

Gang Mores in Nigeria: The Prospect and Challenges

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Abstract

Indeed, gang culture had become an issue which gives the government, parents and other policy makers a huge concern. Of every ten boys', six belong to a gang or being affected by gang operations. The purpose of this study is to present an analytical view of the nature, trend and dynamism of gang culture in Nigeria using the city of Lagos as a case study. The choice of the case study is due to the fact that Lagos is a mega city which will best capture the issues related to gangs and at the same time ably represents all other parts of the country and indeed cities across the world. The methodology used in this work is an exploratory case study approach of group theory. Focus groups and archival data are used to explore different perspectives on the phenomena of gang culture. The findings show the trend of gang culture growth from joblessness to aggrieved youths and to armed groups. Also that a great treat is poised on the peace and security of the society if a concrete solution is not meted out. The study suggests a need for a working collaboration of the government, the parents and other social reformative agencies or organizations so as to rally round the youths in other to reduce the menace of gangs on the life of the society. Conclusion is however drawn on the fact that there is a rapid proliferation of gang culture in Nigeria, most among the youths of less than twenty years of age and the next generations might witness serious growth of terrorist attacks than what is being witness at present if this menace is not curbed effectively.

Key Words: Gangs, Gang Culture, Hoodlums, Violence and Lagos.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past four decades Nigerian society has seen an increase in gang culture and its associated violence. In addition, the composition and nature of gang culture has shifted. Gang members are getting younger, geographical territory is transcending their local habitat, drug territory and violence is increasingly chaotic. The general increase in gang-related deaths of young people and in particular a number of high-profile murders are alarming. For example, over the past decade the failure of national and local government to act decisively on gradual integration of the youths into the main stream of the economy has allowed gangs to become entrenched in some of our most disadvantaged neighbourhoods. (UNHCR 2010)

Evidently, up to 8% of 10-19 year olds self-report belong to a gang. Between 7000 and 9000 young people are estimated to be directly gang-involved in the Lagos suburb alone, with an additional 20000 people affected by gangs. In both Lagos and Onitsha in Nigeria, around 60% of shootings are gang-related. In the past 5 years there has been an 89% increase in the number of under-20s admitted to hospital with serious stab wounds, and a 75% increase amongst older teenagers. (This is represented in figure one below). Media coverage has, at times, been suggestive of an epidemic in gang-related youth violence. (Central Bank of Nigeria 2011, Afrobarometer 2012)

Although a number of localized studies have been conducted by the police forces and in academics on the prevalence of gangs, their membership and the extent of their criminal activities such as cultism and violence, but majority of their premise and submissions is largely unknown because of the contradictions present in the various studies. This work analyse the true nature, scale and operations of gang culture in Nigeria considering Lagos as a ping point among other states. Who is involved? And what are they involved in? How has Nigeria reached this point? And what the society can do to tackle this menace is the major focus of this work.

2. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

It is expedient at this juncture to clarify some concept used in this work so as to give a clearer view of the perspective to which they are being put to use. Such concepts as Gangs, Gang Culture and Violence will be considered. Although there is no universally recognized definition of a "gang", the term as used by UNHCR (2010) can be viewed as an institutional perspective which denote it as a group of two or more members which carries out criminal activities as its primary or secondary objective relatively durable, predominantly street-based groups of young people for whom crime and violence is integral to the group's identity. The term is also used to

refer to organized criminal groups of individuals for whom involvement in crime is for personal gain (financial or otherwise) and which is their primary “occupation.”(Alemika Etannibi and. Chukwuma Innocent, 2005).

A legalistic view is opined by Hagedorn (2005). He view a gang as a group of individuals who consort together to engage in unlawful activity. Other opinions are structural in outlook such as Gang Resistance Education and Trainings (G.R.E.A.T 2014) a corporate organization. They believe that Gangs can generally be identified by their formal organizational structure; identifiable leadership (but not always); territoriality; recurrent interaction; and, most consistently, involvement in serious, criminal and/or violent behaviour. Notably, the notion of “organized gangs” may also include vigilante type of groups and secret societies which may be brutal and involved in severe criminal activities.

