing; Community security; Hybrid governance; Vigilante groups; Regional security.

Background

Establishing stronger states in Africa is crucial for designing and implementing agendas aimed at improving peace and security.¹ However, the state's inability to adequately provide safety has led

¹ Jeffrey Isima, "Scaling the Hurdle or Muddling Through Coordination and Control of Security in the ECOWAS Region," *African Security Review* 16, no. 3 (2007): 52-63.

citizens to take security into their own hands, often resulting in vigilantism.² In the absence of effective state institutions, particularly in combating crime a widespread issue in Africa, alternatives such as informal policing have emerged. The significance of partnerships in delivering policing services and ensuring community safety is steadily increasing.³

Ideal models of stable democratic states often fail to reflect the realities of many African nations, where weak state institutions have given rise to hybrid security arrangements or non-state organisations operating alongside the state. In Nigeria, for instance, vigilante groups work with the state to provide security.⁴ Many of Nigeria's 36 states, where federally controlled security structures fail to address grassroots insecurity, have established community police organisations or empowered local vigilantes.⁵ The engagement between non-state organisations and the state varies across regions and over time. In some cases, the state opposes these groups to maintain its monopoly on security, while in others, it lends approval, influences, or even assumes control over them.⁶

Security governance in Africa requires a multi-scalar approach. At the regional level, themes such as state fragility and the rise of non-state actors dominate. At the state level, distinct governance strategies and partnerships emerge. At the community level, local initiatives reflect unique socio-cultural dynamics. Community initiatives, such as vigilante groups in Nigeria, community policing

² CLEEN Foundation, *Crime and Policing in Nigeria: Challenges and Options* (Lagos: CLEEN Foundation, 2003); Rita Abrahamsen and Michael C. Williams, *Globalization of Private Security: Country Report—Nigeria* (Oslo: Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, 2005); Elrena Van der Spuy and Ronnett Röntschi, "Police and Crime Prevention in Africa: A Brief Appraisal of Structures, Policies and Practices," *South African Review of Sociology* 39, no. 2 (2008): 209-224; AfroCritic, "The Vigilante Phenomenon in Nigeria: Implications for Democracy and Development," *AfroCritic*, 2013.; Kate Meagher, Tom De Herdt, and Kristof Titeca, "Unravelling Public Authority: Paths of Hybrid Governance in Africa," *DIIS Working Paper*, 2014.

³ Trevor Jones and Tim Newburn, *Policy Transfer and Criminal Justice: Exploring US Influence Over British Crime Control Policy* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2006); Jorunn Gressgård and Steffen Jensen, "Policing the Urban Periphery in Africa: Policing as Practice and Ideology in Sierra Leone," *Social Dynamics* 41, no. 2 (2015): 304-320.

⁴ Daniel E. Agbiboa, "Origins of Hybrid Governance and Armed Community Mobilization in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Resolve Network*, 2019, <https://www.resolve.net.org/research/origins-hybrid-governance-and-armed-community-mobilization-sub-saharan-africa>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Agbiboa, "Origins of Hybrid Governance."

in Kenya, and traditional security systems in Tanzania, play a key role in addressing security gaps left by the state. This analysis highlights how local contexts shape the effectiveness and legitimacy of these initiatives.

Case Studies

This paper examines non-state informal policing in Africa's crime prevention frameworks across regional, state, and community levels, focusing on Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania, Ghana, and South Africa. These cases, shaped by distinct historical, political, and developmental contexts, provide insights into the effectiveness of informal policing.

- **Nigeria:** Colonial history and ethnic diversity have influenced Nigeria's security landscape, with vigilante groups and community policing filling gaps where state presence is weak.
- **Kenya:** The Mungiki sect highlights grassroots efforts to combat crime, showcasing the complex relationship between community-led security and formal state mechanisms.
- **Tanzania:** The Sungusungu, initially formed to address cattle rustling, demonstrates how traditional practices adapt to modern security needs, complementing state efforts in rural areas.

Informal policing is classified into four interaction types with the state (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004):

1. **Complementary Interaction:** Formal and informal institutions work together for a common goal.
2. **Mutually Accommodating:** Formal and informal institutions operate alongside each other without interference.
3. **Competitive Relationship:** Informal institutions undermine formal ones.
4. **Substitutive Relationship:** Informal institutions fill gaps left by absent or ineffective formal institutions.

Complementary informal institutions

Complementary informal institutions 'fill in gaps' by dealing with situations not covered by formal norms nor by aiding the pursuit of individual goals within the formal institutional framework.

