

Fighting Crime in Coastal Settlements in Nigeria: The Interplay of Location, Spirit Medium and Local Social Control Mechanisms

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Abstract

This paper attempts to develop theoretical and empirical understanding of a range of environmental, spiritual, religious and social control factors often utilized to address the challenges of social crime in two coastal settlements in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria: Ibeno and Eastern Obolo. Specific focus was on ‘armed robbery’ incidence. The study, which adopted the situational crime prevention theory by Ronald Clarke, depended on in-depth interviews, discussions, local informants and secondary literature. In the result, a broad consensus was established bordering on the relevance of the role of the local cosmology, linked with a belief in the mutual communication of territorial and marine spirits, in social crime control. Beyond the territorial and marine powers discussed, ‘communitarian spirit’ which was noted as anchored by neighborhood watch, social capital, community vigilantism, adherence to the values of individual and family integrity and other social norms and values were identified as important resources in community security. The paper argues that discourses on crime of any form in developing countries should be framed around some contextually determined factors to enhance the development of better and context-based mechanisms for practical control.

Keywords: crime control, environment, spiritual and social controls, coastal settlements, Nigeria.

1. Introduction

In crime control practice, the focus of attention has always been on the socio-economic factors bordering on causes as well as the effectiveness of the public crime control measures. These traditional orientations come with the rise of modernity in the West and the corresponding relegation of the socio-cultural and religious factors (Wilber, 1998). Akpokodje et al (2002) examined the dilemma of crime prevention in developing countries in the wake of modern crime fighting reality in two separate themes as follows (p. 145):

a. Crime data in developing countries

...the pattern and distribution of data on crime in the developing countries is characterized by a concentration on the criminological aspects, which is similar to those in developed countries. In countries where even basic research on crime is lacking, original insights that are useful tools in policy-making are scant. This lack of research into crime and societal responses to crime in the developing world means crime policy has been dictated by material found in the domain of criminal justice agencies (Zvekic 1995). Public funded criminal justice institutions are the main source of official crime statistics. Poor funding of these agencies in many cases means that much of the data has to be approached with caution because of the possibility of gaps, inconsistencies and errors. Therefore, some means of reviewing unofficial sources of crime data become imperative if effective crime-preventing strategies with a wider reach are to be designed and implemented. However, this generalization does not apply to the whole of the developing world as some regions have reliable indicators of the crime situation.

b. Crime and social control

...the reference of crime in the developing world cannot be complete without acknowledging the role that customs, traditions, folklores, mores and beliefs have played. These social attributes are the basis for the bonds that make up social control (Abotchie, 1997). With modernization these bonds that knit societies, families and institutions together have been disrupted, weakening social control. One key factor that has had implications for crime is urbanization (Buendia, 1989). Social control has been applied variously: as a support to or to improve the operation of the state’s criminal justice system ‘inner policeman’; or operating as a parallel criminal justice system (ibid). It has been useful to make these distinctions as programmes and practice for crime prevention fit into these realms.

Most literature on crime in developing countries have suggested that many studies relating to crime prevention depend more on rhetoric than reality (Akpokodje et al cites Visher and Weisburd 1998; Welsh and Farrington 2001). In Africa for instance, crime control practice depends, to a large extent, on the complex interplay of

spirituality, religion and territorial cults. These elements not only drive local governance and institutional effectiveness, they provide remarkable foundation for traditional justice. Bernard and Kumalo (2004: 119) had reported a presentation by Mamimine and Chinhoyi (2001:7) in Zimbabwe who referred to the spirit medium as an important component in local governance authorities as follows:

...a chieftdom had most of the features of a modern state, that is, a legislature constituted primarily of spirit mediums, chiefs and headmen, an executive, composed of chiefs, headmen, village heads and the councilors and a judiciary system with dare or courts encompassing all community members at large."

They further argued that the spirit mediums are instrumental in conferring legitimacy on the chief designate (also see Lan, 1985; Daneel, 1970 and Schoffeleers, 1978).

