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# The Making of an Ethnic Militia: The Oodua People's Congress in Nigeria

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### *Abstract*

Mainstream economic literature on the causes of civil wars links the probability of emergence of civil conflicts to economic opportunities that make the initiation of a rebellion profitable. This perspective gives a passive role to the state and by resorting to primitive conceptions of mobilisation, ignores the issue of interaction between leaders and followers, which is crucial to the success of a rebellion. Exploring the genealogy and evolution of a Nigerian Yoruba ethnic militia, the Oodua People's Congress (OPC), this paper provides a dynamic analysis of the rebellion-making decision in which the state plays an active role, direct or indirect. The history and evolution of the OPC display many features not found in the archetypical presentation of the rebellion-making process. First, despite Nigeria's oil wealth, greed for lootable natural resources in no way constitutes the impetus for formation of the militia: the OPC emerged largely as a response to the fiercest military dictatorship of Nigeria's post-colonial history. Second, we suggest that collective action problems typically associated with the mobilisation of followers are solved via the everyday benefits the organisation grants to militia members in the course of their activities. The OPC is successful because it accommodates many sections of Yoruba society, including high-profile political figures. It has gained its success largely by functionally replacing the state in domains where the latter has failed, such as security and the judiciary.

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## The Making of an Ethnic Militia. The Oodua People's Congress in Nigeria By Yvan Guichaoua<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Introduction

Mainstream economic literature on conflicts links the probability of emergence of civil wars to the economic opportunities that make the initiation of a rebellion profitable. As Cramer (2002) argues, mainstream economic models actually have a clear tendency to presume that 'wars start with the decision of rebels [to overthrow the incumbents]'. This perspective gives the state a passive role and, by resorting to primitive conceptions of mobilisation, ignores the issue of leader/follower interaction, crucial to the success of a rebellion. The following paper explores the genealogy and evolution of a Nigerian ethnic militia, the Oodua People's Congress (OPC). It puts forward a dynamic analysis of the rebellion-making decision in which the state plays an active role, direct or indirect. It also suggests that the collective action problems typically associated with the mobilisation of followers may be solved through the everyday benefits that the organisation grants to militia members in the course of their activities. Section 1 discusses the basic premises of traditional models of rebellion making. Section 2 describes the emergence and current activities of the OPC, pointing to a shift in its original focus due to the progressive rise of economic opportunities open to its members. Section 3 concludes.

### 2. Rebellions in economic models of civil wars

#### 2.1 *The predator/prey framework*

Collier and Hoeffler's methods, analysis, results and recommendations constituted a major breakthrough in research on civil conflicts (See Collier 2000; Collier and Hoeffler 1998; 2002). Their view that conflicts are triggered by greedy intentions is now widespread. This short paragraph focuses on the specific analytical status of the state in the series of seminal models they have put forward. Collier and Hoeffler's perspective on the state has two notable properties. First, the incumbents are only indirect targets of the rebellion, the main objective of which is to capture the lion's share of the national pie. Second, the government is essentially the passive prey of rebels with whom no past interaction is recorded. The remainder of this paper discusses and challenges these two views.

If greed gives the impetus for overthrowing incumbents, what sort of wealth do rebels actually covet? Drawing on econometric evidence, Collier and Hoeffler assert that the rebels' principal targets are appropriable national natural resources. This statistical result may be illustrated superficially by many examples, such as Sierra-Leone (diamonds), Nigeria (oil) and Congo (diamonds and other mineral resources). Collier and Hoeffler then conclude that natural resources abundance is a direct cause of civil conflicts. But this econometric finding is not entirely convincing from a methodological

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<sup>1</sup> I warmly thank Michael Eshiemokhai, whose assistance in the empirical part of the present research has been tremendously valuable. I am also grateful to Dr. Albert Olawale and Stephen Faleti who facilitated my fieldwork in many ways. The present paper has also benefited from numerous insightful comments from colleagues at the Centre for Research on Inequality, Human Security and Ethnicity (Oxford) and participants of the EADI Conference held in Bonn in 2005. All remaining errors and approximations are my own.

point of view (Ross 2004; Fearon 2005). Importantly, Collier and Hoeffler's analysis doesn't take into account the possibility that natural resources only have an indirect effect on the incidence of civil wars, through, for example, the sort of national institutional design they induce. This possibility could have been controlled for econometrically following the procedure Sala-i-Martin and Subramanian (2003) implemented when analysing the causes of Nigeria's poor economic performance over recent decades. Their econometric analysis suggests that no direct mechanism is responsible for the significant correlation between the country's dismal rate of growth in the past decades and the dependence of the economy on oil revenues. They show, instead, that oil adversely affects the country's governance which, as a result, adversely affects the country's macroeconomic performance. Oil is not necessarily bad for the economy but it is bad for the national 'institutional quality'<sup>2</sup>. When institutional quality is controlled for, the impact of oil on growth can be positive. Applied to the incidence of civil war, such an econometric technique could possibly substantially reduce the significance of the greed argument. The focus should no longer be placed on the direct impact of appropriable wealth on the observed outcome but on the consequences of its management and allocation by the state. This may potentially put a grievance-driven explanation back on the map. The 'weak state' hypothesis has been econometrically tested and partially supported by Humphreys' findings on the impact of natural resources on civil wars (Humphreys 2004).

One consequence of Collier and Hoeffler's perspective is that political action by the state *per se* is not central to the analysis, unless it affects the costs of building an efficient rebellion: incumbents can indeed minimise their chances of being overthrown by increasing military expenditures. But revenge or possible past decisions of the government affecting some sections of the society, and hence causing grievances, are not allowed for. By definition, the greed rationale rules out the possibility that a government is removed as a collective punishment to those running the country. Collier and Hoeffler don't tell us who the incumbents are, where they come from, or if the rebellion leaders have interacted with them in the past. The framework is a-historical. In their analysis, rebellion-building is based on an instant assessment by those fomenting a *coup d'état* of the costs and benefits associated with such a decision. This framework grants the rulers in place a specific status in the emergence of a conflict: their removal by rebels is not pursued for itself but to grant access to the national loot. Rulers are the passive, anonymous victims of rapacious marauders, a mere obstacle on the route to looting.