These non-formal organisations frequently improve efficiency.⁷ Complementing occurs when there is a perceived security gap in the area or sphere under the authority of the state. For example, the community may believe that the state is not doing enough to address gangsterism issues. Communities organise their own security forces to assist the police in such cases. Such assistance can take the form of community patrolling alongside the police, or it can take the form of information and local knowledge sharing.⁸ Complementary informal institutions can also act as a foundation for formal institutions, by generating or reinforcing incentives to uphold formal regulations that would otherwise be only on paper. In this context, it is considered that informal institutions do not only co-exist with effective formal institutions, but rather play a critical role in making the formal rules of the game effective.⁹

There are several examples of complementary informal security providers in Africa. Rwanda's Gacaca Courts, established after the 1994 genocide, promoted truth-telling, reconciliation, and healing by involving local communities. These courts integrated traditional conflict resolution mechanisms into the formal justice system.¹⁰ Another example is Kenya's Nyumba Kumi System, where neighbourhoods are divided into groups of ten households, each with a leader responsible for local security and dispute resolution. This initiative emphasizes community participation in security and cohesion.¹¹

⁷ Gretchen Helmke and Steven Levitsky, "Informal Institutions and Comparative Politics: A Research Agenda," *Perspectives on Politics* 2, no. 4 (2004): 725-740.

⁸ Bruce Baker, *Multi-Choice Policing in Africa* (Stockholm: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2008); Louis Berg, "Community Policing and the Evolution of Policing," *Journal of Community Safety* 6, no. 3 (2010): 245-262; Glib Artemovich Voloskyi, "Hybrid Governance in Post-Apartheid South Africa" (Marster Diss: 2020).

⁹ Gretchen Helmke and Steven Levitsky, "Informal Institutions and Comparative Politics: A Research Agenda," *Perspectives on Politics* 2, no. 4 (2004): 725-740.

¹⁰ Timothy Longman, "An Assessment of Rwanda's Gacaca Courts," *Peace Review* 21, no. 3 (2009): 304-312.

¹¹ Phyllis Ndonu, John Muthama, and Kariuki Muigua, "Effectiveness of the Nyumba Kumi Community Policing Initiative in Kenya," *Journal of Sustainability, Environment and Peace* 1, no. 2 (2019): 63-67.

Amotekun - Complementary

Western Nigeria Security Network Agency, aka ‘Operation Àmòtèkún,’ was launched on January 9, 2020, in Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria.¹² The Yoruba word Amotekun literally means ‘leopard.’ Amotekun is a form of community policing security outfit put together by the governors of six South-Western states of Nigeria, namely Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Ondo, Osun, and Ekiti, as a countermeasure or response to the problem of insecurity in the region. Amotekun further emerged because people were dissatisfied with how the Nigerian security agents were responding to proven cases of conflicts and attacks in the southwest region of Nigeria.¹³ The security outfit was established to control the development of the incessant crime rate that has been disturbing the South-West states. Some of the prominent ones include banditry, kidnapping, insurgents, herdsmen and farmers clashes, and armed robbers, which have made life intolerable for Nigerians in various parts of the country. The overwhelming insecurity in the region had forced the six governors of the South-west to inaugurate the security outfit to tackle peculiar security threats in the region.¹⁴ The Amotekun Corps has also received constitutional support from the region's six state legislatures. Ondo, Ogun, Oyo, and Ekiti states have since kick-started the operations of the security outfit endorsed by the governments of the six South-West states last year.¹⁵

The Southwest Zone is the first to have come up with a regional plan for the joint protection of its citizens in the country. The security outfit is intended to operate as a support vigilante network that will offer surveillance and intelligence services to the Police and other formal security agencies to monitor, detect, report, prevent and possibly deter crime and arrest criminal elements in the South-West region. It is not an alternative to the Police force but a complementary security measure. The outfit is simply an intelligence gathering that will help the Police in no small measure

¹² "Àmòtèkún ‘Fails’ to Tackle Insecurity in South West," *Daily Trust*, January 12, 2020, <https://dailytrust.com/amotekun-fails-to-tackle-insecurity-in-south-west>.

¹³ Adelani Adepegba, "Amotekun Must Not Become Human Rights Abuser Like Police – Ojigho, Amnesty Int’l Nigeria Director," *Punch Newspapers*, February 25, 2020, <https://punchng.com/amotekun-must-not-become-human-rights-abuser-like-police-ojigho-amnesty-intl-nigeria-director/>.

¹⁴ Kayode Oyero, "FG’s Failure to License Amotekun to Bear Arms Illegal – Falana," *Punch Newspapers*, January 20, 2021, <https://punchng.com/fgs-failure-to-license-amotekun-to-bear-arms-illegal-falana/>.