Religion has equally been discussed in the literature as important medium in checking crime through the threat of supernatural sanctions as well as encouraging normative behaviours that are linked to supernatural rewards (Baier and Wright, 2001). Several other studies that implicate and associate religion with decreasing rates of societal crimes have been reported in the literature across many developing countries (Tavakoli 2012, Hirschi 2002, Baier and Wright 2001 and Lee 2006). Religion, in any form, carries elements of belief and morality, and forms one of the core foundations for social control. Literature on social control has suggested that societal crime comes about as a result of an individual's weak or broken bond to society. For instance, Mapp (2009) specifically reported that attachment, commitment, involvement and belief are the four conventional bond elements to a society. Religious institutions are seen as central in fostering individual attachment, commitment and involvement within a larger society (Hirschi, 2002). Consequently, social control theory holds that by strengthening an individual's bond to society, religious institutions should deter criminal behaviour (Baier and Wright, 2001).

This study is an exploratory attempt to understand the interplay of physical, spiritual, religious and social control measures in checking societal crime in Nigeria. The study mainly focuses on thievery and robbery and will depend on empirical findings drawn from two coastal settlements of Ibeno and its neighborhood (Eastern Obolo) in Akwa Ibom state, Nigeria. This study was motivated by the study of Developmental Neglect in Upenekang, Ibeno Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State (Brown, 1998). In the course of in-depth interaction with the respondents, many social issues and practices which were linked to crime prevention and control (as a way of complementing the state security agency capacity) were discussed. These subsequently led to an investigation to further understand them.

2. Study Areas, Theory and Methods

Ibeno and Eastern Obolo are close neighbourhood settlements with each assuming a local government authority within the 31 local government area structure in Akwa Ibom State. They are all located in the southern part of Akwa Ibom State. They are coastal settlements which share their southern boundaries with the Atlantic Ocean. The two settlements are dominantly fishing settlements on the Nigerian coast. While Ibeno has a total population of 75, 380, Eastern Obolo has 60, 543 (NPC, 2006). The people are basically of the Obolo/Andoni origin. The common dialect is Ibeno/Obolo language. The people have rich cultural heritage with many age-long traditional institutions including Ekpe, Obon, Uke, Ekong, Akata, Eka-Ebitu, UbomIsong, Oluo, Ikini and age grade system. These traditional institutions have played numerous roles in governance of the area.

The area have a humid tropical climate characterized by high daily temperature (between 26⁰ C and 33⁰ C), relatively high annual rainfall (3000mm-4000mm) and very high relative humidity (>80%). The influence of the sea contributes not only in moderating the high daily temperatures, it equally influences the relatively high annual rainfall situation in the areas.

Over the past few decades, these two settlements have become important economic areas for Nigeria given their status as oil producing areas. The presence of some oil multinationals in the area has contributed in the transformation of the area (both positively and negatively) in the forms of influencing the cost of living, provision of some physical infrastructure (roads, electricity etc), environmental degradation through oil spillage and gas flaring, etc. In spite of the impact of oil exploration, the rural people still depend on fishing, agriculture and related activities for livelihood and income. While the impact of some physical infrastructures of the oil multinationals such as roads, electricity and water may be felt in some core urban settlements (mostly their Council headquarters), virtually all the rural and island settlements hardly get linked to such benefits (Brown, 1998). Consequently, the people depend on individual and community efforts in surviving through the constraints of the natural environment. In such circumstance, it is natural that surviving in such difficult environments will depend, to a large extent, on the rich socio-cultural relations and religious beliefs.