Ignoring the time dimension of government action and interaction with its constituents (including potential rebellion leaders) is likely to affect the comprehensiveness of the analysis of conflict dramatically: it exempts the incumbents from any responsibility in the tension-raising process. In-depth historical case studies may actually deliver a more ambiguous understanding of the role of the state. Rather than acting as the starting point of a rebellion, greed, as we will suggest, may in fact be the outcome of a collective political trajectory from which the state is far from absent.

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<sup>2</sup> A tentative micro foundation of this link, substantiated by political scientists' observations (Mustapha 2002), could be the following: if local representatives get most of their resources through the redistribution of the natural resources rent from the centre rather than through decentralised taxation, then their incentive to perform well in the delivery of public services shrinks and their inclination to mobilise local support through patron-client ties increases. This rationale may not only explain poor economic performance but also political instability: political mobilisation may occur because some groups may feel that they don't receive an equal share of the pie. In a more sophisticated way, political mobilisation through distribution of privileges (monetary or in kind) may also transform the constituency into easily manipulated 'electoral cattle' forming the main element of the bargaining power of a region in the negotiation over the distribution of natural resource windfalls at the national level.

## 2.2 *The capacity of rebellion to mobilise: ethnic politics*

Following Collier and Hoeffler's framework, rebels are largely motivated by looting and should therefore be treated analytically just like criminals. But the picture is more nuanced: to Collier (2000), the big theft rebels are planning makes them distinct from petty delinquents or Mafiosi: 'Rebellions are a distinctive type of criminal activity in that the labour force engaged in the activity is both large and organised into a single enterprise' (p. 841-2). Rebels plan criminal activity on an industrial scale. This, however, doesn't change the basic prediction about individual behaviours put forward in models of crime (Becker 1968): the poorer an individual, the lower his/her opportunity cost of committing crimes and the greater his/her chance of becoming a criminal.

At a collective level, rebellions, like any enterprise, face at least two sorts of issues: they need to gather finance for their activities and they need to design specific rules aimed at overcoming traditional internal collective action problems (asymmetries of information, free-riding etc.). How are the time-consuming logistics of mobilising financial, material and human resources organised? More precisely, what sort of interactions do those who have initiated the rebellion have with their donors and/or their supporters? Does it actually matter if those who fight and those who ensure the economic sustainability of the rebellion (for example, by paying membership fees, collecting illegal taxes and even looting, or, as we will show later in this paper, receiving 'gifts' from the population) are the same? In short, how does the type of relationship entertained between leaders and followers affect the nature and the outcome of a rebellion? Collier (2000) provides some hypotheses – that he considers to be supported by common observations – for both the fund-gathering and the collective action issues.

Funds may be collected through different channels: criminal activities, foreign power assistance or supporters' contributions. Here we focus on the latter. What makes support at the grassroots level feasible? Collier argues that 'a political entrepreneur seeking to fund a loot-seeking rebellion may need to rekindle dormant grievances to generate start-up finance' (p. 851). He later extends his rationale: 'grievance may enable a rebel organisation to grow to the point at which it is viable as a predator; greed may sustain the organisation once it has reached this point' (p. 852). The subsequent nature of the rebellion is unaffected by its temporary, grievance-driven development: as noted above, loot is the ultimate objective of rebels. Grievance is instrumentalised by the rebellion's leaders, and those followers sincere in their attachment to a collective 'cause' rather than to purely materialistic interests are in fact fooled by those in command. This whole enterprise is coldly planned by high-profile rebels.

But how credible is this argument? How can followers remain blind over time to the true intentions of their chiefs? Collier fails to answer this as he does not explicitly model the interaction, over time, between followers and leaders. He does, however, give insights as to what he thinks is likely to make followers, including low-ranking officers, adhere to their chiefs' instructions:

'Successful military action depends on officers being given operational command of their troops, but this makes it relatively easy for such officers to contest the leadership of the rebellion. The typical solution that rebel leaders adopt in response to these problems is to confine recruitment to those strata of the population that enable the rebel organisation to be

cohesive. Recruits share a common ethnic, religious, or class background’.

(Collier 2000: 843).

What then makes followers blind to their leaders’ intentions are basic primordial feelings and discourses of intergroup hatred. In short, the collective action problems that a rebellion may face are, according to Collier, solved practically through the *deus ex machina* of ethnicity. Common language and codes are the main tools rendering enforcement possible among members of a rebellion. Followers are subject to a sort of cognitive mystification set up by their chiefs.

Strangely, Collier’s models rest on a combination of two drastically opposed behavioural assumptions: perfect intentionality and rational calculus of the leaders and perfect group obedience of the followers, fully brainwashed by the primordial rhetoric and ideology. How satisfactory is this dichotomous approach to behaviour? On epistemological grounds, surprisingly for a tenet of economic orthodoxy, it denies the followers the agency capacity central to the methodological individualism on which economics has been built. On empirical grounds, can we reasonably consider that the ethnic discourse is sufficient to push individuals to sacrifice their lives? Evidence has shown that pure coercion mechanisms can be implemented to mobilise fighters (see the large-scale abduction of child soldiers reported in the West African ‘Wild West’ – comprising Sierra-Leone, Liberia and Côte d’Ivoire – see Human Rights Watch 2005). At the other extreme, one can also imagine the predictions of basic crime models being applicable to followers: those who have fewer opportunities to get a legal job (the ‘loose molecules’, as labelled by Krueger and Maleckova 2003), may constitute easy recruits for political entrepreneurs. But this model, too, may not be completely applicable, as shown by Krueger and Maleckova (2003)<sup>3</sup>. Other routes can be taken: Sanin’s analysis of Colombian rebellions observes that mobilisation in rebel groups is determined in a variety of ways:

‘People enlist in guerrillas following a mélange of motivations – vengeance, prestige, fear, hate, even excitement, where strictly materialist ones do not always appear, because those organisations have explicit bureaucratic methods of internal distribution that disallow practices like looting, and may even prevent salary-paying. This is common knowledge for both recruiters and recruited’.

(Sanin 2004: 272).