¹⁵ *ibid*

to bring about peace and orderliness in the country.¹⁶ The overall aim of Operation Amotekun is not different from other similar groups like the Civilian Joint Task Force in the North-East and other local vigilante groups in other regions of the country. Amotekun was created to have a synergy with the Police and is intended to be supervised by the Police and not to be used to abuse citizens.¹⁷ The security outfit is poised to complement the efforts of other security agencies including the new community policing initiative of the Nigeria Police and other existing security agencies.¹⁸

In support of the outfit, all the six southwest governors contributed twenty vehicles each, with Oyo contributing thirty-three vehicles to assist the operatives in carrying out their duties. They also procured 100 units of motorcycles each.¹⁹ However, there have been disagreements about how the security outfit should be run. The Inspector General of Police emphasised that the Amotekun Corps should be operated at the state level like others of its kind and not as a regional outfit. According to him, every state has one form of security arrangement, whether it is vigilante or neighbourhood watch that is working in the state to fight crime and Amotekun should not act different from these initiatives.²⁰ Nevertheless, most stakeholders in the southwest have disagreed that the statement is the IGP's opinion and that his opinion is not a law but an expression of personal view. They have also opposed plans by the Nigerian government to utilise Mohammed Adamu, the then-Inspector-General of Police, to define and oversee Amotekun's structure, arguing that this would limit state or regional authority of the group.²¹ Operation Amotekun is similar to the Civilian Joint Task Force in the North-East, Hisbah in Kano State, and other local vigilante groups in other parts of the country in that it was created to work in tandem with the police and is intended to be supervised

¹⁶ Mike Ozekhome, "AMOTEKUN: Constitutional Legal Security Issues Involved," *Vanguard*, February 12, 2020, <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2020/02/amotekun-constitutional-legal-security-issues-involved/>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ James Ogunnaike, "Amotekun to Kick Off in Ogun January—Gov Abiodun," *Vanguard Newspapers*, February 12, 2021, <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2021/01/amotekun-to-kick-off-in-ogun-january-gov-abiodun/>.

¹⁹ "Àmòtèkún 'Fails' to Tackle Insecurity in South West," *Daily Trust*.

²⁰ Kayode Oyero, "FG's Failure to License Amotekun to Bear Arms Illegal – Falana."

²¹ "Afenifere, Others Reject Control of Amotekun by Nigeria's Inspector-General of Police," *Sahara Reporters*, August 26, 2020, <http://saharareporters.com/2020/08/26/afenifere-others-reject-control-amotekun-nigerias-inspector-general-police>.

by the police rather than used to abuse citizens. Those hired will be familiar with the region's terrain, culture, and language, which will be useful to the police and other security organisations.²²



Figure 1: An image of the Amotekun officers in action (source; Oriowo, 2021)

[Accommodating informal institutions.](#)

Accommodating informal institutions create incentives for behavior that affects the substantive outcomes of formal norms without explicitly breaking them; they contradict the spirit but not the letter of formal regulations. States often accommodate non-state security measures that address concerns outside the official legal system, such as witchcraft or socially inappropriate behaviour.²³

These informal institutions often arise from dissatisfaction with formal norms but without the ability to amend or break them. They reconcile individual interests with formal frameworks, stabilising institutions by reducing demands for reform, even without improving efficiency.²⁴ An example of accommodating informal institutions is Nigeria's O'dua People Congress (OPC). Founded in 1994 as a Yoruba cultural group, the OPC evolved into a political organisation. Despite involvement in violence, the Nigerian state accommodated the OPC, especially under the 1990s

²² Mike Ozekhome, "AMOTEKUN: Constitutional Legal Security Issues Involved," *Vanguard*.

²³ Glenn D. Super, "Urban Informal Security," *Policing and Society* 24, no. 4 (2014): 448-467.

²⁴ Gretchen Helmke and Steven Levitsky, "Informal Institutions and Comparative Politics: A Research Agenda," *Perspectives on Politics* 2, no. 4 (2004): 725-740.

military regime, using it to counter opponents and maintain order.²⁵ In Mali, the Dozos, a traditional hunter community, are recognised by the government and combat extremist groups in the northern region.²⁶

The O'dua People Congress (OPC) - Accommodating

For the OPC, a Sovereign National Conference is required if Nigeria's various ethnic and social groups are to co-exist under one undivided Federal State free of oppression, marginalisation, and other forms of injustice. The OPC was founded during the dark and brutal era of General Sani Abacha's dictatorial military rule. It was thought to be an ethnic reaction to the military regime's perceived oppression of Yoruba people.²⁷ This persecution was thought to have culminated in the annulment of Chief M.K. O. Abiola's, a Yoruba, victory in the June 12, 1993-presidential election in Nigeria. But the OPC has meddled into vigilante activities and is perceived to be effective in using unorthodox means to fish out and eliminate criminals. For this reason, the group has often clashed with the Police who believe that the OPC is usurping their traditional roles or Constitutional functions. The police also accuse the OPC of going too far and using unlawful means to kill innocent individuals.²⁸ The OPC, on the other hand, accuses the police of collaborating with and assisting criminals. They claim that when suspects are apprehended and handed over to the police, the police collect a bribe from the suspects, release them, and then turn against their captors. The OPC and the police, on the one hand, and the police and civil society, on the other, had regular fierce and bloody battles. Both sides have suffered many casualties as a result of this violent conflict.²⁹