This work is concerned with the propensity to resort to supernatural remedies in an attempt to cope with situations of stress, anxiety and uncertainty. As such, the argument by Malinowski (1954) that religion reinforces social norms and values, promotes social solidarity; and by extension, is a viable tool for social order and stability, would have sufficed. However, since the study goes beyond the functional sphere of religion to a

network of other possible local social control mechanisms, the situational crime prevention theory by Clarke (1997) is adopted for the work. This is because it explains the environment, rational choice, and routine activity as the basic propositions. It follows that the law, the offender, the victim or target, the place, the plan and decision by the offender to act, as well as, the suitability of the target and no capable person watching the target and the offender are ingredients of crime (Green and Shapiro, 1994; and Clarke and Eck, 2003).

This paper is part of a study by Brown (1998) on 'developmental neglect in Upenekang in Ibeno Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State. Although the project worked more on the physical and social infrastructural aspects of development in the area, there was significant benefit of insights on the social, cultural and other religious issues that contributed in achieving governance through social controls (See Brown, 1998). Of greater interest were the discussions on the opportunities of a wide range of spiritual agencies and social controls in checking crime in the area. This prompted research interest on these themes since 2012. The researcher decided to broaden the study area to cover the neighborhood of Eastern Obolo to have a broad and a much better insight on the topic of investigation. The study depended on interviews (30 in-depth interviews), informal discussions and informant services. The study targeted the elders, youths, women, men, traditional rulers, the elites and the police.

Key ideas, information and discussions were subjected to verification from a range of informants and interviewees. The researcher's previous fieldwork experience in the area was useful in locating appropriate individuals, social groups and informants as well as expanding the field area and strengthening trust with the community. The study equally depended on a wide range of secondary sources of information from the literature and local news publications. The study restricted its focus to robbery and depended on the perceptual surveys of incidence, experiences and control measures, among others.

In actual fact, official data on robbery incidence from the police are not part of this study. This has to do with the fact that police records of robbery incidence in Nigeria in general is very poor and largely depends on a formal complaint by victims which, in most cases, are hardly forthcoming. Except for some high income and well-educated resident citizens, robbery attacks on individuals and households are hardly reported to the police by most urban residents unless it involves loss of lives and important property. These practically render dependence on official statistics of armed robbery for the areas unrealistic. Public attitude to crime reporting is further undermined by a seeming lack of faith and trust in the criminal policing capacity of the Nigerian police authorities on the one hand, and the economic constraints of most individuals, a lack of confidence on the ability of the police authorities to act, as well as concerns over the confidentiality of information released to the police authorities. These issues are fundamentally related to the wider image problem of the Nigeria police as a corrupt institution in one of the most corrupt countries in the world (Transparency International, 2004). Given these limitations, the study employed perceptual survey as a way of overcoming the limitations of data imposed by the factors highlighted earlier.

The paper acknowledges the numerous limitations pertaining to data and coverage (a study on Ibeno and Eastern Obolo local government areas alone cannot truly reflect the realities of a heterogeneous population and social fabric of Nigeria). Despite these and related limitations, the study has the potential in giving rise to further studies on these issues.

3. Results

Information on crime with specific emphasis on armed robbery depended on analysis and discussions from the respondents. Out of the 30 respondents interviewed, a consensus was established in the fact that armed robbery in the coastal environment was less common compared to other non-coastal areas in the state. The respondents did not see armed robbery as a social problem in their areas. None of the respondents reported having experienced armed robbery attack in their private homes compared to what some claimed were 'daily news items' in the media in other areas in the State. Discussions identified key responsible factors located mainly in the locational and environmental attributes, the importance of the spirit agency, traditional institutions and the activities of faith-based agencies, as well as the impact of local social control mechanisms. The relevance of public security infrastructure including the police force was less prominent in the discussions of the respondents, although there are few police posts in the areas.

One female discussant (in her early 30s) who works in one of the commercial banks opened up a discussion on this with the following:

...but you can't find robbers here [in Ibeno]...where would they come from? After their operation where would they go through? We only have one road, that is Eket-Ibeno road...but the rest are water bodies....

