

DISCUSSION PAPER 53

**ZANGBETO:**  
Navigating Between the Spaces of Oral Art,  
Communal Security and Conflict Mediation  
in Badagry, Nigeria

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*Indexing terms*

Grass roots groups

Traditional culture

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## Foreword

This Discussion Paper explores Zangbeto, a traditional society among the Egun people in the town of Badagry in southwest Nigeria, near Lagos. The exploration has several dimensions, including the local reinvention of the traditional night watchman role in the service of communal policing or vigilantism, conflict mediation at the local level, oral art, entertainment and communal order. In more ways than one, the study captures the essence and multiple identities of Zangbeto within Badagry society.

Its point of departure lies in the interrogation of the widely held view that vigilantism in Nigeria is always characterised by high levels of violence. The author shows how Zangbeto draws on local Egun culture and traditional practices to maintain security and local order at the community level. It is argued that rather than act in an arbitrary and violent manner, Zangbeto operates through the combination of non-violent traditional symbolic actions and oral art in community policing. This partly explains why it has continued to thrive in a rapidly growing and increasingly multi-ethnic setting such as Badagry town.

Locating the reinvention of Zangbeto as an instrument or a form of community policing since the late 1980s in post-structural adjustment Nigeria, the author provides insights into how aspects of culture evolve and adapt to the dynamics of change and crisis in modern African societies. While this paper does not glorify vigilantism in Nigeria, it makes the valid point that not all vigilante groups are steeped in violent or deviant behaviour. It also asserts, based on fieldwork among the Egun people of Badagry, that vigilantism can have more than one form, particularly in cases where its origins lies deep in cultural histories and long-established local traditional practices.

The paper delves into other aspects of the form and content of Zangbeto society, including its organisation, beliefs, modes of operation and multiple roles. Such roles are symbolised by the metaphors of Zangbeto as Spirit, Messenger, Peace Maker, Custodian of Egun culture and values, and Conflict Mediator at the community level. It underscores the relevance of Zangbeto to the socio-cultural context of the Egun people, and how it cohabits with modern religions such as Christianity and Islam and institutions such as the Nigerian police in the social space of the Egun ethnic group without major clashes of roles or conflict.

Equally significant is the treatment of the oral art of Zangbeto as the cultural and artistic expression of the essential values of Egun people, and the aesthetics of its cultural tropes of oral presentation and representation. Focusing on the public performance of the Zangbeto masquerade, the content of its messages and rhetoric, the author is able to bring out the manifestations of its oral aesthetics as a powerful force of communal security, peace and social cohesion. This Discussion Paper breaks new ground in local traditional policing, and alternative forms of communal conflict mediation, security and social order.

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*Far from attempting to reform society, vigilantes are seen as collections of thugs and marginalized youth struggling for their share of patronage, and preying on the communities they claim to protect. ... In the social disorder of contemporary Africa, everything is up for grabs, and vigilantism is just the latest strategy for grabbing. (Meagher 2007)*

## Introduction

This study examines Zangbeto, a revered traditional group of communal ‘night watchmen’ in Badagry, southwest Nigeria, and the oral art that sustains a local brand of vigilantism and conflict mediation in post-structural adjustment Nigeria, where some of the security functions of the state have been taken over by community-based, non-state actors. Such actors have drawn on local cultures, traditions and practices to maintain security and promote social harmony at the grassroots level. The paper interrogates the view that vigilantism in Nigeria is characteristically violent and mainly a product of a Nigerian state that has been unable or unwilling to maintain law and order fully within its borders. It argues that traditional institutions that extend their functions to include vigilantism can be relatively less violent and more effective in policing communities than politically connected vigilante groups.

The Zangbeto is believed to have supernatural powers, and is communal, rather than the initiative of private individuals or a self-defined group. Its origins lie in the pre-colonial history of the Egun people of Badagry and the coastal region of Porto-Novo in neighbouring Benin. Its survival and transition from ‘night watching’ to local vigilantism/policing underscores its capacity to adapt to socio-communal changes and demands, while retaining some of its unique traditional characteristics, which differentiate it from other recently formed vigilante groups in Nigeria. The Zangbeto is seen and generally regarded as a cultural emblem of the Egun people, whose visibility is enhanced in contemporary times by the security functions it performs within Badagry and surrounding villages. In addition, Zangbeto does not fit easily into current modes and types of vigilantism known in Nigeria. For instance, it is not ‘short-lived,’ did not arise as a result of repeated deviant behaviour and does not respond to cultural difference violently (Senebachal 1996). As will be discussed below, its vigilantism is less violent and its means of reaching out to and operating within Egun community are through a combination of its oral art and symbolic actions rather than the use of violence.