The concept of gang culture just like gang as an entity is not also subjected to a single conceptualization. The view of Jankowaski, (1991) can be incorporated which believes it to be a gangs way of life which is an organized social system that is both quasi-private and quasi-secretive and whose size and goals require that social interactions be governed by a leadership structure that has defined roles.

In the same vein, The Centre for Social Justice (2009) posited that gang culture are actions from groups of men although women play roles in these gangs, but overwhelmingly, they are groups of armed young men, warriors fighting for masculinity, survival, and ethnic or religious identity. Also it is regarded by Esperance (2010) that it is the gang lifestyle, a way of life that includes patterns related to conduct and indoctrination, beliefs, traditions, values, language, art, skills and social and interpersonal relationships. In addition to the foregoing, we will define gang culture as the existence of a group of people who have form the habit (psychologically, temporary or permanently) to pursue their course in an extra judicial manner regardless of the consequences on themselves and the society at large.

Violence in the same vein is a popular concept with various approaches but similar connotations. Collier Paul and Pedro Vicente (2010) see violence as the disturbance to lawful activities which could cumulate to loss of human life. But what if the human in question loss is life due to unlawful non violent act what classification will this be? Nevertheless, a working definition of violence is the act of disturbance of public peace and progress of fellow humans’ life.

3. Gang Culture and Manifestations in Nigeria

Aristotle said ‘man by nature is a political animal’. But much to it, man by nature is a rational political human being. He takes decisions which will be in his own and or group interest. By this assertion, man lives and works in groups. This cumulates to the cultivation of different habits and culture which could be good, bad or ugly. Gangism is a product of this rationalism of man.

In Nigeria, the dimension of gang culture manifestation is not different from what is seen from other countries such as America, Germany, Britain, Kenya, Egypt, Ethiopia and South Africa among other states. Organized, unorganized, legal and illegal gang groups exist in almost all parts of Nigeria. Lagos State is seen as haven of gangsters and a good representation of the whole country. Mostly, they live 85% of there lives on the street or in club houses, disco parties and hotel arenas where they perpetuate series of violent acts against humanity but on the contrary, it is meant for their own livelihood. They have there identity, language, mode of recruitments, dressing, colours and symbols. Such gangs include; hoodlums in car parks, cinema house, club houses and some sharp corners or joints. Others are Musicians, Cultists, Prostitute, and Vigilante gangs among others. Members of gangs typically share common social, cultural and psychological characteristics. Their members as observed by Patrick Mutahi (2011) may be from marginalized segments of society, the same socio-economic class or within a certain age range. Gangs may also be organized along ethnic, political or religious lines.

There is a cross boarder identity of gang culture which makes the study more interesting and complex. Hagedorn (2005) noted in the study of gangs in American that this culture can no longer start and stop with local conditions but must also be rooted in a global context. Gangs all over the world evolved systematically, the phenomenon did not leave Nigeria in isolation.

The reasons d’être for the manifestation of this cross boarder proliferations are coined out by Bangeter (2010). The first reason is the fact that urban population is increasing (representing 50% of the world population in 2008), thus creating more and more densely populated agglomerations, which are as many recruitment areas, especially when essential services are not or only inadequately provided. Secondly as shared by Alleyne and Wood (2010), the weapons used are increasingly available and powerful: The gangs have graduated from using steel weapons such as flick knives to the systematic use of handheld firearms. At present, war weapons which including assault rifles such as the M16 and the AK47 are regularly used or seized.

The trend and manifestations in Nigeria is not different from the facts above and in addition the manifestation of unsatisfied group of people in some part or almost all parts of the country breeds the culture of gangism. Notably, the marginalization and oppression of the masses often result into the formation of aggrieved

set of individuals (Ojo E. 2010). These therefore cumulate into the existence of gang culture in Nigeria. An example is the Bakkasi Boys in Southern Nigeria. Also, in order to resist the frequent intimidation by lecturers and fellow students, Rotimi A. (2005) noted that some students begin to consider joining or forming gangs [campus cult] in order to counter the lecturers' intimidation and to resist the unlawful denial of accurate marks on course works. The gang groups continue to evolve over time and became more sophisticated, deadly and even adopting criminal strategies for sustaining their activities.