This statement underscores the importance of environmental-locational factors given that most settlements in the coastal regions are island settlements. Transports and communications are mostly mediated by the use of sea facilities mostly dominated by canoes and engine boats. Oil exploration in the areas have led to relative

improvements in local social and economic livelihoods as some settlements areas have had some benefits of water supply, roads and electricity infrastructures as well as some financial improvements in individual businesses, village authorities and local councils. Over the years, these areas have witnessed the influx of alien settlers who engage in fishing, trading and other small scale businesses. Relative to other rural and urban areas in Nigeria, the coastal settlements under study are better in terms of resources, wealth and local livelihoods despite claims of environmental degradation brought about by petroleum oil exploration. In spite of these relative advantages, crime rate (in the form of robbery) is relatively less frequent. There was a general agreement that armed robbery incidence is less common with some respondents linking this to environmental-locational factors.

Within the broad consensus that believed the coastal settlements is relatively armed robbery-free, were some dissonant voices on the factors most responsible for that. Over 80% (about 26 interviewees) of the respondents held shared beliefs in the spiritual, religious and traditional factors. While some respondents were more cautious in explaining the spiritual/traditional perspectives to the issue, others were more explicit on this. Two specific discussions drawn from Eastern Obolo and Ibeno are used to support this explanation as follows (translated in English)

...no one will dare to venture into that business [armed robbery] here. If you steal...and at the point of trying to cross over the water...you will be attacked by Ukarakpa [the sea python]...the river will be highly disturbed by the Ukarakpa until you are drowned...it is linked to the protective spirit of the land...[Eastern Obolo].

In another dimension, a respondent from Ibeno had this to say (translated into English)

...water is important for our security. We use it to detect and punish robbers and other social crimes. If someone steals, the village will draw on the agency of Atabri-Inyang [a river in Okobo]...it is either you confess or die...

Quite unlike other non-coastal settlement areas in Nigeria, the coastal areas live relatively simple lives reflected in some security practices in private homes and public places. Notwithstanding the importance or magnificence of a building, external physical security practices such as 'round and high-rise fencing of compounds', 'external iron protectors for doors and windows', 'security gates' and the presence of 'security attendants', were rare occurrences in private and public houses except the facilities of the oil multinationals (e.g., ExxonMobil and a few other places in Ibeno) which must be protected against threat of protest and other acts of deliberate vandalism. This remains the first indicator for understanding the relative security of the areas. Akpabio (2012) had earlier reported a respondent in his early 30s in the coastal area who highlighted the 'policing powers' of the 'marine spirit' with specific reference to deterring social crimes as follows:

...compare our community with others...you will note the difference being the absence of high security fences around individual compounds and door or window protectors...people do not steal here because of the sea... (pp.810).

Some 'sense connections' could be established between the respondents who used environmental-locational factors to explain the relative low crime rate in Ibeno and others who depended on the spirit of the waters. Such 'sense connection' could be gleaned from the discussions of a male respondent (in his early 60s) as follows:

...we have lived here with the waters...and it has been our source for almost everything we want...our waters know every one of us...but one important thing to note is that our water cannot drown the natives....

The local perspectives of experiencing water serve to underscore the common belief in the mutual relationship between the territorial and marine cults. The point is that a native hardly steals being fully aware of the historical but ambivalent role of water in security and in local justice. On the other hand, an outsider who ventures, through territorial boundaries, on a robbery mission is very likely not to go 'unharmful' since the marine powers will also be used in communication with the territorial cults to track down the culprit. The fact is if one decided to steal and goes through the waters, he or she will likely be drowned and if one decides to use the land, the waters will be used in communication with the territorial cults (in an act of incantation/invocation) to track down the culprit. This was the view of a graduate student from the area.

