

Introduction to Special Issue on Youth Groups and Gangs in the African Context

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Conceptualising “Gangs”

What is a gang? The word may conjure up different images to different people; as Moore (1998) notes, a gang may be a group of adolescents hanging out together or an internationally organised network of criminals or drug traffickers. Scholars have long been having difficulty in defining and classifying gangs, particularly when a global perspective is taken. Most agree, at least, that gangs are groups with a commitment to criminal or violent activity (Klein 1997)—though even this may be contested (Hagedorn 2005).¹ The word “gang” tends to assume certain characteristics when, in fact, gangs are hugely diverse, contingent upon the social, economic and political conditions from which they arise (Cooper and Ward 2013).² Therefore, the word “gang(s)” is a loose definition and one that we use with caution.

Our understanding of gangs in the African context should first be built on a wider understanding of violent actors in general in Africa, particularly the wide range of non-state armed groups (NSAGs) extensively studied on the African subcontinent. Schubert (2015) notes that the classification of such groups has never been cemented, despite attempts by many authors. He helpfully offers a classification of community-based armed groups, a subtype of NSAGs operating at the community level, where our collection is based. He classifies these as vigilantes, militias and gangs, based on the security, political and economic dimensions in which they tend to operate respectively, explaining, however, that the reality is much muddier than the neat classification of

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- 1 Klein, M. 1997. *The American Street Gang: It's Nature, Prevalence and Control*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Covey, H. 2010. *Street Gangs throughout the World*. Springfield: Charles L. Thomas.
 - 2 Cooper, A., and C. Ward. 2013. “Intervening with Youths in Gangs.” In *Youth Violence, Sources and Solutions in South Africa*, edited by C. A. Ward, A. van der Merwe, and A. Davies. Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press.

UNISA  university of south africa PRESS

Politeia
<https://unisapressjournals.co.za/index.php/Politeia>
Volume 40 | Number 2 | 2021 | #11239 | 8 pages

<https://doi.org/10.25159/0256-8845/11239>
ISSN 0256-8845 (Online), ISSN 0256-8845 (Print)
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“ideal types.” He notes that in the security dimension we find vigilantes who are believed to arise in a context of state fragility and failure. They provide security services but can often morph into criminal gangs (Mose, this issue), thereby undermining the same security they are working towards. In the political dimension, we see militias which operate on the basis of patronage and clientelism, drawing support from their followers on the basis of either traditional authority or charisma. The former types of militias evoke ethnicity and clan, while the latter types “evoke the image of a common enemy of the excluded masses in order to legitimise their authority.” And in the economic sphere, we find gangs often characterised by delinquency and criminality, including the familiar youth gangs or street gangs responsible for juvenile delinquency and the more organised institutionalised criminal gangs.³ Such gangs are a considerable challenge to the state, but unlike many other NSAGs, they do not directly challenge its sovereignty (Schuberth 2015).

The Importance of a Global Perspective on Gangs

Although most early published work on gangs originated in the USA—the earliest efforts being in Chicago—Hagedorn (2005) highlights the importance of a global perspective. He points to urbanisation, which has always been known to create fertile conditions for the growth of gangs. Despite our American “West Side Story” perceptions of gangs, most gangs and gang members are, in fact, in more recently urbanised countries of Latin America, Asia and Africa.⁴ Africa is urbanising rapidly (OECD 2020).⁵ The top five countries with the highest rates of urban dwellers in sub-Saharan Africa are Gabon, Djibouti, South Africa, Congo, and Algeria, while the greatest changes in urbanisation between 1990 and 2015 have occurred in Rwanda, Kenya, Angola, Equatorial Guinea and South Africa. Hagedorn (2005) notes that these urban spaces are often highly discriminatory, made possible by and serving global capitalism. Moreover, the weakening of the state in the era of globalisation, together with capitalism, also tends to increase inequality and exclusion.

Hagedorn (2005) mentions another global phenomenon, which is echoed in this collection, that is, the adoption of resistance identities as a response to marginalisation (see also Omanga, this issue) in which Kenyan youths adopt cultural symbols from the US, and lastly, the presence of an internationally connected underground economy.