²⁵ Monsuru Adegboyega Kasali, "Analyzing the Evolution of Private Security Guards and Their Limitations to Security Management in Nigeria," *African Journal of Criminology and Justice Studies* 5, no. 1 (2011): 4.

²⁶ Sten Hagberg, "Traditional Hunters but Not Always Poachers: Power, Authority, and the Political Ecology of Hunting in Northern Mali," *African Studies Review* 62, no. 1 (2019): 83-105.

²⁷ "OPC Calls for Sovereign National Conference," *Vanguard News*, 2020, <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2020/02/opc-calls-for-sovereign-national-conference/>.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Mike Ozekhome, "AMOTEKUN: Constitutional Legal Security Issues Involved," *Vanguard*.

Competing informal institutions.

In this scenario, formal norms and procedures are inconsistently implemented, allowing actors to disregard or violate them. These informal institutions create incentives that contradict formal rules: following one rule necessitates breaking another. Common examples of such institutions include clientelism, patrimonialism, clan politics, and corruption. Competing informal institutions are prevalent in post-colonial settings where formal institutions were imposed on indigenous rules and authority systems.³⁰

Several examples of competitive informal security providers or organisations can be found in Africa, particularly where state security is weak or insufficient. One example is Somalia's Al-Shabaab militant group, which emerged as an Islamist insurgency opposing the Transitional Federal Government. Al-Shabaab established its own governance structures and controlled territories, effectively challenging formal state institutions.³¹

In contrast, the Kamajors in Sierra Leone emerged as a traditional militia group during the civil war, rooted in the practices of secret societies and local self-defense mechanisms. Unlike the Mungiki, the Kamajors maintained a more cooperative relationship with formal state institutions. They were recognised and, at times, supported by the government, particularly in their efforts to combat rebel forces, highlighting the blend of traditional practices and informal security arrangements.³²

The Zamazamas in South Africa are informal miners who engage in illegal mining activities within abandoned mines. To protect their operations, they have developed their own security structures, which often bring them into direct conflict with formal law enforcement agencies.³³ Similarly, the Sudanese Janjaweed militias, composed primarily of Arab nomads, have been implicated in severe

³⁰ Gretchen Helmke and Steven Levitsky, "Informal Institutions and Comparative Politics: A Research Agenda," *Perspectives on Politics* 2, no. 4 (2004): 725-740.

³¹ Lauren Ploch Blanchard, *Al-Shabaab* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 2020).

³² Danny Hoffman, *The Kamajors of Sierra Leone* (PhD diss., Duke University, 2004).

³³ Janet Munakamwe, "Zamazama—Livelihood Strategies, Mobilisation and Resistance in Johannesburg, South Africa," in *Mining Africa: Law, Environment, Society and Politics in Historical and Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Artwell Nhemachena and Tapiwa V. Warikandwa (Bamenda: Langaa RPCIG, 2017), 155–185.

atrocities, including ethnic cleansing in the Darfur region. These militias operate as powerful informal security providers, further complicating the already fragile state security apparatus.³⁴

The Mungiki sect in Kenya- Competition

Urban vigilantism in Nairobi largely stems from widespread public anxiety and the perception that the police are unable to effectively combat crime.³⁵ The *Mungiki*³⁶ sect, established in the 1980s, emerged as a response to these concerns.³⁷ Initially founded as a self-defense force for the Kikuyu, Kenya's most populous ethnic group,³⁸ the Mungiki were motivated by a desire to protect their community and preserve traditional Kikuyu values and religion, while rejecting Western and Christian influences.³⁹ However, as the group grew, their motivations became intertwined with broader socio-economic grievances, including opposition to the existing government and wealthy elites, who they perceived as perpetuating inequality. The majority of Mungiki members are young, unemployed, and impoverished, which fueled their radicalisation. These socio-economic frustrations, combined with the group's ideological goals, led the Mungiki to take on a more aggressive role in urban vigilantism. They sought to 'cleanse' Kenya of those they viewed as outsiders, engaging in violent actions that went beyond self-defense and entered the realm of criminality and political violence, further destabilising the urban landscape.⁴⁰

The sect began as a form of vigilantism in the 1990s, when tribal clashes decimated small communities across Kenya.⁴¹ The Mungiki are also notorious for criminal and 'mafia-like' behaviour utilising violence and intimidation to attain their goals, according to Afrik.com, a French

³⁴ Issam AW Mohamed, "The Janjaweed, the Armed Movements, and the Political Disintegration of Sudan," *Law, Institutions and Development Journal* 9, no. 29 (2010).