The perspective on vigilantism adopted by most scholars across disciplines tends to emphasise its arbitrariness, disorderliness, illegality and violent practices in contrast to the organised, formal and legal structures of the police and other formal national security agencies. Vigilantism is also understood as a reactionary practice that seeks to vent discontentment over socio-political issues through means not permitted in legal systems. Roenbaum and Sederberg (1974:544), in a seminal essay on the subject, submit that sometimes people engage in vigilantism in support of ‘the established order’ by ‘means that violate these formal boundaries.’ In their three-pronged investigation of the effects of vigilantism, they favour an approach that recognises ‘vigilantism as a form of violence’ (ibid.). Another definition of vigilantism is advanced by Senechal de la Roche (1996:97), who describes vigilantism as one of the ‘four major forms’ of ‘unilateral and nongovernmental collective violence,’ the others being ‘lynching, rioting and terrorism.’ He examines collective violence, and by extension vigilantism, as social control and ‘a moralistic response to deviant behaviour’ (1996:98).

These positions highlight vigilantism as a violent and collective practice directed at effecting change or maintaining the status quo outside the law. From whichever per-

spective vigilantism is viewed, studies on vigilantism in Nigeria have reiterated that it is a mechanism capable of serving ethnic, political and even religious purposes. Scholars interested in vigilante groups such as the O'odua People's Congress (OPC) of southwestern Nigeria, Bakassi of the southeast and *hisba* in the north have largely concentrated on the various dimensions of these groups and the changes they have brought to the socio-political landscape of Nigeria.

The concept of the vigilante has its roots in the Latin *vigilans*, connoting a 'watchman,' 'guard' or someone who 'watches.' In its more recent usage, the term has been used to describe (non-state) armed groups that use violent means to mete out extra-judicial punishment to those accused of committing specific crimes in a local community or society. Thus, a vigilante group, within its own conception of crime, appropriates the authority of the police in order to provide a safer community.

In Nigerian cities, particularly from the late 1980s in the wake of declining standards of living, rising unemployment and crime levels, vigilante groups proliferated, largely in the form of neighbourhood watch groups seeking to protect their communities from armed robbery. However, some of these vigilante groups also evolved beyond their communal base to connect with larger ethno-political agendas –largely framed as acting in defence of the rights of the ethnic nation in the context of an unjust and highly centralised poly-ethnic federation. A good example of a group combining neighbourhood watch roles and a larger ethnic agenda was the OPC, which operated across the Yoruba communities of southwest Nigeria.

The complexity of the notion of vigilantism is underscored by the reality that it covers a disparate collection of groups often operating below the radar of the state security agencies, but selectively engaging with some state agencies and political elites. It also elicits a certain level of ambivalence regarding its nature and ramifications in academic circles both within and outside Nigeria. In some regards, vigilantism represents both elements of welcome relief to those terrorised by armed robbers, living in fear, denied the 'fruits of their labour' or, in extreme cases, their lives, and at the same time a social menace that is symptomatic of the crisis of the postcolonial Nigerian state. The excesses of some vigilante groups, particularly ethnic vigilantes, have been the focus of articles, journals and books (Gore and Pratten 2003; Smith 2004; Adebaniwi 2005).

The rise of vigilantism in Nigeria can be traced to the period following economic crisis and decline in the mid-1980s, and the political crisis that followed long years of military rule, particularly in the 1990s. In the face of large-scale retrenchment, unemployment and the rising prices of basic necessities, the state and law enforcement agencies found it increasingly difficult to control the spiralling levels of crime. Most of the studies of these groups have more or less given them a 'status synonymous with the fractured and violence-ridden image of Africa's most populous nation' (Pratten 2008:1). This image is not unconnected with the actual activities of ethnic vigilante groups, including their involvement in acts of violence, human rights abuse and extra-judicial killings (Human Rights Watch 2003; Amnesty International 2002; Smith 2004; Adebaniwi 2005). This is not to claim that only their excesses are of interest to researchers: there have also been attempts to highlight their positive contributions to their host communities, including

their acceptance, civility and their role in affirming the state's relevance to the maintenance of law and order (Nolte 2007; Meagher 2007).

Meagher draws attention to one of the approaches in the study of vigilantism in which the violent and unlawful manifestations of vigilante groups are seen as either continuities or discontinuities with a cultic traditional past. According to her, vigilante groups in Nigeria have been unsympathetically or favourably projected because they are usually seen as mere replications of pre-existing cultic groups. However, the studies Meagher interrogates are themselves in the tradition of critical inquiries in which social scientists, historians, anthropologists and literary critics seek connections between contemporary phenomena and old ones. Her work is relevant here because it shows what possibilities a critical interrogation of vigilantism in Nigeria can engender.

Invariably, the focus on the misdeeds of vigilantes in contemporary Nigeria has resulted in the stigmatisation of the notion of 'vigilante,' such that its employment to depict 'night watch' carries an existing bias that privileges form over content. As a traditional institution that is responsive to modern demands, Zangbeto at a certain point expanded its scope to include entertainment. For example, during the military administrations of the mid-1980s to early 1990s, Zangbeto also became synonymous with cultural entertainment and shows as successive local government administrations encouraged the group to perform at state functions. In line with this, some of the mystical and spectacular oeuvre that pervades its appearance at night is played down in order to allow the audience enjoy the performances.