In fact, many different channels of mobilisation are plausible and can be individually investigated and combined. Following Williams’ and Gambetta’s (2000) broad perspective on cooperation (based on societies partially regulated by Mafia codes like Sicily), people can be motivated to act together in a variety of ways, very pertinent to our concerns:

‘The mechanisms which motivate cooperation in any form of human endeavour [...] comprise four basic elements: coercion, interests, values, and personal bonds. People, that is, may decide to cooperate (1) for fear of sanctions; (2) because cooperation enhances their mutual economic

<sup>3</sup> Krueger and Maleckova (2003), analysing quantitative and qualitative data on the profiles of Hezbollah fighters and suicide bombers in Lebanon and Gaza Strip, question the validity of the ‘loose molecules’ hypothesis. They observe that ‘poverty is inversely related with the likelihood that someone becomes a Hezbollah fighter, and education is positively related with the likelihood that someone becomes a Hezbollah fighter’ (p. 25). The message that their analysis delivers is that ‘instead of viewing terrorism as a direct response to low market opportunities or ignorance, we suggest it is more accurately viewed as a response to political conditions and long-standing feelings (either perceived or real) of indignity and frustration that have little to do with economics’ (p. 1).

interests; (3) because they have general reasons, whether cultural, moral or religious, to believe that cooperation is good irrespective of sanctions and rewards; and finally (4) because they are related to one another by bonds of kin or friendship'.<sup>4</sup>

(Gambetta: 164).

There is no reason why any of these four models of cooperation should be ruled out *ex ante* in the process of analysing the factors behind the mobilisation of the rank and file in rebellions. In evaluating the role of ideology or rent-seeking or other motives in violent political mobilisation, what should be investigated is why some channels have become more prominent over time. This is what we intend to do in the next section. We base our reflection on the particular case of an ethnic militia operating in southwestern Nigeria, the Oodua People's Congress (OPC).

### **3. The history and multifaceted current practices of the Oodua People's Congress in Nigeria**

#### **3.1 Nigeria's turbulent political and social context**

Scholars studying conflicts might classify Nigeria as one of the most challenging of terrains in which to explore various conflict-related theories. Nigeria exhibits most of the features listed by Collier and Hoeffler as significantly increasing the probability of conflict: it is a poor country, it has large reserves of natural resources and it is multiethnic.

In 2003, Nigeria was the fifth largest oil producer in the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). Oil is estimated to represent 70% of the government's federal revenues, 98% of export earnings and 40% of the country's gross domestic product (Bach 2004; Mustapha 2002). However, Nigerians are among the poorest people in the world. Around 70% of the population lives on less than one dollar a day. Life expectancy at birth hardly reaches 52 years. A total of 44% of young men aged between 20 and 24 are unemployed (National Population Commission 2000).

Nigeria is also politically very unstable. Since the Biafran civil war that almost split the country at the end of the 1960s, the country is still struggling to solve its 'national question', which was largely inherited from the colonial political structure. This struggle consists in finding the best way to accommodate its numerous social constituents, who differ sharply in their cultural practices, their political traditions and/or their religious beliefs and rites. Three 'majority' groups account for around 50% of the country's inhabitants: the Hausa-Fulani (mostly living in the north), the Yoruba (west) and the Igbo (east). 'Minority' groups have a particularly strong presence in the Middle Belt (such as the Tiv) or in the coastal Niger Delta region (such as the Ijaw). But despite this cultural diversity, 'the tendency of many minority groups to cluster – politically, linguistically and culturally – round the big three, has given Nigeria a tripolar ethnic structure which forms the main context for ethnic mobilisation and contestation' (Mustapha 2004: 4). Despite considerable efforts made to achieve national cohesiveness, by creating new decentralised administrative units (Bach 2004) or entrenching cultural pluralism in the Constitution – for example

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, these patterns of cooperation are explored in the latest models of crime economics, focusing on the role of social networks, 'street culture' or racial beliefs (See Calvo-Armengol and Zenou 2004; Silverman 2004; Verdier and Zenou 2004).

through the ‘Federal Character Principle’<sup>5</sup> – Nigeria regularly witnesses large-scale episodes of violence. Efforts to solve the ‘national question’ may well have been overshadowed, if not totally undermined, by three decades of dictatorial military rule, which led to massive diversion of public funds, generalised corruption<sup>6</sup> and violent repression of political opposition. Interethnic imbalances remained blatantly in evidence as military power was concentrated in the hands of generals of northern origin only. This dismal political situation reached a climax in the late 1990s, during the infamous ‘Abacha years’.

Recent episodes of violence in Nigeria include clashes between herdsmen and farmers in Plateau and Oyo States, sabotage operations and combat between official forces and secessionist militias in the oil-producing area of the Niger Delta and communal conflicts in urbanised neighbourhoods of the economic capital, Lagos. Interestingly, self-proclaimed ethnic militias openly operate as non ‘legal’ perpetrators of violence. The Oodua People’s Congress (OPC), named after the mythological ancestor of the Yoruba, is one of the largest ethnic militias in Nigeria today. It is very influential in the states demographically dominated by the Yoruba in the southwest. The OPC’s official fundamental objectives are set out in its constitution. The OPC’s aims are:

‘to identify with our historical and cultural origin with a view to reliving the glory of our past for the purpose of posterity; to educate and mobilise the descendants of Oduduwa for the purpose of the above; to integrate the aspirations and values of all the descendants of Oduduwa into a collective platform of an Oodua entity; to monitor the various interests of descendants of Oduduwa [...] and struggle for the protection of these interests; [...] to further the progress of Oodua civilization by protection and promoting our value, mores and the intergenerational transmission of same’.

(quoted in Human Rights Watch 2003: 4).

Other violent groups – each of them having their own objectives and idiosyncratic history – are also active in other parts of the country, though not necessarily sharing the same focus as the OPC. The most notorious are the Bakassi boys (Harnischfeger 2003; Human Rights Watch 2002) in the southeast and the Arewa People’s Congress, set up by northerners, partly in response to the creation of the OPC.

### **3.2 Methodological aspects of the research**

The following empirical evidence is mainly centred on the OPC as an organisation, rather than on its members. A survey specifically focused on the OPC rank and file is currently being carried out and constitutes the second phase of this research<sup>7</sup>. The latter, which will make quantitative analysis possible, is more likely to present rigorous evidence on which to test the various hypotheses formulated above on the motives of militia members. An evaluation of the pertinence of each motive is nevertheless still feasible here, as many qualitative interviews have already been

<sup>5</sup> The Federal Character Principle requires that ‘the composition of the Federal Government, of any of its agencies and the conduct of their affairs shall be carried out in such a manner as to recognize the federal character of Nigeria and the need to promote national unity and to command national loyalty. Accordingly, the predominance in that Government or its agencies of persons from a few states, or from a few ethnic or other sectional groups shall be avoided’ (Albert 2000: 71). In recent years, this innovative logic has been applied to an expanding set of issues, such as electoral rules and the allocation of university bursaries to students.