The social control mechanism was equally frequently mentioned during discussions on this issue. Indeed several social institutions and norms are common among the inhabitants of the coastal environment. Attachment to beliefs, religious values of morality as well as adherence to personal and family integrity was noted to foster the incentive for 'communitarian spirit.' The availability of social and cultural institutions such as 'Ekong', 'Obon', 'Ekpe', 'Uke', 'Akata', 'Eka-Ebitu', 'UbiomIsong', 'Oluo', 'Ikini' and various age grade system were referred to as contributing to 'community policing' as well as regulating social behaviours. Observance of social trust, morality and values for individual and family integrity imply that deviant behaviours are regularly named, exposed and shamed. In some cases, culprits are subjected to social and physical torture

which may result in the loss of life and property. Such social stigma translates to physical and psychological sense of alienation and exclusion for the culprits and his family. Crime in such context becomes a very costly risk which no individual would want to venture. In the words of a man in his 40s (who has had a formal education),

'...it amounts to a costly venture to ever think of enlisting in such criminal adventure...you are in trouble and your immediate family will be in trouble for the rest of their lives'.

'Communitarian spirit' equally entails mutual neighbourhood watch. Traits of criminal elements and behaviours are easily identified by a single 'tip' of the neighbor to the appropriate village authority. The situation is serious to the extent of affecting social contracts and relationships such as marriage, friendship, credit worthiness, financial transactions and social trust, among others. An elderly woman who should be in her early 60s observed as follows:

...relationships are screened on the basis of individual and traces of family integrity...but when you are noted to be the son or daughter of a thief [eyen ino]...the prospect of contracting a relationship such as marriage to a decent individual or family is dimmed...no reasonable and responsible individual would want to risk his/her name or that of the family....

Individual attachments or commitments to social values, norms and beliefs as pre-requisites for social and moral order are regular features in Mapp (2009) and Hirschi (2002) studies. Social control mechanisms were reported as important fulcrum in responding to challenges of crime in the coastal settlements. They have continued to be effective in spite of the rare presence of the Nigeria police.

4. Discussions

Emerging from the results are the diverse ways coastal communities utilize in responding to challenges of keeping their communities safe from social crime. Environment-locational factors contribute as natural elements. The efforts of the communities have been seen to depend on tradition, social capital, social control, religion and spirituality. The belief in the agency of the marine powers dominated discussions in the study communities. The surrounding bodies of water in these communities have, historically, been at the center of discourses of community governance and security. Although most of the respondents were not forthcoming in openly admitting the realities of the beliefs, local informants, however, were clear and emphatic on the potency of both the relevant territorial and marine spirit agencies in social crime control. As one of the respondents (in his late 60s) observed:

...you see they would not tell you the fact but they know it happens...the new generation Churches do not accept this way of life...they preach openly against it...but most of their members still fall back on these beliefs in times of needs....

While this respondent was making some general claims on the potency of the marine and territorial spirits in local governance, this statement was however used to support his argument that such spirit agencies are still very relevant in fighting social crime.

Several studies have projected the African system of governance as founded on local tradition, customs, religion, spirituality, social control mechanism and beliefs (Ellis and TerHaar 2004, Akpabio 2012; Douglas 1966, Ekong 2003, Bernard and Kumalo 2004, Lan 1985, etc). The wider African cosmology has been discussed to be dominated by beliefs in local ancestors, sorcery and other forms of spiritual and supernatural powers (Ellis and TerHaar 2004 as cited by Akpabio, 2012). This explains why large bodies of water most likely command what Strang (2005) calls 'hydrolatory' or 'water worship.' Local beliefs in the powers of the water spirits, gods and goddesses have historically been appropriated for diverse ends. This argument goes beyond the study communities to the wider Nigerian society going by the submission of Ellis and TerHaar (2004: 125-126) that water has always been at the center of wealth and power in southern Nigeria, and which could be appropriated for human and societal fortunes or misfortunes (also see Akpabio 2012). One broad but implied consensus derived during this study is the role of Christian religion in shaping local attitudes over beliefs and practices appropriated for local governance. Though acknowledged by some as important in crime control, others were more circumspect about these water-linked powers probably to avoid running the risk of incurring the Church sanction. The demonization campaign against the traditional spiritual institutions as a means of achieving effective local governance has been well documented in the literature, dating back to the nineteenth-century evangelizations of Africa by foreign missionaries. Beyond the Christian religion, the institution of the secular state equally has impact that pervades across every element of the traditional institutions.