³⁵ David M. Anderson, "Vigilantes, Violence and the Politics of Public Order in Kenya," *African Affairs* 101, no. 405 (2002): 531-555.

³⁶ *Mungiki* is a Kikuyu word that meaning 'multitude,' and the Kikuyu are Kenya's most prominent traditional tribe.

³⁷ Patrick Henningsen and Bill Jones, "The Mungiki: Organized Crime in Kenya," *Refworld*, 2013, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/52a72f7e4.html>.

³⁸ IHS, "Kenya: Security Situation," 2010; Patrick Henningsen and Bill Jones, "The Mungiki: Organized Crime in Kenya."

³⁹ Patrick Henningsen and Bill Jones, "The Mungiki: Organized Crime in Kenya," Afrik.com, "The Mungiki Sect in Kenya," 2010; Landinfo: Country of Origin Information Centre, *Report* (Norway, 2010).

⁴⁰ Katie Serena, "Kenya's Machete-Wielding Mungiki Gang Is One of The Scariest in The World," *All That's Interesting*, July 1, 2018, <https://allthatsinteresting.com/mungiki>.

⁴¹ *Ibid*.

independent worldwide media source on Africa.⁴² Its exact population is unknown, but it claims tens of thousands of members, many of them unemployed youngsters whose communities were destroyed in tribal violence in the 1990s. It has taken on a politically aggressive tone, siding with the poor against wealthy elites it accuses of serving former colonial masters' interests.⁴³ "The fact that they were hired for security to protect the land is a clear indication that they run the entire security system". Gikaria, a former Nakuru mayor, stated.⁴⁴ Mungiki is suspected of being responsible for the deaths of 50 persons in Nairobi in 2002 as a result of incidents involving matatu owners. A conflict between the cult and Nairobi police in February 2003 resulted in the deaths of two officers and the arrest of 74 members of the group.⁴⁵

Even after the group was banned in 2003, it was involved in a number of horrific and violent acts. In 2007, Kenyan authorities apprehended and executed 500 young men suspected of being linked to the Mungiki. Rather than deterring the gang's members, this only encouraged them to become more violent. Following the disputed 2007 elections, fighting broke out in the Rift Valley, and it embarked on a retribution mission to avenge the people and authorities.⁴⁶ After this, they allegedly embarked on a killing spree, beheading matatu drivers, conductors, and Mungiki defectors, and those who refused to take their oath. In response, armed security forces stormed the Mathare slums where the sect was operating from, leading to the deaths of at least 100 people.⁴⁷ The gang, armed with machetes, smashed down the doors of his neighbours, pushed them out, demanded their identity cards, and forcefully circumcised any who were not Kikuyus, according to a terrified witness. "Anyone who resisted had his head chopped off while his family watched in horror. I prayed that they would not ask me to say anything else in the language, as those were the only two words I knew," Omondi said in an interview in Nakuru, Kenya, north of Nairobi.⁴⁸ Again, in April 2009, the group was implicated in hacking to death 28 people in another revenge mission in Gathaithi, in the central city of Nyeri. By the end of the conflict, at least 1,300 Kenyans had died,

⁴² Patrick Henningsen and Bill Jones, "The Mungiki: Organized Crime in Kenya".

⁴³ "Kenya: Security Situation," *Reuters*, 2009.

⁴⁴ "Kenyans Fear Re-emergence of the Banned Mungiki Sect and its Deadly Reign of Terror," *Mail & Guardian*, 2016.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Katie Serena, "Kenya's Machete-Wielding Mungiki Gang Is One of The Scariest in The World."

⁴⁷ "Kenyans Fear Re-emergence of the Banned Mungiki Sect," *Mail & Guardian*.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

with 650,000 displaced by violence. According to the Waki report, which was tasked with investigating the 2007-2008 bloodbath, the Mungiki sect was deeply involved in the massacre.⁴⁹

Membership numbers range from 100,000 to one million and members of tribes other than the Kikuyu are despised by the group. Politicians, local police, and government officials are all connected to the gang. Kenya banned the group in 2003, following a battle with a rival gang in 2002 that resulted in the deaths of 20 persons. Even after the gang was banned, it remained.⁵⁰ Authorities allege that the Mungiki hacked to death twenty-eight individuals in the central Kenyan city of Nyeri in 2009. That incident was a retaliation mission against those who stood up to the Mungiki and attempted to cleanse their town of the vicious gang.⁵¹ There is no easy solution to the problem of Mungiki. The original goal of the Mungiki was to alleviate poverty. Solving Kenya's chronic poverty in the lower classes is one approach to rid the country of certain gang members, but poverty eradication in Africa has been a centuries-long challenge. Traditional tribal concern, which extends back several millennia, likewise lacks a feasible answer for the short term.⁵²