<sup>6</sup> According to the NGO Transparency International, Nigeria is the second most corrupt country in the world.

<sup>7</sup> Its results are presented in Guichaoua (2006).

carried out. In our view, focusing on the organisation itself was actually an analytical prerequisite: it is indeed at the level of the organisation that the policy of recruitment is most likely to be decided. Individuals don't freely self-select into any collective, *a fortiori* when this collective is deliberately engaged in violent operations. Practically, as suggested by Fearon and Laitin (2000), each collective carries at least two sorts of rules that make an investigation of its specific organisational structure worthwhile, i.e. membership rules deciding who can become an insider and behavioural rules specifying members' dos and don'ts. Moreover OPC has a peculiarity that makes organisational analysis essential: it currently comprises two factions, which emerged five years after the creation of the movement. The grounds on which these two factions diverge are a crucial aspect of the character of the militia. It shows that the rebellion is the locus of internal tensions on what objectives it should pursue and that its very nature may actually change over time. The picture emerging from this observation is remote from the instantaneously built, single-goaled, homogeneous rebel collective of Collier's theory.

The empirical material at our disposal comes from various sources. NGO reports and press articles describing the activities of the OPC and its leaders since the inception of the militia in 1994 were reviewed. Members of the OPC, positioned at different levels in its internal hierarchy, were interviewed. Separate meetings were organised in Lagos with Gani Adams and Frederick Fasehun, respectively leaders of the 'Gani Adams faction' and the 'Fasehun faction'. Meetings with state-level officers from both factions, based in the second largest city of the country, Ibadan (Oyo State), at which 'zonal coordinators' were also present, took place on several occasions. We attended one of the weekly zonal meetings of a 'sister-group' of OPC, the Federation of Yoruba Culture and Consciousness (FYCC) and had collective discussions with its participants. Finally, external observers of the OPC, some very close to it, were interviewed, including scholars from the University of Ibadan, human rights activists from the Campaign for Democracy and the Civil Liberties Organisation and a student leader, also from the University of Ibadan.

### **3.3 The OPC's origins and the role of the military regime**

The OPC currently claims to have several million members spread worldwide<sup>8</sup>: men and, in a smaller proportion, women; Christian, Muslim and traditionalist. The main bulk of these supporters is obviously concentrated in the heart of the Yorubaland, mainly consisting of the six states of the former Southwestern region (Lagos, Ekiti, Ogun, Osun, Oyo and Ondo) plus the states of Edo, Kwara and Kogi. Other supporters live in the Yoruba part of the Republic of Bénin or belong to the diaspora in North America or Europe. Whether these are card-carrying members, regularly attending meetings, or simply sympathisers occasionally contributing to the activities of the group, is unverifiable, as is the relative weights of each faction and the proportion of 'esos' (or 'guardians', the alleged paramilitary elite of the OPC) in the groups<sup>9</sup>. What is sure, however, is that the OPC can be labelled a mass movement that is known by everyone in Nigeria.

<sup>8</sup> The Gani Adams faction claims to have enlisted around 5 million members but we have no possibility of evaluating the reliability of this figure. OPC leaders compound the confusion on the size of their support by pretending that, theoretically, every adult Yoruba is entitled to be a member. Possibly more realistically, we propose the following calculus to estimate the number of supporters, taking Oyo State as an example: in Oyo State, the reported number of 'zones' (the smallest geographical administrative unit of the movement) is 500. If we consider 30 as the average realistic number of affiliates per zone, then Gani Adams' OPC 'labour force' in Oyo State amounts to 15,000 individuals.

<sup>9</sup> According to Gani Adams, only 3% of his faction is composed of 'esos', whose duties consist of ensuring the security of those attending the cultural festivals or demonstrations organised by the group.

Obviously, its popularity was not as high at the movement's inception in 1994. In analysing this particular period, it is relevant to focus on the political trajectory and intentions of the OPC's founder, Frederick Fasehun. After all, the coup plotter is the central figure in the Collier approach. Can the intentions expressed at the origin of the OPC, coinciding at that time with Fasehun's motives, be uncovered?

Frederick Fasehun is a medical doctor approaching 70 years of age, running a clinic and a high-standard hotel in Lagos, both acquired before the creation of OPC (Fasehun 2002). His father was a rich trader who, however, didn't contribute to his education. According to Frederick Fasehun himself, he owes his exemplary educational trajectory to his tenacity and, eventually, to the generosity of his brother. His business was already well established when his political career took off. Interestingly, Fasehun didn't explicitly start his political career as a combatant of the Yoruba cause. Why he decided to embrace the ethnic battle is of interest: was it purely tactical, a strategic move to flatter the primordial instincts of the crowds?

Fasehun's first political appointment was in 1989, under the military regime of General Ibrahim Babangida. He was asked at that time to chair the newly created National Labour Party, a leftist party that emerged from a coalition of labour unions. Before that, Fasehun states that he had no particular interest in politics<sup>10</sup>. He simply strongly admired some important Nigerian political figures of the 1950s and the 1960s, who were not necessarily Yoruba, apart from Chief Obafemi Awolowo. The latter, known as a Yoruba nationalist who theorised and promoted the political organisation of Nigeria according to primordial cultural differences (see Oyelaran 1988), was admired by Fasehun for his struggle for the eradication of poverty and access to free education rather than for his 'Yorubanness'<sup>11</sup>.

According to Fasehun, his connection with the labour movement in 1989 was established through his activity as a physician, providing consultations to the Dockworkers' Union of Nigeria. At that time, Ibrahim Babangida lifted the ban on political parties and promised to hand over power to civilians, thus triggering an increase in political activity. Fasehun's initial political appointment didn't last long: the military regime decided that only two parties could run for the promised elections. Being a leader of the labour movement, Fasehun then joined the most 'progressive' of the two newly created *ad hoc* parties, the Social Democratic Party (SDP). After a while, however, he witnessed the multiple and dubious political manoeuvres of Babangida and increasingly doubted – as did many non-partisan observers at that time (Reno 1999) – the genuineness of the ongoing democratic transition<sup>12</sup>. He therefore abandoned any intention of becoming the SDP's presidential candidate. He directed his energy toward human rights activism in order to denounce Babangida's violations of civil liberties. Meanwhile, Moshood Abiola, an immensely rich Muslim Yoruba, was chosen as the SDP's presidential candidate, and won the elections held in June 1993. The military regime soon annulled the ballot, causing tremendous trauma among Nigerians, particularly the Yoruba. The event lent itself to an immediate, simplistic but appealing interpretation: the northern elite were not ready to

<sup>10</sup> Most of the empirical material in this section comes from Fasehun personally or from his autobiography (Fasehun 2002). It is therefore, by definition, one-sided and partial. However, information concerning his various official appointments and the events which now form part of Nigerian history are verifiable.