Apart from seeking to connect present with past, studies have focused on contemporary and emergent forms of vigilantism and the individualistic and socio-political underpinnings of their formation and practice in the larger framework of globalisation (Agbu 2004; Gore and Pratten 2003; Reno 2002). It appears there is an increasing emphasis on solely locating ethnic vigilantism in Nigeria in the wider discourse of global socio-political and economic trends without paying much attention to the history and socio-cultural context of the practice in multi-ethnic Nigeria. Interestingly, Pratten's introduction (2008:1-15) reveals some of the tensions in the discourse on Nigerian vigilantism. This tension lies in the link between the wider narratives of globalisation and the privatisation of vigilantism in Nigeria. Studies seem always to explain the activities of vigilante groups in Nigeria in the context of economic or political factors, whereas local Annang vigilantes, which Pratten later examines in the volume, are not always after economic or political gains.

From personal experience, people who volunteer or are requested to participate in vigilante activities do so with the understanding that without such groups, they, their families and communities would be in imminent danger or risk. Though the link is sometimes applicable to vigilantism in Nigeria, Pratten's approach of emphasising the cultural context of vigilantism acknowledges the multiplicity and complexities of physical-cultural variables in the understanding of vigilantism in Nigeria. This point is further substantiated by Fourchard (2008), who argues that vigilante groups existed before the socio-political upheavals of the 1990s, and that the practice is an old one bearing a new name. From his study of the security systems in Ibadan in southwest Nigeria, he continues:

Effectively, 'vigilante' in Nigeria is a term initially proposed by the police in the mid-1980s as a substitute for an older practice present since the colonial period and referred to as the 'hunter guard' or 'night guard' system ... Hence, instead of looking at vigilante groups as a response to a supposed increase of crime or a supposed decline of the police force, we should consider them – initially at least – as a first attempt at introducing some form of community policing in order to improve the appalling image of the police. As such, vigilantism in south-western Nigeria is not only a response to the Nigerian 'politics of plunder' endemic since the beginning of the oil boom (Fourchard 2008:212).

Thus, Fourchard, like Meagher and Pratten, charts an alternative course in the study of Nigerian vigilantism, which dismantles the concept of vigilantism as a response to socio-political issues of the last 20 or so years.

So far, sociological, political and economic approaches have been applied to the investigation of vigilantism in Nigeria. However, not enough attention has been paid to the artistic and literary dimensions of vigilantism in Nigeria.

Hussein (2005:1) has maintained that the functions of oral art in African societies cannot be glossed over. He observes that 'African oral traditions facilitate the transmission of knowledge and conventions from generation to generation. The economic structure and relationships, political traditions and practices, social rules and values of the African societies are still transmitted orally.' The study of many traditional African organisations, societies, age- and non-age groups through their oral repertoire usually results in a deeper understanding of the inner workings of such groups. In line with the arguments of Pratten and Meagher, the proper contextualisation of vigilantes in their cultural histories will yield valuable findings.

Therefore, Zangbeto can be understood as a group and practice with its own peculiar make-up and socio-cultural relevance in a heterogeneous contemporary Nigerian setting. 'Vigilante' may not be the best nomenclature for Zangbeto, but for want of a better one vigilante is applied to it only to the extent that it engages in some sort of policing in the communities where it exists. It is a group with an oral tradition through which it functions as an institution that promotes social harmony in Badagry.

This paper is based on close personal observation of Egun culture, live performances of Zangbeto and interviews with leaders and members of the group and with Egun and non-Egun residents of Badagry and selected villages nearby.

Zangbeto literally means 'watchers or men of the night.' As a nominal, it represents a group of men who are involved in policing the community and who also double as members of Zangbeto as a cultural masquerade group during public performances. Zangbeto is also used to convey the notion of a socio-cultural phenomenon made up of a series of beliefs and practices. As an institution, it is backed by an oral history that accentuates its origin as an Egun concept, not an alien or imported one. Sources consulted on the origin and history of Zangbeto asserts that 'it has existed before we were born and was handed down to us by our forefathers' (*Zanga Jofforo*). One of the responses given by the head of the group in Yeketome, Badagry, is that Zangbeto dates back several centuries to when an Egun man was said to have been pursued by his enemies and needed to flee from his

hometown unnoticed in the night. Using supernatural powers, he disguised himself by covering his body with dried leaves and raffia and by making scary sounds with the horn of an animal. Thus he was eventually able to leave the town unharmed and undetected by his enemies. He later founded a settlement, which he named Hugbonu (in modern Porto Novo, Benin) and subsequently had the men with him dress in a similar manner and keep watch over the new settlement by night to ensure that his enemies did not attack him in his new home. Since then, Zangbeto has been used to keep watch over settlements and towns of the Egun community.

Another view, put forward by Oyesakin (1994:165), holds that Zangbeto first emerged as a group to protect the coastal township against external incursions. He states: 'A constant feature of the coast dwellers is the need to effectively defend their settlements against external aggressors from the overseas and hinterland [sic] neighbours and the necessity to venture and attack others.' Zangbeto, according to this position, was initially a traditional military organisation responsible for defending the territorial borders of Badagry.