Substitutive informal institutions

Where governmental mechanisms are weak or lack authority, substitute institutions emerge. Actors who want results that are compatible with formal rules and processes use substitutive informal institutions, just as they do complementary institutions. They do, however, exist in situations where formal norms are not consistently enforced, much like competing institutions. As a result, substitutive informal institutions do what formal institutions failed to do.⁵³ In Africa, it is common to completely or partially substitute official state security regulations. For example, dwellers of rich neighbourhoods frustrated by the police's inability to deal with crime in most parts of Africa hire private security firms and set up gated communities, effectively replacing the police, while

⁴⁹ "Kenyans Fear Re-emergence of the Banned Mungiki Sect," *Mail & Guardian*.

⁵⁰ Katie Serena, "Kenya's Machete-Wielding Mungiki Gang Is One of The Scariest in The World."

⁵¹ Katie Serena, "Kenya's Machete-Wielding Mungiki Gang Is One of The Scariest in The World."

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Gretchen Helmke and Steven Levitsky, "Informal Institutions and Comparative Politics: A Research Agenda," *Perspectives on Politics* 2, no. 4 (2004): 725-740.

poor neighbourhoods that cannot afford to hire private security firms typically have vigilante organisations replace official police forces.⁵⁴

Across Africa, various substitutive informal institutions operate alongside or in place of formal structures, demonstrating the critical role of community support and influence in governance. These institutions, including the Bakassi Boys in Nigeria, the Ombudsman system in Ghana, the Sungusungu in Tanzania, Asafo Companies in Ghana, Clan-based Security Systems in Somalia, Nyumba Kumi in Kenya, the Trokosi System in Ghana, and Community Policing Forums in South Africa, illustrate how local communities mobilise to address perceived gaps or failures in state-provided security, justice, and services. For instance, the Bakassi Boys, formed in Nigeria's southeastern region, emerged as a vigilante group to combat crime and maintain law and order. Their effectiveness in addressing local security concerns earned them widespread community support, even in the face of allegations of extra-judicial violence and human rights violations, as residents viewed them as a preferable alternative to the corrupt and ineffective state police.⁵⁵ Similarly, the Sungusungu in Tanzania, Asafo Companies in Ghana, and Clan-based Security Systems in Somalia all rely on local knowledge and informal structures to provide security. These institutions are deeply rooted in community practices and values, which not only ensures their acceptance but also enhances their legitimacy and effectiveness within their respective communities.⁵⁶ Despite operating outside the formal legal framework, the Trokosi System in Ghana wields significant social influence within certain communities, demonstrating the power of community-driven justice mechanisms. In South Africa, Community Policing Forums actively involve local residents in crime prevention and law enforcement, providing a platform for

⁵⁴ Bruce Baker, *Multi-Choice Policing in Africa* (Stockholm: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2008); Glib Artemovich Voloskyi, "Hybrid Governance in Post-Apartheid South Africa."

⁵⁵ Johannes Harnischfeger, "The Bakassi Boys: Fighting Crime in Nigeria," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 41, no. 1 (2003): 23-49.

⁵⁶ Ray Abrahams, "Sungusungu: Village Vigilante Groups in Tanzania," *African Affairs* 86, no. 343 (1987): 179-196; Darryl Li, "The 'Asafo' of Ghana: A Case of an Informal Security Group," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 33, no. 4 (1995): 619-647.

community participation and reinforcing the critical role of community support in ensuring the success and sustainability of these informal institutions.⁵⁷

Tanzania Sungusungu- Substitutive

The Sungusungu is a form of village vigilantism in rural Tanzania that emerged in the 1980s as an indigenous response to the widespread problem of cattle raiding and robbery and the failure of the law enforcement and justice system to prevent these crimes. The demobilisation of soldiers in the aftermath of the Tanzania/Uganda conflict led to increasing insecurity and violence associated with cattle-rustling and banditry in Tanzania.⁵⁸ The state was largely ineffective in managing the violence and as a result, in the early 1980s, villages responded autonomously, forming defence groups called Sungusungu in order to confront these gangs of thieves.⁵⁹ In rural Kenya and Tanzania, a form of law enforcement and dispute resolution known as Sungusungu arose to combat crime, initially in opposition to state institutions (particularly the police and the judiciary) and it was based on local customary law rather than state law. Sungusungu led to the development of ‘hybrid forms of organisation, which are, strictly speaking, illegal but are officially authorized, neither part of the state nor totally rejected by it.’⁶⁰ In their work on Sungusungu, for example, Abraham, Fleisher, and Heald were able to demonstrate how local people ‘mobilized indigenous modes of governance and turned these to new ends, thereby creating new forms of political unity and consciousness.’⁶¹ The Sungusungu has a long pedigree among cattle herders. Customary methods of pursuit, capture, and retrieval of livestock by Sungusungu are appreciated and utilised by the Tanzanian state, which, in 1990, attempted to incorporate them into an integrated policing