<sup>11</sup> Obafemi Awolowo was the first Prime Minister of the Western Region under Nigeria's federal system, from 1952 to 1960. He introduced free primary education for all in the Western Region, and established radio, television and electrification projects. He died in 1987 but he is still regarded as a highly popular political reference among the Yoruba.

<sup>12</sup> Again, this story is narrated by Fasehun himself and is aimed at self-promotion and the construction of the image of the visionary leader he aspires to be. For example, referring to Babangida: 'something told me the man was a joker who would not give up his position peacefully' (Fasehun 2002: 134).

hand over power, especially to Yoruba leaders. Neither Awolowo, who was denied victory in presidential elections in 1979, nor Abiola could become head of state. Fasehun, maybe for opportunistic reasons, espoused this version of history and it is here that his discourse takes on an ethnicised dimension:

‘Abiola, though friend of the north, business partner with them, sharing religion and even women, won the election landslide but the result was annulled, he was arrested and killed in incarceration; we felt that was too much. The richest Yoruba [*sic*], highest politician could not claim his mandate, so I thought it was maybe we were not moving with two legs like the northern elite who had two legs to run the race, I mean they had both political and military power. When their political elites are tired, they give it to the military elite and vice versa, of which we did not like because for any country to grow, there must be peace and stability and as well as justice without which there cannot be progress’.

(Interview with F. Fasehun, 02/06/05)

In the aftermath of the annulment of the elections, the fierce dictatorship of Sani Abacha, the military ruler who overthrew the Interim National Government installed by Babangida after the elections, forced many human rights activists and democrats – often Yoruba, from the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO) to which Fasehun belonged – into hiding. Many were killed, including Abiola’s wife and Chief Albert Rewane, considered the major financier of NADECO (Albert 2001). Fasehun’s rhetoric then clearly took a racist turn. Defending the Yoruba ‘race’ became a matter of survival:

‘The Yoruba are no longer considered disfavoured second-class citizens but have become enemies that must be hounded into exile, haunted into detention, humiliated, dehumanised, and marked to be wiped off the surface of Nigeria’.

(Fasehun 2002: 147)

The preservation of national unity is nothing more than the rhetorical Trojan horse of those hiding hegemonic intentions:

‘The Yoruba, who deserve historical accolades for preaching National Unity, are now recanting just to remove the perceived cloak of ‘parochialism’ forcibly tossed on them by those who see them as the only stumbling block on ‘the way to the Atlantic’.

(Fasehun 2002: 146)

The creation of the OPC stems from this reading of the Abacha years. Fasehun considered that the Yoruba needed a movement capable of gathering large support and displaying some physical force to oppose the northerners:

‘It was then I decided to gather the youths who are quite able to flex their muscles because, if it was what is required, why not’.

(Interview with F. Fasehun, 02/06/05).

The OPC was created in August 1994, apparently godfathered by prominent Yoruba figures<sup>13</sup>. As a ‘self-determination movement’, it argued for the organisation of a Sovereign National Conference designed to redraw the rules of the Federation.

<sup>13</sup> Among them, Fasehun cites the human rights activist Beko Ransome-Kuti from Campaign for Democracy, Chief Michael Adekunle Ajasin (leader of NADECO and head of Afenifere, a respected Yoruba elite group claiming the

The OPC was created in very specific circumstances, characterised by frustrated promises of democratic transition and fierce repression of political opposition, under the most corrupt post-independence military rule Nigeria has ever known. In this context, the OPC founder, Frederick Fasehun, adopted two stances. The first was to bring to the fore an ethnic reading of the political situation; the second was to allow the movement he had created to resort to force to reach its goals. These two elements laid the ground for the conversion of the OPC into an ethnic rebellion. Playing the ethnic card was not necessarily the sole option and possibly results from tactical support-gathering considerations. But, given the context of the Abacha years, resorting to violence can hardly be said to be driven by opportunistic intentions. The benefits of such a move could not be calculated. The individual risk attached to being a member of the OPC or any pro-democratic movement was extremely high. At this stage of the emergence of the movement, to argue that the prospect of capturing national resources was a major motive is largely inaccurate, if not absurd. In addition, if the potential for the use of force by the OPC was undeniably present at its inception, actual use of force and violence was limited to one agent: the Abacha military regime.

OPC's violent exactions came at a later stage. Here again, the state or some of its instances, directly or indirectly, had a far from minor role to play in the process.

### **3.4 The factionalisation of the OPC and its progressive shift of focus**

'OPC became a violent organisation in 1996 after its founder [...] was thrown into detention by the Abacha military junta. This incident made the OPC members feel that the Nigerian problems could not be solved peacefully'.

(Albert 2001: 282).

In December 1996, Fasehun was incarcerated. He was released in June 1998 only, after the sudden and unexpected death of Sani Abacha, which permitted the democratic transition to resume. The continuing repression of the OPC and its leader may actually be one of the reasons why violence became one of the OPC's major modes of expression. Symptomatically, some of the first clashes involving the OPC, which occurred during the first stages of the democratic transition at the end of 1998, were against the federal police, which in the eyes of OPC members was the incarnation of the detested hegemony of the northerners over the country. The confrontations are said to have claimed hundreds of lives on both sides (Akinyele 2001). But repression may not be the sole reason for the rise of OPC violence, which took many forms after 1999.

Two changes coincided which certainly helped bring a violent agenda to the fore: the emergence of a new radical OPC faction, led by Gani Adams, and the partial conversion of the movement to vigilantism, and the parallel increase in local economic opportunities open to the militia members.