As pointed out earlier, neighbouring kingdoms and states in the mid-19th century (Old Oyo, Abomey/Dahomey) were interested in gaining control of Badagry because, with its seaport, it was both a strategic link in the trans-Atlantic trade and a terminus for trade routes from the interior. Given Badagry's history and strategic location, it was logical that a group such as Zangbeto would be formed to protect the town from its powerful neighbours. Apart from its defensive role, Zangbeto was also an arm of the traditional ruling institutions headed by the Badagry monarch or *aholu*, and saw to the maintenance of law and order in the society (Oyesakin 1994). Thus, apart from its military role, Zangbeto also had community policing functions at that time.

Badagry is located 'fifty-one kilometres West of Lagos. It is bounded in the north by the Egbado Plateau, in the south by the Atlantic Ocean and in the west by the Nigerian-Benin border. In the east, it is hemmed in by the Mangrove swamps west of Lagos' (Dioka 1994:91). Historically, Badagry port was used for transporting slaves and during the trans-Atlantic slave-trade era was acknowledged as a major trade centre. Not surprisingly, powerful neighbours such as Lagos, Porto Novo and Dahomey jostled to control the town.

Presently, Badagry is a multicultural town consisting of three major ethnic groups namely, the Egun, Awori and Yoruba, who have coexisted peacefully for more than 300 years. Though versions of the history of the founding of the town differ, it is generally agreed that these three groups are indigenes of the town. The Yoruba and Awori are said to have migrated from Ile-Ife, southwest Nigeria (with the Awori later settling in parts of present-day Ogun and Lagos states); while the Egun are believed by some to have come from Benin (formerly Dahomey) (oral sources). According to the oral sources, each group has its own cultural institutions or societies, which are respected by all three ethnic formations. For example, Yoruba have Oro, Awori have Igunnuko, while Egun have Zangbeto. The differences between these three masquerade cults include the language, costume, constitution and function.

My first contact with Zangbeto dates back to 1989, when I went on my first visit to Badagry to meet my future mother-in-law. Just before we retired to our rooms for the

night, she showed me where the conveniences were but told me that I shouldn't go out during the night to use them because of Zangbeto. She explained that these were the traditional night watchmen who were so powerful they could notice anyone loitering within a radius of 500 metres. Being a young lady from Ifetedo, a neighbouring town in Ile-Ife in southwest Nigeria, but resident in Ile-Ife, about 240 kilometres from Badagry, I could not understand why at that point in history in a town within Lagos State people would be forbidden from moving about by some traditional security outfit. This and other cultural practices of the Egun I have observed over the years brought me to the realisation that, unlike other parts of Yorubaland where most traditional practices have given way to modern ones, the Egun people have maintained theirs even in the face of growing urbanisation. I also began to understand why they have always insisted they are not Yoruba even though they are an ethnic group within Lagos State.

Olaoluwa's assertion (2006) that Egun traditional institutions are markedly different from those of the Yoruba is substantiated by the point that 'the traditional Egun monarch can never be called Oba; he is called Aholu. Obaship is a cultural patrimony of the Yoruba as Aholuship is of the Egun.' He writes as an indigene of Ipokia, an Egun town located in Ogun State, to protest the imposition of *Obaship* on the town. This difference is also illustrated by the popular saying among some Lagosians while doing business, '*Egun ni mi, mi o gbo Yoruba,*' meaning 'I am an Egun person and I do not understand Yoruba.' This statement is generally understood to mean that whoever is being told should give the speaker whatever is due to him/her or else there could be trouble. This is not to say that Egun are known for making trouble, but to underscore the difference between Egun and Yoruba, particularly that Egun are reputed to stand up to any form of oppression.

Apart from linguistic differences, there are kinship institutions among the Egun without parallel among the Yoruba. Examples include the extended family system peculiar to Egun culture. There are two important members of the extended family, namely aunt or *tanyin* and uncle or *tafe*. *Tanyin*, whether of the maternal or paternal side, are considered very important in matters pertaining to members of the extended family. They are, for instance, evident in wedding ceremonies of their nieces and are even expected to perform a role usually undertaken by the bride's parents in Yoruba culture. Adedokun (1994:289) throws more light on this aspect of Egun culture: 'Significantly, the paternal and maternal aunts assume a prominent role in relation to the bride. They are the representatives of the bride's family and they perform the most important function of offering prayers and conjugal blessings for the success of the new union.'

There is also the important role the *tanyin* plays during child-naming ceremonies. She also offers prayers for the newly born in the presence of men who are not privileged to do the same (ibid.). Despite modernity and the influence of Christianity and Islam, the traditions surrounding child-naming are still upheld by Egun people. Adedokun (1994:290) asserts that unlike most Yoruba cultures, in which a child, irrespective of its sex, is named on the eighth day, in Egun culture 'a male child is named on the ninth day while the female child is named on the seventh day.' There are obviously marked differences between certain Yoruba cultural practices and their Egun counterparts, which might be cited to support the Egun claim of not being Yoruba, despite their placement within the Yoruba linguistic group.