⁵⁷ Ameh Akoran, "Traditional Justice Systems in Contemporary Ghana," *African Journal of Criminology and Justice Studies* 10, no. 1 (2017): 77-96; Willem van Vuuren, "Community Policing in South Africa: Lessons from Abroad," *Crime and Policing Review* 10, no. 3 (1996): 19-36.

⁵⁸ Lisa Denney and Sarah Jenkins, *Securing Communities: Redefining Community Policing to Achieve Results* (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2013); Iffat Idris, *Non-State Policing in Fragile Contexts*, K4D Helpdesk Report 664 (Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies, 2019).

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Suzette Heald, "State, Law, and Vigilantism in Northern Tanzania," *African Affairs* 102, no. 409 (2007): 229-244.

⁶¹ Ray Abrahams, "Sungusungu: Village Vigilante Groups in Tanzania," *African Affairs* 86, no. 343 (1987): 179-196; Michael Fleisher, "Sungusungu: State-Sponsored Vigilantism in Tanzania," *Africa* 70, no. 2 (2000): 209-228; Suzette Heald, "State, Law, and Vigilantism in Northern Tanzania," *African Affairs* 102, no. 409 (2007): 229-244.

system.⁶² In recent years, they have appeared in modified form in several Tanzanian urban centres. However, it has been noted that the police often delegate the more distasteful or risky work to vigilante groups and informal militias, making it difficult to subsequently outlaw such groups if they become predatory.⁶³

The Tanzanian government's decision to rely on the Sungusungu for maintaining law and order reflects a significant lack of trust in the police, driven by pervasive corruption within the force. Police officers frequently demanded bribes to initiate investigations, often extorting both the complainant and the accused in a continuous cycle of corruption. This systemic failure of the police to address crime effectively, particularly in dealing with cattle theft, left communities vulnerable and necessitated the formation of the Sungusungu as a more trustworthy and effective alternative for local security.⁶⁴ This sentiment is reminiscent of how colonial police forces were frequently accused of supplementing their wages by extorting fowl, food, beer, and even women from the communities where they worked. The Sungusungu provided local communities with law enforcers who are community members and accountable to them. The Sungusungu faced stiff opposition from the state's official police and courts from the start, who saw them as a serious threat to the state's administration of law enforcement and justice; these officials argued that the Sungusungu was "attempting to turn the clock back to primitive punitive measures".⁶⁵ However, the Sungusungu groups' effectiveness and popularity, combined with growing dissatisfaction with the police's corrupt practices, weakened resistance to their activities over time. Ultimately, the state was forced to endorse the Sungusungu as a revolutionary force within the villages that ought to be encouraged rather than harassed by bureaucracy.⁶⁶ Since the Sungusungu movement met a need and resonated with the socialist ideology of the state, it was later sanctioned by the government and incorporated within official state policy.⁶⁷ While the Tanzanian state has allowed Sungusungu

⁶² Suzette Heald, "Controlling Crime and Corruption from Below: Sungusungu in Kenya," *International Relations* 16, no. 3 (2002): 459-476.

⁶³ Lars Buur, "The Sovereign Outsourced: Local Justice and Violence in Port Elizabeth," *Anthropology and Humanism* 27, no. 1 (2002): 91-108; Jo Beall and Sean Fox, *Cities and Development* (London: Routledge, 2011).

⁶⁴ Agbiboa, "Origins of Hybrid Governance."