The recruitment of new gang members is by both voluntary and forces. In the first few weeks of every academic session, alumni members of the gang join forces with current students to embark on the recruitment drive across the university campuses.

The gangs coerce new members by way of intimidation sometimes at gunpoint forcing them to join the gangs. The initiations into the gangs are often violent involving torture, blood oaths of secrecy, forcing new male members to rape female students and sometimes to rape female staff of the university or out of the institutions. Initiation into the female gang groups such as the Amazons involves new members being subjected to gang rape by several female members.

The first of the student gang group is widely believed to have been formed in the University of Ibadan in 1953 by seven students whose acclaimed reason for the formation of the gang was to resisting the injustices of the university authority towards students of poor background. There are currently more than fifty different students gangs (cults) in Nigeria universities including: The Black axe, Black Berets, Black brothers, Black scorpions,

Buccaneers (sea dogs), Egbe dudu, Eiyе confraternity, Pirates, Thomas Sankara boys, Sons of the night, Vikings, green berets, KKK and female gangs known as Amazons.

There are estimated 200 gangs groups on university campuses with approximately 200,000 active members, across 36 States and the federal capital city of Abuja. The criminal activities of the university gangs though are mainly concentrated in the major urban areas; the gangs are also known to operate in the rural and suburban areas.

The various university gangs use arms to sustain their struggle against what they perceived as university corrupt culture. The acquisition of arms created human rights abuses as various group fights for supremacy on the university campuses. Some lecturers soon join the students' gangs to guarantee the continuation of their corrupt lifestyles.

The gangs have since become messengers of death; where politicians hire the gang members for intimidation, torture, rape and assassination of political opponents and opponents' families across the country. (Rotimi A. 2005).

In 2008, human rights groups estimated that between 1993 and 2003, at least 200 students and lecturers were killed in gang related violence across the country. Gangs have been linked to several criminal activities outside the university campuses including armed robbery, kidnapping and internet fraud. The alliance between the campus gangs and high ranking politicians in the country makes it difficult for the university authorities to discipline the members of the gangs. In some instances, the arrest and expulsion of gang members from the university often lead to backlash from politicians and, does lead to the dismissal of university administrators that fails to re-admit expelled gang members back to the university.

The birth of ethnic politics and religious minded sects are facts undoubtable to the proof of gang culture existence in Nigeria. (Ojo E. 2010) This has the feature of the violent Oodua Peoples Congress (OPC) in the western Nigeria and the new terror in Nigeria, the Boko Haram in the Northern Nigeria. Other reasons while people join gangs are commonly cited reasons: surrogate family (perception that affection, affirmation, understanding as well as physical and emotional support can be found in gangs, and is absent at home); failure in mainstream society's challenges (i.e., school, sports, peer relationships); identity reasons, recognition and respect (confusing fear with respect, substituting gang membership for individual identity); protection; intimidation or peer pressure; money acquisition; glamour/role models; excitement and rebellious acts and/or a family history of gang membership.

There are some classical features of a gang culture in any society as noted in various hand books and literatures. Some which are peculiar to Nigeria's version of gang culture which include the following; Habitual staying out late in the night, unexplained injuries in the body, declining grades and school attendance, withdrawal from family and from former friends then this will lead to secretive about new 'friends' and increasingly confrontational attitudes. Other features noted by gang awareness source hand book G.R.E.A.T (2014) include; the abrupt change in personality which is evident in the unexplained possessions or money, borrows money repeatedly, the use of alcohol, drug and other substance abuse or use. The Preference for certain colour or item of clothing and refusal to wear a certain colour is another indicator. The unusual handwriting or graffiti on personal items such as notebooks, papers or bedroom walls, marking gang symbols on themselves may precede tattoos of those symbols. The use of gang slang, practice or use of hand signs, use of nicknames and

frequent run-ins with the law and law enforcement agents are usual features of a gang way of life. Apart from the personal features noted in the gang members, the community is not immune of some signs and symptoms.