As regards traditional precolonial 'night watch' institutions, the Oro and Egun cults of the Yoruba are the closest masquerade groups to Zangbeto. Earlier studies of both institutions have shown that in precolonial times, in addition to other cultural and religious functions, they were also security outfits mandated to guard the community against foreign or enemy invasion. They are also both regarded in their respective communities as personified representations of ancestral spirits, and their presence is an assurance of the ever-protective and supportive help of the ancestors for their descendants (Babayemi 1980:1). Babayemi (*ibid.*) explains the role of these ancestral spirits in protecting individuals, families and communities.

The ancestral spirits have collective functions that cut across lineage and family loyalty. They collectively protect the community against evil spirits, epidemics, famine, witchcraft and evildoers, ensuring the well-being, prosperity, and productivity of the whole community generally.

### Form and Content of Zangbeto

In contemporary Badagry, including the Egun villages surrounding the coastal town, the Zangbeto society is headed by the *Zanga*, a highly respected elderly man who is well tested and reliable. The *Zanga* occupies a position of responsibility in dealing with sensitive issues affecting individuals, families and the larger community. While conducting this research, I chanced on the *baale* of Yeketome in council. It so happened they were waiting for the last member of the council to arrive so the meeting could commence. It was a bit of a surprise to find out that it was the *Zanga* of Yeketome they were waiting for. Further enquiries revealed that the *Zanga* is not just the head of the Zangbeto group, but is also a representative of the people. The *Zanga* is in effect a traditional chief who functions within the Zangbeto group and in the larger community.

According to oral sources, although the *Zanga* remains in 'office' for life, the position is rotational and is not inherited, unlike some traditional chieftaincy stools. Due to the integrity attached to the position and the fairness expected of this office, each *Zanga* is chosen by members of the group in consultation with the *aholu* or *baale* as the case may be. Membership of the group is thrown open to any male Egun who wishes to identify with the group within his quarters. There are eight quarters in Badagry township, and each has its own Zangbeto society. In small villages like those selected for this study, there is usually only one group to watch over the community at night in order to keep people with improper or criminal motives in check and maintain law and order.

As mentioned earlier, apart from its night watch duties, the group is also called on to entertain guests at major functions as a cultural group. There are usually two to four masquerades (believed to represent ancestral spirits and possessing some supernatural powers) covered in raffia, who are escorted by men and women alike on such occasions. However, at night, women are not allowed to participate in or witness Zangbeto's activities. It is important to draw attention to this singular and most distinctive aspect of Zangbeto, which sets it apart from vigilante institutions among other ethnic groups. This is perhaps one of the strategies by which the group has won acceptance among residents over the years, particularly in this age of cultural renaissance when abandoned and

'demonised' traditional practices are being revived in Nigeria. The mystical *oeuvre* of night watching gives way to a more pervasive promotion of cultural values and heritage: the audience is treated to the entertaining 'sight and sound' of Egun dance, music and spectacular masquerade performance.

### **Oral Art of Zangbeto and the Rhetoric of Social Order**

Oral art or oral literature refers to literary texts produced orally in performances before a live audience for its entertainment and education, and for religious and political purposes, including praise of eminent members of the society and behaviour control of others. They could be rendered as song, chant, narrative, proverb and poetry. At the communal level, oral art emerges as a cultural expression that identifies a people, their philosophy, social relations, values and sometimes their aspirations, which can be accessed through a critical examination of the tropes of presentation and representation in the oral texts (Finnegan 1992; Okpewho 1992; Hussein 2005). Oral art or oral literature is also a means of sustaining and transmitting cultural values, histories and identities in African societies.

The functions of oral art in any society depend on a range of variables, each of which indicates the mutability of its use. Hussein's thesis that the function of oral art is 'in a constant flux' and that in order to understand the functions of a piece of oral art, one has to develop a 'sociological semiotics between the art and its users' (Hussein 2005:16) is valuable in understanding Zangbeto songs. This approach to the study of oral art focuses on the relationship between the art and the society within which it is practised. Just as written literature gives a portrait of the artist and his/her society, the oral artist represents his/her society and culture through performances. Themes, content and style of performance reflect collective worldviews and the skills of individual performers, so that each performance blends various oral traditional genres to create enjoyable and functional art. This section discusses the tropes of Zangbeto songs, highlighting some of their strategies of control and continued relevance within the socio-cultural context of the contemporary Egun community. Of the various genres of oral literature, songs, particularly satirical ones, are among the most striking mediums of social control, because as the audience dances to the rhythm of the songs and laughs at comic performances, the message is subtly delivered. Messages intended to elicit behavioural change can be communicated through the performance of songs or poetry highlighting the bad effects of bad behaviour and/or the gains from good behaviour.