3 Schuberth, M. 2015. “The Challenge of Community-based Armed Groups: Towards a Conceptualization of Militias, Gangs and Vigilantes.” *Contemporary Security Policy* 36 (2): 296–320.

4 Hagedorn, J. 2005. “The Global Impact of Gangs.” *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 21 (20): 153–169.

5 OECD/SWAC. 2020. “Africa’s Urbanization Dynamics 2020: Africapolis. Mapping a new Urban Geography, West African Studies.” Paris: OECD publishing. Accessed April 2, 2020. <http://doi.org/10.1787/b6bccb81-en>.

Moreover, as another of our papers notes, political rivalries can transcend borders and contribute to gang violence by diaspora communities (Rosette, this issue).

Factors in Gang Formation in Africa

Mitton (2021) states, however, that rather than assuming street gangs to simply be a product of urban growth, it is important for the analysis of street gangs in Africa to be rooted in an understanding of local and historical contexts. Moreover, in his site of study, Sierra Leone, there is no major narcotics trade to spur opportunistic criminality. Rather, detailed ethnographic research reveals primarily that in Freetown, gang membership is driven by a feeling of exclusion, a need to belong, and again, a need to turn to illicit activities for survival (rather than profit) in an inequitable system.

Hazlehurst and Hazlehurst (1998), in their edited book on gangs in various countries, also bring out the economic functions of gangs, where global capitalism has excluded poor communities, forcing them into an informal economy where criminal activities are perceived as “work.”⁶ Similarly, Rodgers and Muggah (2009), in their work on Central America, describe how the poor are forced to live outside of the formal ambit of the state and to compete for the same “informal scraps” of economic opportunities which inevitably lead to violence.⁷ In Kenya, Van Stapele (2021) agrees that many “gangs” are social groups forced to live on the margins of legitimacy and their motives are chiefly about finding work and fulfilling masculinities in this way, not about violence.⁸

Several of the works in this collection bring out the theme of political links. These may be in the emergence of gangs as political and ideological movements (Bagson, this issue) or, rather differently, in the use of gangs as pawns by politicians (Mkutu, this issue); a theme echoed in Mitton’s (2021) work on Sierra Leone. He notes: “Sierra Leone’s political system is a catalyst for gang growth and institutionalisation. It has demonstrated its capacity to fuse street violence with party politics, imbuing electoral violence (and non-violence) with socio-economic value whilst simultaneously deepening [gangs’] sense of marginalisation.” By this, he refers to the support given by politicians in terms of cash handouts to gangs, which end after elections, while failing to support them in a concrete and sustainable manner.⁹

6 Hazlehurst, Kayleen, and Cameron Hazlehurst (Eds). 1998. *Gangs and Youth Subcultures: international Explorations*. Piscataway, NJ: Transaction.

7 Rodgers, D., and R. Muggah. 2009. “Gangs as Non-state Armed Groups: The Central American Case.” *Contemporary Security Policy* 30 (2): 301–317.

8 Van Stapele, Naomi. 2021. “Gangs in Kenya: Work, Manhood and Security.” In *Routledge International Handbook of Critical Gang Studies*, edited by David C. Brotherton and Rafael Jose Gude. London/New York: Routledge, 489–502.

9 Mitton, K. 2021. “A Game of Pain: Youth Marginalization and the Gangs of Freetown.” *Journal of Modern African Studies*.

The rise of gangs in the Niger Delta area is another well-studied phenomenon in the African continent. Gangs in this context emerged from conflict, which has been variously attributed to grievances resulting from economic and political marginalisation, the destruction of livelihoods and the environment by the oil project, opportunism of youths, corruption of state and local elite players (Watts 2007), and transnational forces (Obi 2010). This collection of factors reminds us of the uniqueness of context, but it is also helpful to keep in mind as we look at other gang phenomena on the continent.¹⁰ There has also been a strong research focus on militias in post-conflict societies in Africa, from cold war rivalries, civil wars and resource wars, which today influence the availability of arms and formations of violence in peacetime, and may leave NSAGs as the only actors on the ground. These include the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda and the Central African Republic, amongst many others. Countries emerging from armed conflict often experience heightened gang activity, as Kerr (2020) informs us. This may be the result of illicit economics and criminal networks, exposure to violence, marginalisation, social disorganisation, security gaps and state responses, and the presence of former combatants.¹¹