The signs of gang presence in a community as noted by Alemeka E. and Chukwuma C. (2005) and Esperance (2010) include the following;

Increase in crime such as street and commercial robberies, assaults, vandalism, graffiti, and stolen autos, sexual assaults, increase in drug trafficking and drug uses, rape cases and senseless crimes of violence. Youths commonly seen hanging out in groups, particularly at night with gang colours and dress worn on the streets and in schools are also indicators. Rumours of gang activity also prevail in most cases.

4. The challenges on the polity

The gang member becomes a victim of his or her own choices in most causes but also have a domino effect on the community and the parents. G.R.E.A.T (2014) noted that the impact of gang culture on the individual gang member is equal to the effect it has on the polity. This assertion is correct in the case of Nigeria as the polity pay a lot to curb the menaces caused by these groups. Whereas, the limited economic resources could have been used to harness national development and further strengthens the hegemony in the country. This is the case of the Niger Delta militant, who were rehabilitated and empowered with over twenty billions naira through the Niger delta Development Commission (Chuba N. 2010).

Ojo E. (2010), Attoh F. and Soyombo O. (2011) and Olayiwola A. (2012) observed and support the fact that different gangs had been fomenting terror in Nigeria since independent. These groups have deep affiliations to their ethnicity, religion and educational background (usually low). It is also agreed that the current gangs which had been fomenting trouble since 2010 in Nigeria is the Al Majiri groups also know as the Boko Haram group in the Northern Nigeria and it is observed that there is no solution yet for this boiling issue. The following are conspicuous challenges of gang culture on the polity at large.

There is a repeated Criminal records and prison time. Gang members are 3 to 7 times more likely to commit serious or violent crimes. Being a suspect in any crime the gang commits. There is the risk of serious or disabling physical injury or death which is a loss to the economy of a productive population of any country.

There is also a possibility of becoming a target of rival gangs and being a target of one's own gang if one fails to conform to an odious rivalry gang or attempts to quit the gang. Also significant is the lost of opportunities for education and employment in the future due to loss of body parts or even life. The look (tattoos), walk and talk of being a gangster hinder getting a job and rejoining mainstream society. This limit the number of active work force in the society as viewed by Okojie (2009) and further deepens the woos of the economy instead of its growth.

Another challenge on the polity is risk of AIDS gotten from sexual assault, blood covenant and the use of sharp unsterilized objects. This makes the healthy population of the youth to be reduced drastically as the other youth are venerable to the infection. In the same vein, the euphoric boldness derived from drug use or tattoos also being involved in a gang makes them eager to vandalism pipelines and other government or community properties, harassment of fellow students and lecturers, extortion and general violence.

Mutahi (2011) noted right well that gang members who are unemployed, facing court charges, and are in and out of jail may become a financial as well as an emotional burden on their family and the society. Other challenges which Lorraine Khan et al (2013) pointed out mostly on female gangs but it transcends the female to the male as well. It focuses on the psychological and mental implications. There is a high vulnerability of gang-involved young women as having a suspected diagnosable mental health problem. 30% have a chance to self-harming or at risk of suicide. 30% also have a wide chance of sleeping or eating problems.

Finally, nearly 40% of girls with gang associations showed signs of behavioural problems before the age of twelve. These early behavioural problems represent one of the most common childhood mental health problems with particularly damaging implications for children's life chances. Young women linked to gangs were three times more likely to have mental and psychological disorder and identified with signs of early persistent conduct or behavioral problems than other females who are not involved in gangism.

5. The way forward

The way of ameliorating this menace can be viewed basically from social and political perspectives. From the social perspective, Silver B. et al (2000) posited that the family is the basic point of prevention of gang involvement. Children need their parents and guardians to be involved in their growth and development. To help prevent gang involvement parents should do the following as noted by Lorraine Khan et al (2013), The Centre for Social Justice (2009) and G.R.E.A.T. (2014) which includes the following; spending time with, and give attention to their children because children need to know that they are loved. The planning of family activities with the children and expose them to a variety of learning experiences also knowing what the children are doing

in and out of school, who their friends are, where they go and what they do makes parents to help to keep their children out of gangs and gang related activities.

However, giving the child responsibility at home, Setting limits, establish and consistently maintain acceptable rules and expectations for your children's behaviour. Keeping good communicate with the children is often advocated as if good communication is open, frequent and positive, it encourages the child to know they can approach you to discuss any topic or problem without fear of condemnation.