The following tropes in Zangbeto performance are examined below: Zangbeto as spirit and messenger; Zangbeto as peacemaker, moral spokesperson and custodian of Egun culture; Zangbeto as an indivisible whole; Zangbeto as a non-religious group; and *Zanga* as the honourable one. It is important to note that Zangbeto songs are contributed at different times by members of the group. As with most songs in African oral literature, no single person can claim sole authorship: songs are considered as creations of the group. Moreover, these songs do not possess a singular theme, but themes that underline the circumstances of the creation of such songs and their performance.

The songs also reveal the influence of modernity and the multicultural setting of Badagry and its surrounding villages. Though Zangbeto as an institution is older than all of those interviewed, the songs are not. The interpreter used for this research ex-

plained that new songs are composed often and integrated into old ones, without necessarily effacing the earlier songs.

### Zangbeto as Messenger and Spirit

The appearance of Zangbeto masquerades during cultural festivals or public performances is usually announced by short but pungent praise. This is a kind of formulaic verse that is not so flexible, in the sense that the words and phrases used retain their structure and content in most performances. The chanter, usually a woman, stays at a distance neither too close nor too far from the masquerade. The opening chant is translated thus:

*He wishes to be head,  
But the horn would not let him,  
The horn that makes sounds,  
the horn that breathes.*

This introduces Zangbeto as a being with a ‘horn’ and a desire. The horn, as shown in Figure 1, is located at the tip of the mask and is used to symbolise the position of Zangbeto as a leading group in the community. The masquerade is only a constitutive part of a whole. Zangbeto is a group, an institution, and even a way of life that is represented in physical form by the mask. ‘He’ is then used to represent the form under this mask. He is not the head even though he wishes to be. The horn, which is attached to the head of the masquerade like a pinnacle, is the symbol of Zangbeto’s role in the society: he makes sounds, talks and is not dumb even though he is not the ‘head.’ Zangbeto is also a supernatural or ‘possessed’ living being, which can see and perform wonderful acts. During the night watch, the horn is sounded to announce the beginning of the watch and to alert people that the group is about, and is also an important and visible part of the costume worn during daytime performances. The *Zanga* of Yeketome explains that there is a difference between the appearance of Zangbeto during the day and at night: ‘Zangbeto is meant for night appearances when it comes out without the mask, but if we are invited to perform during the day, it wears the mask.’

Therefore, as a vocal and speaking agent, he, as well as the group, embody and vocalise the wishes of the ‘head’ that is not mentioned, but could be either the visible authority – the *aholu* or king – or the invisible spirit that is regarded as the spiritual power backing Zangbeto. Whichever applies, Zangbeto is only a mouthpiece, a medium for the ‘head’ and cannot be the ‘head.’ On the one hand, the ‘horn’ can be interpreted as a check, which is placed there to caution the group against any attempt to arrogate powers to itself and recognise the fact that it is answerable to higher powers. On the other hand, Zangbeto is sometimes a metaphor for the spirit that sends the group and therefore the ‘head.’

The next song is also part of the opening for performances, but unlike the first, it addresses an audience:

*Adjust the load, the spirit is coming,  
Adjust the load, the preacher is coming  
Ready, ready, adjust the load, the preacher is coming.*

The identity of Zangbeto is constantly moving around that of a spirit that is vocal and as a messenger/preacher that has a message for the audience. As a preacher, he is placed on a pedestal that raises him above everyone in the audience, including the king, who is initially portrayed as one of those in charge. According to one of my sources, the possession of political or material power does not exclude anyone from Zangbeto's surveillance and if the wishes of the king or any powerful member of the society clash with those of Zangbeto, it accedes to the wishes of the people whom it represents. The last line 'ready, ready...' gives the rendition a sense of urgency, which alerts the audience to the approach or entrance of Zangbeto into the physical and cultural space within which it performs. The 'load,' which is not physically visible, will then symbolise the act or specific behaviour that could attract comments by the 'preacher.'

The stage is now set for the content of Zangbeto's message to be delivered. This portraiture is central to the appropriation of mechanisms of control by Zangbeto. As an ancestral spirit, he may not be questioned and as messenger/emissary, he should be listened to. A rhetorical question posed in these lines further illustrates Zangbeto's status:

*There is only one thing he abhors,  
Who can see Zangbeto?*

Zangbeto here is depicted as a spirit and is represented by humans and although he cannot be seen, he has emotions that can be hurt and a set of ideals or morals that make him abhor whatever is contrary to them. This point is corroborated in Parrinder's (1989:269) comment that 'the Zangbeto were said to be spirits of the sea, or revenants, and it was a taboo to speak of them as human.' Zangbeto's ambiguous or dual personality can be drawn from, as the need arises, to support the moral and spiritual imperatives of Zangbeto's operations in the society.