Policing Gangs

Policing gangs is an important focus of this collection, and it is, therefore, necessary to put it in context. State policing in Africa is frequently characterised by weakness, brutality, corruption and partisanship, leading to a low level of legitimacy and public trust. The colonial legacy is an important contributor to this state of affairs because state policing introduced during the colonial regime was designed to benefit the coloniser, not the colonised. Policing focused on securing privileged settler areas from the “savages,” while areas deemed unprofitable were neglected until they became a security threat and were then handled in a militaristic fashion (Deflem 1994; Waller 2010).¹² Moreover, there was administrative incompetence and difficulty in obtaining good police personnel (Sinclair and Williams 2007).¹³ Thus, post-colonial states inherited deeply flawed systems, which have not been modernised to meet the needs of citizens

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- 10 Watts, M. 2007. “Petro-Insurgency or Criminal Syndicate? Conflict and Violence in the Niger Delta.” In *Conflict and Security in Africa*, edited by R. Abrahamsen. Oxford: James Currey; Obi, C. 2010. “Oil as the ‘Curse’ of Conflict in Africa: Peering through the Smoke and Mirrors.” In *Conflict and Security in Africa*, edited by R. Abrahamsen. Oxford: James Currey.
- 11 Kerr, K. 2020. “Assessing Gang Risks in Post-war Environments: The Case of Colombia.” *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 9 (1): 1–21
- 12 Deflem, M. 1994. “Law Enforcement in British Colonial Africa: A Comparative Analysis of Imperialist Policing in Nyasaland, the Gold Coast and Kenya.” *Police Studies* 17 (1): 45–68; Waller, R. 2010. “Towards Contextualisation of Policing in Colonial Kenya.” *Journal of East African Studies* 493: 525–541.
- 13 Sinclair, G., and C. Williams. 2007. “Home and Away: The Cross-fertilization between ‘Colonial’ and British Policing, 1921–1985.” *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 35 (2): 221–238.

but have rather been used to serve the political or economic objectives of regimes or elites (Hills 2007).¹⁴

One of our cases deals with street gangs in South Africa (Maringira, this issue), a country which has had the strongest focus on gang research on the continent. Kynoch (2008) comments that although all colonial regimes were violent, the South African case is exceptional among other African countries for urban violence during the colonial era. The conditions of migration into mining settlements combined with the criminalisation of huge numbers of Africans for bureaucratic transgressions and the incarceration into a violent prison system in which newcomers were victimised and inducted by gangs into brutal violence. South Africa's economic strength made it relatively free from restraints imposed on other countries by the British Colonial Office, while its largely White population were determined to maintain White supremacy. The violence continues to be reflected in the various violent conflicts in the post-colonial years and in the current crisis of criminality in South Africa.¹⁵

Today, Rodgers and Muggah (2009) comment that in the vastly unequal societies of central America, there are “patterns of regular police patrolling in wealthier areas of the city” versus “the unpredictable, arbitrary and violent patrolling of the slums and poor neighbourhoods.” Policing the poor is characterised by the “War of Gangs” approach taken by several central American countries, which has largely exacerbated violence, causing gangs to become radicalised against the state. Again, the response to gangs may be influenced by the other expressions of violence in the country, as Kerr (2020, 7) notes that in post-conflict settings, “it is easy to see how a country emerging from armed conflict could follow a path of least resistance from a war against—say—insurgents, to a war against gangs.”

The Collection

Our collection of papers is noticeably broad, reflecting a range of group formations with variable organisation and commitment to the use of violence, operating with a variety of purposes in unique African contexts. What ties this collection together is that it reflects original empirical work from the street-level, which is often difficult to obtain by authors from outside, and not without its risks and discomforts for those within. The authors hail from various parts of sub-Saharan Africa (Ghana, South Africa, Kenya and the Democratic Republic of Congo); some of them junior scholars embarking upon a lifetime of research and bringing a fresh perspective to the literature.