The OPC broke up into two factions at the beginning of 1999. There are many explanations for the factionalisation of the OPC circulating. A reciprocal accusation

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legacy of Awolowo), and Chief Bola Ige (future Attorney General and Minister of Justice under democratic rule, after 1999). Beko Ransome-Kuti, Bola Ige and Afenifere, though not officially supporting OPC, later maintained close links with the movement.

concerns the alleged political connections established by each of the leaders independently. Fasehun is blamed for having supported Olu Falae, one of the two Yoruba candidates for the presidential election, while Fasehun accuses Gani Adams of being the puppet of another populist Yoruba leader, Gani Fawehinmi. Another rumour discussed by Fasehun (2002) suggests that Fasehun was approached by a mysterious 'Lady Bee' on behalf of elected President Olusegun Obasanjo and promised money in order to temper the claims of the movement. Finally, the militarisation of the movement has been reported as one alternative (or possibly additional) element of contention between the two leaders. Whatever the true cause of the split, some features clearly differentiate the two OPC leaders. Gani Adams is much younger than Fasehun (he was approaching 30 in 1999) and is the flag bearer of a generation which was largely denied the chance of pursuing a long education<sup>14</sup>. He was trained as a carpenter. His discourse toward the newly introduced democratic regime was also much more radical than Fasehun's. While Fasehun seemingly considered that volatile OPC youths should remain under the control of educated leaders, Gani Adams' perspective on what makes a good OPC member is much closer to the 'loose molecule' type highlighted earlier:

'We don't like to bother ourselves with people from a capitalist background or rich people because they can only behave like sympathisers to the struggle and can be difficult to be devoted member. The real people are the frustrated people on the street who are deprived one way or the other. They have the will and courage to fight. For instance, take the student union movement, children of rich people do not bother to join such movement to fight for their rights, it is only student from deprived homes who are often at the forefront of the battle'.

(Interview with Gani Adams, 23/05/05)

This new philosophy in recruitment (although certainly not fully implemented practically, as 'zonal coordinators' have great autonomy in the recruitment process at the grassroots level) is likely to have prompted the progressive, partial criminalisation of the OPC. As explained by one of our informants from the Gani Adams' faction in Oyo State:

'When we started, we called ourselves youth activists but when the then military started dealing with us, that they killed about 300 at Mushin [a popular neighbourhood of Lagos], then we went back to recruit all sorts of people, area boys [street boys] and any kind of person that was interested, this to me led to the loss of focus of the organisation leading to the derailing for the initial plans of it'.

(Interview with S., 04/03/04)

Those who were members of the OPC before the break-up were not necessarily greatly affected by the new situation; as the Chairman of the Fasehun faction in Oyo State conceded, grassroots members just followed the person who recruited them. Interestingly, this highlights the role that patron-client ties could play in the process of mobilisation. The factionalisation however multiplied the possibility offered to so-called 'bad eggs' within the movement (those who committed criminal offences by using the 'powers' they gained through their OPC membership) to 'shop' for the most rewarding affiliation. It also lowered the opportunity cost to 'miscreants' of being

<sup>14</sup> 'This Fasehun who is calling me illiterate went through free education. If I had a chance of free education, you know what I could have been now? I could be a Ph.D. in political science, but I came from a very poor family' (Gani Adams, cited in Maier 2002: 241).

expelled from one faction and may have increased their feelings of impunity if they committed criminal offences<sup>15</sup>.

### 3.5 OPC's lucrative activities

In 1999, vigilantism became one of OPC's main activities, at a time of alleged rising criminality<sup>16</sup>. OPC's reliance on magical techniques and beliefs, deeply entrenched in Yoruba society (Nolte 2004; Williams 1980), gave them a substantial comparative advantage for this kind of activity. When recruited, new OPC members take an oath which they believe makes them bullet-proof and compels them not to commit any criminal offence. They believe that, through progressive learning of the use of *juju*, neither cutlasses nor acid can hurt them. They believe that higher-profile OPC members have the ability temporarily to petrify their enemies simply by looking at them and that a thrown egg can transform itself into a bomb. Apart from increasing self-confidence among members, these techniques ensure cohesiveness within the group, as violating the oath may have very serious consequences for the culprit. Simultaneously, these claims provoke fear in OPC's potential enemies and give the OPC credibility within the population they serve. This magical equipment is often complemented by more 'classical' weaponry: some OPC members (certainly not all) carry guns, locally produced, smuggled or stolen from police stores. Retired policemen or soldiers offer them training sessions in 'self-defence', 'in the bush' (Akinyele 2001, Human Rights Watch 2003).

Criminality was and is a huge concern in many parts of Yorubaland as shown by monographs and existing, reliable victimisation surveys (Alemika and Chukwuma 2005). The police force is a highly distrusted institution, alternately for its passiveness, its degree of corruption and its propensity to overreact when it actually intervenes (Albert, Awe, Hérault, and Omitoogun 1995). In cities, the proliferation of gated communities (Fabiya 2004) makes the security business extremely lucrative. The OPC has established a strong role in this sector, probably to improve its image<sup>17</sup> and certainly also to meet a genuine demand from the population. To a certain extent, the OPC is the police force that poor people can rely on (see Appendix A2). Vigilantism is combined with crime-fighting activities. OPC members pursue armed robbers into zones that policemen are scared to enter. Whether they systematically hand over the suspects to the official police is unclear. Some instances of cooperation with the police have been reported to us but we've also been told a different story:

'once we arrest criminals, we kill them because such person is dangerous to live within the society and again the police are not reliable because you could find out that the criminal you gave them is released the next day'.

(Interview with H., 26/05/05)<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> 'OPC has become a name that is being dropped around by these bad eggs. We have a situation where if a member was disciplined by one faction, he would simply decamp and go to the other faction'. (Interview with Gani Adams in Gbeminiyi 2005)

<sup>16</sup> No convincing quantitative evidence has been found in this respect but most of our informants reported that the immediate aftermath of the military regime coincided with a rising wave of crime.

<sup>17</sup> 'OPC started crime-fighting activities when the police started giving them bad name, that they were rogues and, in order to change their image, they started protecting lives and properties especially of the Yorubas'. (Interview with Moshood Erubami, 03/03/05).

<sup>18</sup> Mob justice is by no means the monopoly of the OPC. It is a widespread phenomenon in Nigeria and elsewhere in West Africa (on Nigeria, see Harnischfeger 2003; Human Rights Watch 2002).