### Zangbeto as the Peacemaker and Moral and Cultural Spokesperson

*The war is coming to an end,  
Spirit, the war is coming to an end,  
You wicked ones  
You have been reported to us, the war is coming to an end.*

The mediating function of Zangbeto cuts across ethnic and religious persuasions. Whenever there is a lingering crisis between members of the community and it is brought to the notice of the king, the *Zanga* is sent to intervene and settle it. But if after this, the parties refuse to settle the quarrel amicably, the king or chief then directs *Zanga* to take the *gbeto* to the homes of those concerned, who are automatically forbidden from entering their homes without first reporting at the king's palace. *Zanga*, as the head of Zangbeto, is expected to take custody of the *gbeto*, which is the small part of the mask used to cover the head of the masquerade. When used for this purpose, it is without the horn. Over the years, this practice has been a major contribution by Zangbeto to the maintenance of social order. The symbolic use of *gbeto* in the settlement of quarrels between married

couples, siblings, landowners and neighbours is one of the sustaining factors of Zangbeto. The *Zanga* of Gbaji explains that ‘it is usually the king who sends for us to tie the *gbeto* in the homes of feuding individuals or families. We judge each case on its merits irrespective of ethnic groups.’ Zangbeto is not associated with violence, only peace. The ‘wicked ones’ have cause to be afraid, since the intervention of the Zangbeto will reveal their dealings and the oppressed will be liberated.

Morality appears to be a major concern of Zangbeto as there is a constant reminder sounded in the songs to ensure that members of the society do not evade familial responsibilities. For instance, a man is not man enough if he cannot fulfil his obligations to his family, and such behaviour is not to be condoned by the society.

*Your father died, you didn't bury him,  
Your mother died, you didn't bury her,  
Your wife has just delivered, you have no money,  
You are now on a drinking spree round the town  
Can you see your life?*

Within this are entrenched Egun values, particularly the decent treatment of women or wives.

*The believer stays in his house,  
The believer does not drive his wife out of the house.*

This verse is also an indictment of those members of the community who refer to themselves as Christians or Muslims (believers), but some of whose moral values are found wanting. This song makes it explicit that a believer is known by the level of responsibility towards his wife and not by merely professing a religion. Fidelity is also implied in the song, because ‘not staying in the house’ is synonymous with ‘looking out for other women.’ Zangbeto therefore promotes values that protect women against abuse and other forms of oppression. This is consonant the partial matriarchy among the Egun people, wherein a woman or female child is as important as the male child. In fact, she has as much right to inheritance as the male child and can become the family head that male members are bound to obey. This is in contrast to some Yoruba or Igbo inheritance systems or extended family structures, in which a woman is not entitled to such equal rights and cannot preside over family meetings. Given the multicultural composition of Badagry town, one can say that Zangbeto is a potent means of asserting Egun culture and resisting attempts to subsume this culture. However, it is not so zealous, because such satirical songs are presented in an atmosphere of peace and entertainment.

As serious as the traditional community policing and mediation of conflict is, the group explores and adopts various avenues for the effective performance of this function. One of their opening songs says, ‘*Zanga* Tose, we want to cut the waistbeads.’ Waistbeads are ornaments worn by young women and are exposed during dances and festivals. By this song, one may assume that the group is only out to entertain and perform exotic dances, but the more serious intent of surveillance is not in doubt. Another

song, like the following, may elicit laughter and douse any tensions in the air during their night watch:

*They asked me to go to school  
but I refused,  
English language is difficult to learn.*

This song seems to be an excuse for the members' inability or even refusal to speak English during performances, but it could also be that the speaker's refusal to learn the English language is because Egun is sufficient: after all, without English, he communicates with his audience. The introduction of songs such as this indicates that Egun language and culture is pivotal to the Zangbeto performance. One of the reasons Oyesakin (1994:170) cites for the continued relevance of Zangbeto is the medium of communication: 'That is why the organisation whose language the people understand, the group that is well known to deliver instant justice, the cult that lives among the people instil [sic] much confidence in the hearts of the people.'

### Zangbeto as an Indivisible Whole

The first and somewhat obvious expression of a group identity is the use of first person plural pronoun 'we':

*We are going to meet Zanga, what do we say?  
Zanga, the big man, what do we say?*

*Here we are, the men fit enough to watch the night,  
You cannot encounter a night watchman and not recognise him,  
Here we are.*

Ruth Finnegan (1992:242) explains the concept of group identity as a strategy employed by groups to 'uphold the *status quo*.' This is because through their performances during the day in the presence of a live audience, they 'express solidarity and social obligation in song.' The Zangbeto group considers solidarity and commitment a serious matter in the constitution of membership, and so membership is by observation, choice and initiation. The *Zanga* of Jofforo says he joined the group at the age of 15 and has remained a member since then because he was not forced to join the group. Apart from this, only Egun speakers who are ready to conform to the rules guiding the group are admitted. This is significant in understanding the Egun belief that Zangbeto is a cultural institution that promotes the values and mores of Egun.