Furthermore, being an informed parent by learning about gang and drug activities in the community so as to talk to the child about alcohol, drugs and gangs will go a long way to ameliorate gangism. Parents that does not tolerate cigarette, alcohol or drug use by their children or their friends makes good impacts on the lives of their children. Be involved in your child's education. Attend school meetings, meet with teachers and help your child develop sound study habits.

Much more important, teaching the child how to deal with peer pressure, to think for themselves and to act responsibly. Help your child to participate in wholesome life style after school such as recreational activities, sports, community clubs, church groups, music, Boys' and Girls' brigades, scouting and cadets are examples but it is advised for a child to learn what is available in their communities.

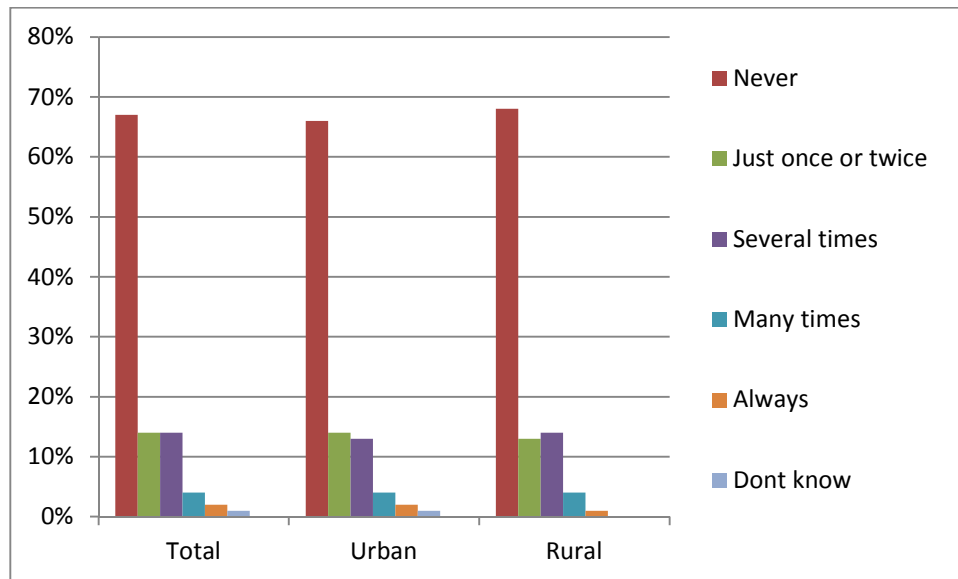
Nevertheless, the government is also encouraged as evident in Bangerter (2010) to have community or general police stations where the report of gang, drug and suspicious activities can be reported.

Finally, a community friendly contact or rehabilitation centre will be helpful if the government and or the community provides one. A contact parent support groups, school officials and police help tips are also useful eventually if your child becomes involved with gangs.

6. Concluding remarks

Gangs do exist in all part of the world and Nigeria's case is not an exemption. There is a rapid proliferation of gang culture most among the youth of less than twenty years of age and the next generations might witness serious growth of terrorist attacks than what is being witness at present if this menace is not curbed effectively. Some gangs have grown so big to become an actor in the world scene by fomenting troubles against humanity and sometimes across their borders. Gang culture had proliferate the cities and even nurtured in most remote villages as evident in the Boko Haram syndicates in the northern Nigeria, secret cults in the tertiary institutions and the Niger Delta militants including the Bakkasi Boys in the south-south Nigeria. Their impacts on the polity are most devastating which is evident on the socio-political and economic strength of the country.

The external view of these vices are demoralizing and non favourable in the economic and political development of the country. However, the reasons why a child join or form a gang which later become a culture in the society is revealed to be ranging from social, economic and political reasons. The family is seen as the main point of correction to this menace. Also the government in collaboration with social agencies or organizations for youth reformation as a subordinate can be of great help to the various families in this social 'contract' reached by each players in the society which include the family and the government.



SOURCE: AFROBAROMETER 2012

FIGURE 1: CRIME PREVALENCE IN NIGERIA

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