The judiciary's reputation is no better than that of the police. Long, written, formal procedures are one obstacle, leading often-illiterate people to choose alternative 'traditional' routes for dispute settling. The OPC has gained some legitimacy in this sector too. It intervenes at a level where existing informal mechanisms<sup>19</sup> have failed. The OPC can arbitrate landlord/tenants issues (Okechukwu 2000). It has also been reported to defend the interests of workers threatened with dismissal (Omole 2005). One of our informants, known for his substantial knowledge of *juju*, has been appointed by his group as a 'patron' in charge of mediating conflicts in the Ibadan-North local government. Importantly, the emergence of the OPC as an informal actor regulating Yoruba society has been facilitated by the identity of its local leaders, who generally share many other affiliations as members of traditional secret societies called *oro* (Nolte 2004), or members of labour unions<sup>20</sup>. Through the personal networks of its members, the OPC is enmeshed with many other organisations of informal social regulation. Locally, its success certainly lies in its ability to bridge gaps between these organisations and to ensure the delivery of 'public services' in areas completely abandoned by formal institutions.

The 'services' offered by the OPC are not free. But quantifying 'prices' is an impossible task. Transfers sometimes happen in kind and transactions may be bulked. Moreover the payment and the delivery of 'services' don't necessarily coincide temporally. The OPC 'recommends' vigilantes in its areas of influence, returns stolen goods to their owner/s or mediates between conflicting parties. Prices may not be formally and systematically set for these services; they may also depend on the social status of the parties to the transaction. But the beneficiaries may certainly be willing to pay something to the OPC, not only for the delivery of services but also out of fear of reprisal if they fail to pay. The OPC's action is thus somewhat ambiguous. It oscillates between a genuine provision of services and what could, in some instances, be labelled a protection racket. This ambiguity might be part of OPC's authority in the view of the communities where it operates (Gambetta 2000). Whether these communities fully consent to OPC's presence in their neighbourhood or merely tolerate it pragmatically is clearly a research question that needs to be investigated further.

A final aspect of the OPC's shift of focus is its instrumentalisation by local politicians resulting in new potential for tension and a rise in economic opportunities.

'Yes, there is a lot of economic gains for [the OPC] now that politicians are around now, they use them as mercenaries for political violence'.

(Interview with Moshood Erubami, 03/03/05)

Being popular among young people and inspiring fear among local communities, the OPC has become the perfect mobilising tool for local politics. Instances of the manipulation of the OPC for political purposes have been observed at several levels (Human Rights Watch 2003; Okechukwu 2000; for a valuable detailed account see also Appendix A14 below). This is neither particularly recent nor exceptional in the Nigerian political landscape, where youths have regularly been used as a strong tool for rallying electoral troops (Gore and Pratten 2003; Nolte 2004).

The OPC's entry into the specific niches in informal social regulation mechanisms that it occupies has, however, been a far from peaceful process. Having uncovered

<sup>19</sup> In Yoruba society, a whole hierarchy of informal dispute-settling mechanisms can be used by conflicting parties, from the household level to the city level (Albert, Awe, Héralut, and Omitoogun 1995).

<sup>20</sup> In Ibadan, the headquarters of the OPC are located in the same building as the National Union of Road Transport Workers and the leaders of the two groups are close relatives. Nolte (2004) notes a similar proximity between the two organisations in another Yoruba town, Remo.

the progressive rise in OPC influence in the security, conflict-settling and political domains of Yoruba society, it becomes easier to understand its involvement in violent clashes, which can hardly be classified as motivated strictly by the defence of Yoruba interests.

### **3.6 OPC involvement in violent clashes**

From 1999 to 2001, the OPC was involved in many violent clashes causing hundreds of fatalities. These violent episodes generally involved OPC members fighting non-Yoruba groups (for example Hausa-Fulani, Igbo and Ijaw. See Human Rights Watch 2003; Okechukwu 2000). But many bloody clashes have also been reported between the two OPC factions (Ajanaku 2004). We hypothesise that rather than arising out of the OPC's general claim for self-determination, these clashes stem from the local economic stakes that the OPC has increasingly developed since its inception and its increasing popular success. Several instances of these clashes are presented in Appendix A1 below. The Mile 12 Market riots directly reflect economic interests associated with the allocation of stands in the market at the expense of traders from other ethnic groups. A similar kind of clash, this time involving OPC members against Ijaw groups, is reported by Akinyele (2001) and concerns the control of Dockers' Unions at the Apapa Port in Lagos. Privileged access to jobs through patronage networks was therefore the issue underlying the conflict. The conflict evoked in Appendix A13 may sound like a purely identity-driven one. But one should bear in mind that this sort of violence can be rational in the long term: it establishes the supremacy of the group and delineates its territorial influence and it also serves as a signal of credible threat to ensure the protracted allegiance of the loser (Gambetta 2000).

## **4. Conclusion**

As an armed, organised, ethnically based mass movement demanding self-determination, the OPC represents a threat to Nigerian national unity. It therefore deserves the label of 'rebellion' familiar in the literature on conflict. However, the genealogy and evolution of the OPC display many features not present in the archetypical presentation of the rebellion-making process. Despite Nigeria's oil wealth, greed for lootable natural resources can by no means be said to constitute the impetus for the formation of the militia. The OPC emerged out of combat against the fiercest military dictatorship in Nigeria's post-colonial history. Its initial violent manifestations were targeted against the forces of this regime. Opting for ethnic struggle, claiming Awolowo's pro-poor, pro-Yoruba ideological legacy, ensured rapid popular support for the OPC. The OPC's success generated – and probably necessitated in the absence of any external source of finance – new, day-to-day economic opportunities for its followers. A comparative advantage for vigilantism activities, the charismatic auras of its leaders and its internal cohesiveness progressively transformed the OPC into a well-positioned and lucrative informal organisation of social regulation and also into a tool used by local political figures to promote their personal agenda. Greed may be said to nurture the success of the group at this stage; but, importantly, it is an outcome of its evolution. The OPC is successful because it accommodates many sections of Yoruba society, including high-profile political figures. It has gained its success largely by replacing the state functionally in domains where the latter has failed appallingly, namely security

provision and the judiciary. Ultimately, the danger of the OPC may not necessarily lie in the threat it represents to national unity but in the process of privatisation of public goods it has induced, at the expense of anyone who doesn't show it allegiance, whether Yoruba or not.

Analytically, the present paper has shown how active the state, its instances, or its individual representatives have been in the emergence of the militia: directly, through repression in a first stage, and, indirectly, through its failure to deliver basic public goods, in a second stage. The decisive issue of followers' mobilisation has only been partially addressed and forms the second part of this research. What seems clear, however, is that cohesiveness is not necessarily ensured through top-down distribution of rents. We hypothesise that the OPC grants its members a status which seems in turn to be reinvested for mundane gains at the local level *via* facilitated access to job or business places or rewards for services delivered to the population or political patrons. This is likely to explain the success of the OPC but may also have subverted its initial intentions.