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Shanna Cross, "The Role of Sungusungu in Local Governance and Security," *Journal of African Studies* 54, no. 2 (2013): 214-230.

tribes to codify their own laws and execute their own punishments, it has ultimately been unable to “contradict its own courts by fully legalising them”.⁶⁸ “The groups occupy a quasi-legal space and consequently are, to an extent, left in danger of prosecution”.⁶⁹

The group functioned by groups of men patrolling their village on a rotational system, protecting property, apprehending and arresting thieves, deciding on punishments, and recovering stolen cattle. Whipping, shunning, and family banishment, as well as harsh fines, beatings, and breaking thieves' ankles, are all possible punishments.⁷⁰ The groups have also been used to retrieve women who had left their husbands or eloped, thereby depriving their parents of bride wealth.⁷¹ The Sungusungu committees are well-rooted in traditional governance mechanisms and elected by democratic village assemblies called iritongo.⁷² The iritongo are democratic assemblies led by the ruling generation, but where all adult men are allowed to speak. Trials are usually heard first by the Sungusungu committee, but they are always held before the entire iritongo.⁷³

Residents of the villages served by the Sungusungu organisations trusted them because they were locals, and they saw them as a credible alternative to the corrupt, expensive, and ineffective services of the regular police and courts. Members of the Sungusungu, unlike police officers, can be voted out of office if they fail to consistently carry out their duties because they are not “invulnerable to community sentiment”.⁷⁴ Composed of men between ages 18 and 50, the Sungusungu routinely conduct house-to-house investigations, soliciting accusations against anyone suspected of cattle theft and seeking corroborating evidence from other accusers. Those found guilty of cattle theft are often handed over to the state police to be incarcerated while they

⁶⁸ Suzette Heald, "State, Law, and Vigilantism in Northern Tanzania," *African Affairs* 108, no. 432 (2009): 1-20.

⁶⁹ Sarah Jenkins, "Community Policing in Fragile States," *International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice* 41, no. 4 (2013): 441-457; Iffat Idris, "Non-state policing in fragile contexts".

⁷⁰ Suzette Heald, "State, Law, and Vigilantism in Northern Tanzania."; Sarah Jenkins, "Community Policing in Fragile States," *International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice* 41, no. 4 (2013): 441-457.

⁷¹ Shanna Cross, "The Role of Sungusungu in Local Governance and Security," *Journal of African Studies* 54, no. 2 (2013): 214-230; Iffat Idris, "Non-state policing in fragile contexts".

⁷² Lisa Denney and Sarah Jenkins, *Securing Communities: Redefining Community Policing to Achieve Results* (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2013).

⁷³ Heald, "State, Law, and Vigilantism in Northern Tanzania"; Jenkins, "Community Policing in Fragile States"; Idris, "Non-state policing in fragile contexts."

⁷⁴ Agbiboa, "Origins of Hybrid Governance."

awaited official investigation of their cases. Also, to enhance village security, members of the Sungusungu routinely conduct night-time patrols.⁷⁵ The Sungusungu have been praised as “arguably the most successful form of community policing in Eastern Africa”, but have also been implicated in the systematic use of torture.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, the Sungusungu have enabled communities to take back power and have heralded a new vision of community responsibility for local safety and security.⁷⁷

Although the rise of the Sungusungu and its alliance with the police forces led to a dramatic reduction in the incidence of cattle-thieving, the group’s members succumbed to the same corrupt practices that undermined the official law enforcement agencies. For example, some Sungusungu village commanders were accused of soliciting payoffs from cattle thieves in return for looking the other way. Other commanders were implicated in demanding advance payments from villagers who came to them with various security needs. After collecting these advance payments, the commanders made no efforts to perform the tasks. Others have actively cashed in on their privileged access to, and knowledge of, communal practices (for example, sleeping habits and security regimes) to weaponize their comrades in the cattle raiding business. In addition, some would incarcerate suspects, ‘sometimes for days, and beat them with a hippopotamus-hide whip.’ All these abuses notwithstanding, some villagers have argued that the Sungusungu is a ‘lesser evil’ than the official police forces. These villagers are of the view that members of the Sungusungu often demand bribes that are considerably lower than those demanded by the police, and that, not infrequently, the Sungusungu delivers on its promise of security.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ *ibid*

⁷⁶ Heald, "State, Law, and Vigilantism in Northern Tanzania"; Denney, "Community Security."

⁷⁷ Jenkins, "Community Policing in Fragile States"; Idris, "Non-state policing in fragile contexts."

⁷⁸ Agbiboa, "Origins of Hybrid Governance."



Figure 3: Supposed Sungusungu members at a function in Kisii. Photo by Jacob Owiti (Source; Nation, 2018)

Conclusion

This paper underscores the importance of context-specific approaches to security governance in Africa, based on fieldwork in Nigeria, Kenya, and Tanzania. Informal policing fills gaps left by the state, with its success influenced by historical, political, and developmental factors. A comparison of these countries highlights the complexity of governance, where non-state actors can complement or substitute formal institutions, but if not properly managed, they risk undermining state authority and exacerbating conflict. The relationship between state and non-state actors involves constant negotiation, with non-state actors often redefining the state's role when it fails to meet expectations. While informal policing can help rebuild trust, it must be integrated into inclusive frameworks that benefit all citizens equally. Further research is needed to explore how informal agreements, and social norms shape these interactions.

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