

**‘When the Bakassi Boys Came: Eastern Nigeria Confronts Vigilantism’, *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 20, 2 (2002), 1-22.**

Abstract

Against a background of failure by the Nigeria Police to protect citizens from violent robberies, the Governor of Anambra State has adopted a radical solution. He invited a private vigilante group, the Bakassi Boys, to form the basis of a state vigilante service. Within a space of one year, armed robbery had been reduced to a minimum. But, as the paper shows, the venture was not unproblematic. First, it brought to the fore a power struggle between the federal and state levels of government and between the Nigeria Police and those in the local community concerned with security. More seriously, for all its local popularity, the group’s use of counter-violence and their scant regard for the law or human rights has serious implications for democracy. Locating such state vigilante services within sociological theory is not straightforward, but a number of approaches to explaining the phenomenon are considered in the light of the account. The paper concludes that although it is increasingly being used as a model of internal security across Nigeria, its lack of accountability and attitude to the rule of law disqualify it from being a valid alternative policing strategy within a democracy.