14 Hills, A. 2007. “Police Commissioners, Presidents and the Governance of Security.” *Journal of African Studies* 45 (3): 409–423.

15 Kynoch, Gary. 2008. “Urban Violence in Colonial Africa: A Case for South African Exceptionalism.” *Journal of South African Studies* 34 (3): 629–45.

In their paper, Kennedy Mkutu, Tessa Mkutu and Obondo Kajumbi provide insights into Kenya's coastal gangs in the city of Mombasa—a site of many an organised urban gang. With a history of drug problems, youth unemployment and pervasive grievance politics, they expose the “organisational” structures of these gangs to give a nuanced understanding of gangs that moves away from previous, singular readings of gangs as mere spaces of violence and youth criminality. And, in a country where extra-judicial killings and violence against gangsters are commonplace—and silently sanctioned both by the public and the state—the paper provides a fitting segue to Duncan Omanga, Erick Kashara, and Pamela Mainye's paper on super-cops and performances of community-based social policing on “Facebook” in Eastlands Nairobi, Kenya. In their paper, traced from the footprints of a group of outlaw cops in Kenya who use the extra-judicial killing of gangsters to gain public support for their “policing” methods, they draw from a rich trove of social media data and popular cultural texts to argue that extra-judicial killings of gangsters in Kenya is a function of tacit state support and public approval of managing perceived violent spaces. In particular, the paper gives light to the phenomenon of the super-cop in Kenya—a subject that has received widespread media coverage over the years, but scant scholarly research.

On his part, Ernest Bagson draws from research done in the Ghanaian city of Tamale to explore how group dynamics and identity issues incentivise youth group memberships—the breeding grounds and foundational roots of potential urban gangs. He reveals how youth see themselves and how they are perceived by others, combined in complex ways with economic marginalities, politics, and religious and ethnic proclivities to shape how gangs and youth groups are structured in Tamale. These loose forms of membership, and how they are instrumentalised for dirty political labour during political competition, are not just common to Ghana.

In Kenya, Nora Mose's paper shows how the discursive scaffolding of “vigilantes” in Western Kenya is linked to local politics. Her paper uses linguistic methods to explore the sungusungu vigilante group—a mostly ad hoc quasi-militia group among the Abagusii—that draws from the community's pre-colonial mythical narratives around warriorhood. Although still a proscribed group, Mose traces how, like most similar vigilantes in Kenya, sungusungu are often “revived” for “good causes” like community policing or other related social assignments; however, with time, they mutate to criminality. Cases of extortion, violence and killings associated with sungusungu have only blurred the lines between state-sponsored violence and the violence meted out by vigilantes and similar styled groups. This apparent blurring of lines in the functionality of groups and gangs, where groups play both criminal and seemingly socially progressive roles, is also seen in other countries, especially migrant communities in countries with huge communities of immigrants, such as South Africa.

In her insightful paper, Rosette Vuninga sheds light on this very contrariety through her research on the *combattants* (“fighters”), a formation of diasporic Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) youth in Cape Town, South Africa. In this paper, Rosette shows how

offshore identities among the Congolese are reproduced in host countries through gang affiliations, while at the same time fashioned and structured through how a broken immigration system creates fault lines among people who should otherwise have more in common. These fault lines, located around how the South African immigration system formalises statuses of being a refugee, reproduce struggles and gang rivalry within the diasporic Congolese communities.

In a deeper dive into gang practices, Godfrey Maringira draws from the influential work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the field to explain how killings are the ultimate expression that shapes gangs' identity, power and sense of belonging. Focused also on urban post-apartheid South Africa, Maringira shows how killing functions as a social resource within gang groups. Here, we learn that gangs kill rivals as a way of seeking and acquiring recognition, identity and belonging within gangs. At the same time, this cycle of violent killings often ends up consuming those who seek to kill. Like all the other papers, here we learn that gang violence feeds a social rather than an economic function.

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