The circumstances of the Nigerian nation state are also useful framework for understanding the faith and persistence of the traditional approaches to combating social crime, most specifically armed robbery.

Generally, the Nigerian police is ranked as a 'corrupt institution' and inadequately equipped to address the problem of crime. While policing attention of the state prioritizes the urban centers, police presence in rural communities are, however, concentrated in local government headquarters, always at the services of the local government political office holders. Lack of police attention to rural areas only leaves the natives with the option of drawing from their network of available local social institutions, neighbourhood watch, social control mechanisms, community vigilantism, beliefs and the spirit medium. In the coastal communities, the surrounding bodies of water are often depended upon. With these arrangements, the tendency is that 'non-community' members or 'outsiders' are seen as potential threat and labeled as enemies of the community. The point drawn during fieldwork interaction seems to be that while local community members caught in crime are handled with the traditional means (such as swearing to an oath linked to the water etc), a 'non-community' member caught with same crime receives summary justice through extralegal means. Within the wider Nigerian society, extralegal means of handling criminal suspects range from lynching, pounding and many other crude means of inflicting deadly pains. A 2012 media report on this is captioned, '...jungle justice: community in Akwa Ibom roast four kinsmen over alleged robbery...four alleged armed robbers were recently roasted to death in IbiangaAsakpa...the alleged robbers were said to have gone to the community to rob residents of the area...' (The Sensor Newspaper 28, February 2012:1). 'Jungle' or 'summary' justice is often relied upon when a suspected 'robber' is physically caught. However, it is believed 'run-away' robbers meet their 'nemesis' through the prying powers of the supernatural agencies as in discussions about *Ukarakpa* in Eastern Obolo.

'Communitarian spirits' were discussed as important resource for controlling social crime in the coastal communities. Individuals take responsibilities for the security of their property and that of the community. Local groups take action when needs arise. These spirits, it was gathered, are sustained and enriched by kinship ties, religion, social values about individual and family integrity as well as beliefs and commitments to the norms of the wider community. Though the relevance of the communitarian spirits have attracted wider debates (see Valentine 2001: 128-137), it was discovered to be useful in such communities with minimal public security infrastructure.

5. Conclusion

This study was conceived to develop practical and theoretical understanding of the role of a range of locational-environmental factors, spirit medium and local social control mechanism in addressing the challenges of crime in coastal Nigeria. The results have demonstrated the importance of these factors which are mostly subsumed within the wider African cosmology characterized by beliefs, customs, traditions, spirituality, social control mechanisms, among others. Through this framework, the study has attempted to advance practical understanding of how communities in coastal areas of Nigeria draw on these elements in combating social crime specifically armed robbery. In this context, water bodies were discussed as central platform in which such practice beliefs manifest. While the nature of the coastal areas (almost surrounded with large bodies of water) served to play natural security role of controlling 'armed robbery', the various social resources underpinning the communitarian spirits of the coastal communities were seen as important human factors though with some ambivalent roles. For instance the image of 'community' or 'non-community' member implies criminal suspects are more likely to be handled differently depending on identity.

While this study did not intend to over-romanticize the communitarian spirit as a social resource in crime control, its capacity and persistence in attending to the security needs of the local coastal communities can be judged comparatively with situations in Nigeria's urban spaces where such resources are less common. The study equally discussed the pervasive roles of the Christian religion in undermining and demonizing the traditional medium of controlling crime. The important lesson to be drawn about this study borders on the need to understand the diverse roles of contextual elements in crime control and community governance. As Hyun (2001) rightly implied, it is important that the dynamics of community values and actions should always be understood within particular evolving socio-cultural-historical contexts. Rather than make definite recommendations, it is imperative that further research on this theme be conducted and possibly in comparative perspectives across other Nigerian regions. There is the need to understand the situations in other coastal and non-coastal communities.

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