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## **Appendix A1: Instances of violent episodes involving the OPC**

### *A11. Ketu/Mile 12 Market*

'On November 25 and 26, 1999, scores of people were killed when the OPC clashed with traders in Ketu/Mile 12 market in Lagos. The exact number of victims has not been confirmed, but is estimated to be more than one hundred. A senior police official who was at the scene said he saw an estimated two hundred bodies, but that others had already been buried in mass graves.

The fighting is thought to have been caused by jealousy on the part of Yoruba about the perceived dominance of the market by Hausa traders. There had also been disputes between particular individuals for control of key leadership positions within the market traders' committee. According to some of the traders, some Yoruba had been threatening to challenge this dominance and 'claim back' the market from the Hausa. Consequently, many of the victims of the OPC attack were Hausa, or people of northern origin suspected to be Hausa; however, a number of Igbo and members of other ethnic groups were also attacked by the OPC.'

**Source: Human Rights Watch (2003: 12)**

### *A12. Traditional leadership conflicts in Ilorin*

'In Ilorin, the capital of Kwara State, considered by some Yoruba to be one of their historical towns, the OPC has intervened on the side of local groups who have wanted to oust the current Fulani traditional ruler (or emir) and replace him with a Yoruba ruler (or oba). The two sides in this dispute are broadly aligned with the pronorthern and the pro-Yoruba/southern factions of Ilorin politics, with the OPC naturally siding with the latter. Battles over this traditional leadership position in Ilorin have been fierce and sometimes violent. On October 14, 2000, there was a serious shoot-out between the police and the OPC, as the police intercepted a large OPC convoy of about thirty vehicles traveling with their lights and sirens on; some likened the OPC's arrival in Ilorin on that day to 'a kind of invasion.' The OPC were apparently planning a meeting or rally, but panic spread after it was rumored that they were intending to install a Yoruba ruler by force. The OPC were armed but were caught unawares. Several OPC members were killed and many arrested by the police; a number of policemen were also injured. In a newspaper interview a few days after the clash, Abdulkareem Olola Kasumu, leader of the Kwara State chapter of the OPC, stated: 'The struggle is justified. It is long overdue and would not stop until its aims and objectives are achieved. [...] Ilorin is a Yoruba town by all historical and sociological standards.'

**Source: Human Rights Watch (2003: 32)**

### *A13. Sagamu*

'In mid July 1999, there was a major clash between Hausa and Yoruba in Sagamu, Ogun State. Scores of people were killed. The violence began following an argument over customs observed during the Oro festival, an annual Yoruba event which had not been disrupted by any disputes either before or since 1999. Yoruba and Hausa had agreed to respect a traditional night-time curfew usually observed during the festival. However, according to local residents, a fight erupted between the Yoruba and the Hausa after a Hausa woman was killed by a group of Yoruba because she had broken the curfew. The fighting escalated and the OPC intervened to support the Yoruba. Both sides were armed. At least sixty-eight Hausa were killed, including three boys between the ages of ten and fifteen; some were killed with guns, but the

majority were killed with cutlasses. A number of Yoruba were also killed, including one of the Oro leaders. Some people were burnt inside their houses.'

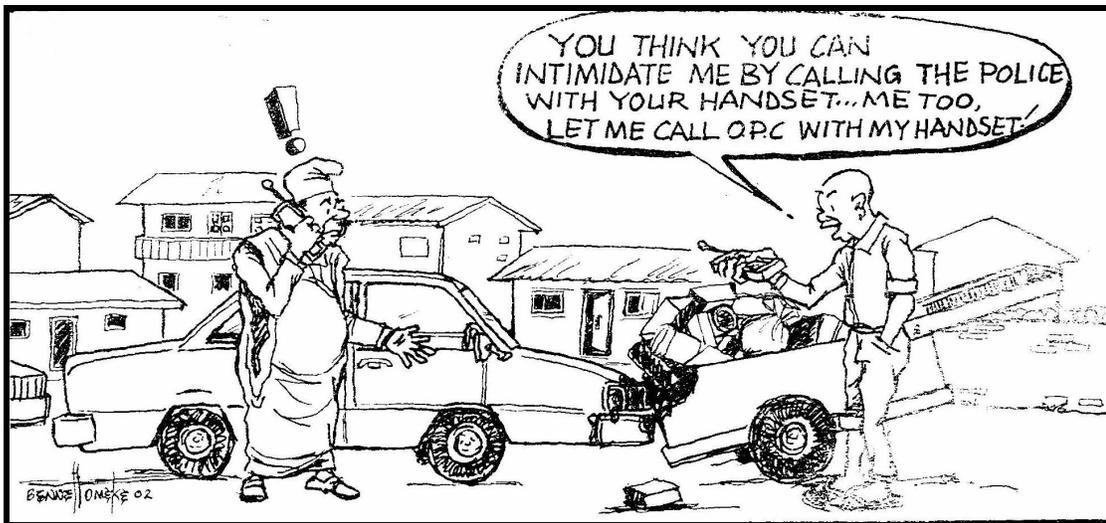
**Source: Human Rights Watch (2003: 12)**

*A14. An instance of political instrumentalisation of the OPC*

During 2002 the (Alliance for Democracy) AD continued, for the time being, to be the most powerful party in Remo, and most important political conflicts were personal rivalries over AD controlled positions. Thus, the AD primaries for the chairmanship of the newly created Sagamu Central Local Government were contested by two candidates with different backing among the youth. Joko Adekunbi, a former member of another local government in Sagamu, found himself supported by the (pro-Faseun) OPC faction led by Sodeinde, a section of the vigilante and Tolu Daudu, the ex-commissioner for health in Ogun State. His opponent Bamgbola Akinsanya was supported by the 'Irawo' (pro-Adams) faction of the OPC, another section of the vigilante and 'Awo' Awofala, a former principal of Remo Division High School. Crucially, the candidates neither represented different social groups nor stood for different political ideas or blueprints; it appears that the two groups simply consisted of rival local patronage networks.

**Source: Nolte (2004: 79-80)**

Appendix A2: OPC as a protector of the poor



Source: The Punch, Friday, January 18, 2002