### Zangbeto as a Non-religious Group

It is not uncommon for religious groups to warn their members against participating in traditional occult practices either as performers or audience onlookers. A plausible reason for the survival of Zangbeto among the Egun may be the claim that it is not a religion or cult. During an interview with the *Zanga* of Joffro, I wanted to know what sacrifice would be required of an offender, but I was surprised when he told me none would be,

except that the offender should change or else a curse will be placed on him/her. This song supports this concept:

*Come and believe,  
Come and believe,  
The spirit is not to be worshipped.*

As pointed out earlier, the spirit is a metaphor for Zangbeto. Therefore one can substitute Zangbeto for spirit and rewrite the song as:

*Come and believe,  
Come and believe,  
Zangbeto is not to be worshipped.*

Interestingly, two of the three leaders interviewed for this study claimed to be Christians. One may ask if Zangbeto is not to be worshipped, what does it demand? The answer is obvious: consistent with the passage in the Bible that says ‘obedience is better than sacrifice,’ members of the society are to obey the rules of Zangbeto and the cultural values it enshrines. ‘Zangbeto is not to be worshipped’ is a caution to those who may want to view the Zangbeto cult as a religious organisation or a god. Oyesakin also supports this claim: ‘Zangbeto has no shrine and has no symbol other than the raffia costume.’ In other words, unlike most African traditional religions, in which there are totems or effigies representing a concept of the supernatural and divine worship, there are no such items in Zangbeto. All my respondents insisted that they have their religions separate from Zangbeto and that they see their membership in the latter as a call to serve their community. This is perhaps a manifestation of the sort of religious syncretism that Asaju and Owanikin (1994) argue exists in Badagry. By syncretism, they mean that Badagry indigenes subscribe to religious or cult practices other than Christianity or Islam, which most of them profess. Moreover, unlike the Oro and Egun cults with a closed system of membership, women and any male of good standing in the society can be admitted into the group. I was informed that one *Zanga* is a woman and that she performs every role that her male counterparts perform as the head of a Zangbeto group.

### *Zanga* as the Honourable One

The *Zanga* is the leader of Zangbeto group who is worthy of being honoured. At least one-fifth of the songs collected for this study are devoted to the praise of *Zanga*. He is not a mere man or ceremonial leader: apart from leading the group, he epitomises the strength, virility and transparency of the group.

He is constantly eulogised and regarded as one worthy of honour

*We are going to see our leader,  
What worship/service/honour do we offer him?  
The leader of the vigilante,  
What worship do we offer him?*

Judging by the kind of songs composed in honour of *Zanga*, one can infer that whoever dishonours him may be held guilty of slighting the group as a whole. Apart from this, he is a member of the ruling council whose opinion counts in the decision-making process and day-to-day running of the community.

From the foregoing, we can infer that Zangbeto functions as a night watcher, cultural and community group, and has survived and adapted to change in the face of the coming of Christianity, Islam, changing socio-economic conditions and rapid urbanisation. The general assumption in this paper so far is that conflicts within the group and between the group and other groups in society are almost nonexistent. This is the position advanced by the interviewees in this study. However, there are rare cases of abuse of power by a few members of the group in certain quarters of the city, but in the villages this is not the case. Further research into conflicts and contradictions in Zangbeto is possible.

## Conclusion

Zangbeto may be chiefly about social order within traditional Egun society, using oral forms of art, rituals and cultural practices, some of which have been adapted to the security needs of the town's inhabitants in the face of the state security agencies' inability to satisfy the demands of law enforcement and order. As for Zangbeto's relationship with Christianity and Islam, some Zangbeto members I interacted with gave the impression of peaceful coexistence between their group and adherents of these religions. They maintain that the latter benefit from the activities of Zangbeto as a traditional security group and would not want to disrupt its activities. However, Christians, particularly those belonging to Pentecostal churches, including my interpreter, do not agree with *Zanga Gbaji's* claim that being a member of the Zangbeto does not stop him from going to church.

Zangbeto is recognised by the Lagos State command of the Nigerian police force, which accepts alleged criminal offenders handed over to it by Zangbeto groups (Oyesakin 1994). However, Oyesakin, notes that some Zangbeto members have complained that the police have on occasion released suspects handed over to them without charging them or bringing them to court. Nonetheless, the Zangbeto have maintained a relatively cooperative relationship with the Nigerian police, who regard 'Badagry town [a]s one of the relatively crime free towns in Lagos State' (Oyesakin 1994:note 9).

The example of Zangbeto as a traditional vigilante group shows that vigilantism in Nigeria is not monolithic and that its manifestations across the country differ. Vigilantism may not be as violent as many critics have opined, and complex cultural and demographic formations in Nigeria should be considered in investigating community policing. Zangbeto is not a modern vigilante group but a traditional institution with peculiar inner workings, which interrogates the over-generalised image of violent Nigerian vigilantism portrayed in most studies. Zangbeto as a traditional vigilante institution has survived and maintained its integrity and relevance in Badagry and other Egun communities because it first emerged as a traditional military-cum-police outfit that defended the people and maintained law and order in the communities. Second, through a rich and dynamic deployment of oral literary aesthetics, Zangbeto is seen and accepted as a mediator and protector that serves the interests of the oppressed, including women. The oral art of Zangbeto, discussed in this essay, underlines its reception and *modus operandi* in a multicultural setting and the importance of oral aesthetics in understanding traditional institutions.

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