

'We are All *Àmòtẹ̀kùn*': Insecurity, Ethno-Regional Hegemony, and Resistance in Southwest Nigeria

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Abstract

This article offers an interpretation of *Àmòtẹ̀kùn*, a security outfit established by the governors of Southwest Nigeria to tackle rising cases of insecurity in the region. In the light of existing discourse of identity politics in Nigeria; the inauguration of the outfit in early 2020 initially sets the southwest states on collision course with the federal government due to the fact that the police in Nigeria are centrally controlled. Drawing from online news reports and qualitative data obtained through interview the article argues that *Àmòtẹ̀kùn* together with the controversies that follow the launch illustrates a particular way in which the Yorùbá of southwest Nigeria construct and as well resist real or imagined ethno-regional hegemony. Although created to address insecurity, the shared meanings that grow out of *Àmòtẹ̀kùn* emphasise more complex significations: Yorùbá trailblazing tradition, succour from the suffocating silence and inactivity of the Nigerian state, possibility of political restructuring, and more importantly, resistance of ethno-regional hegemony.

Keywords: *Àmòtẹ̀kùn*, Insecurity, Ethno-Regional Hegemony, and Herdsmen

Introduction

In the early part of the 2020, governors of the six states of Nigeria's southwest region launched the Western Nigeria Security Network, codenamed the Operation *Àmòtẹ̀kùn* (henceforth *Àmòtẹ̀kùn*), to coordinate internal security activities in the region. Since 2015, when Muhammadu Buhari, a former

military Head of State was elected Nigerian president, security challenges and tensions have aggravated in the country. Attacks on farmlands and spate of kidnap activities in the South are linked with destructive incursions of Fulani pastoralists (Chukwuma 2020). In the southwest, the persistent carnages did not just lead to widespread anxieties and fears but also stimulated discourses about an agenda (real or imagined) of the Fulani to bring the Yorùbá, the main group in the Southwest region, under its control. Rumours about complicity of the Nigerian state in the numerous cases of kidnapping for ransom were rife and strengthened by the preponderance of people of Fulani ethnicity in political leadership and key national security positions.

Few days after the Southwest governors unveiled *Àmòtẹ̀kùn*, the central government of Nigeria, through the Office of the Attorney-General, berated the governors for violating national law on policing, and subsequently declared *Àmòtẹ̀kùn* illegal. In Nigeria, police are centrally controlled, and previous agitations, especially of states in the South for constitutional review to allow for the devolution of local policing authority from the federal government, have not led to any tangible reform. Nonetheless, in many states, local vigilante groups have carried out the work of internal policing without their activities being seen as incongruous with constitutional provisions. However, an instance of mobilising ethno-regional identity around insecurity is altogether novel. Although, activities of militia groups, sociocultural organizations and other informal structures have in the past constituted springboards for ethnic agitations and resistance of subjectivity (see Adebani 2008; Guichaoua 2006; Nolte 2004), the inscription of regional state on a non-conventional security outfit as we have in the case of *Àmòtẹ̀kùn* simply portrays the absence of consensus between regional and central states on the very important mandate of securing human lives and properties.

During a month of struggle between the central government and governors of the six Southwest states over the legality of *Àmòtẹ̀kùn*, conversations about the outfit proliferated in both the conventional and the new media. What did *Àmòtẹ̀kùn* represent in the Nigerian context? Why did the launch provoke much passion in the Yorùbá of the Southwest region of Nigeria? In what way did the launch of a regional security outfit reflect the politics of ethnic resistance? In this article, I argue that *Àmòtẹ̀kùn* together with the controversies that follow the launch illustrates a particular way in which the Yorùbá of Southwest Nigeria construct and as well resist real or imagined ethno-regional hegemony. More importantly, the support for and protests against *Àmòtẹ̀kùn* attest to not just the numerous fault lines that define the Nigerian nation since its very inception but also the distinctive ways in which the Nigerian state is encountered by citizens and identity groupings. In Nigeria, the three largest ethnic groups, the Hausa-Fulani, Igbo, and Yorùbá, are engaged in persistent

struggle for power at the centre. The nature of resistance which Àmòtẹ̀kùn represents, suggests a new mode of organising against the national state, even as one can as well argue that the outfit is a loud manifestation of discontent with the unitary structure of Nigerian federalism. This article, therefore, offers an interpretation of Àmòtẹ̀kùn in the light of existing discourse of identity politics in Nigeria.

The article draws extensively from online news reports on Àmòtẹ̀kùn. In addition, data was obtained from interviews carried out in capital cities of the six Southwest states between July and December 2020. In the course of my research, I spoke to leaders and men of Àmòtẹ̀kùn whose views on the outfit were central to the analysis carried out in this article. However, in reporting the data from interviews, I have preserved the anonymity of these informants.

Ethno-Regional Hegemony and Insecurity

Quite a number of scholarly works and journalistic commentaries have alluded to the domination of the post-independence Nigerian politics by the northern section of the country as an example of ethno-regional hegemony. Much of the commentaries focused on succession of Nigerian military rulers of northern origin (see Okeke 1992; Kukah 1993; Ifidon 1998; Suberu 2004). The idea of an ethno-regional hegemon derives from the assumption that; Northern section, sometimes broadly categorized as the Hausa-Fulani, is intolerant to being ruled by the South (Mohamed-Salih 2001) or constantly engaged in plots to keep political power perpetually (Onuoha 2004). Onuoha, while outlining the factors that led to Nigeria electing a president from the Southern section in 1999, has argued that the North's acceptance of power shift came about, 'after it convinced itself that power shift could still be a strategy, to retain informal control over power wielders in the attempt of the North to remain relevant in mainstream political context' (2004: 48). Giving further credence to a notion of the hegemony of the North, Rueben Abati, a popular Nigerian journalist, had in the build-up to the 2007 general election dismissed the chance of any member of the Igbo ethnicity being elected president upon his view that the North could not possibly give favorable consideration to the aspiration of the southeast to lead Nigeria. So strong is the imagination of a northern hegemony that many Nigerians would deem a president of Southern ethnicity to have been imposed on the country by the North (Onuoha 2004). Hence, Ayoade and Akinsanya (2013) interpret the outcome of the 2011 presidential election to mean a decline of Northern hegemony and the ascendancy of the South, after a candidate from the South emerged winner ahead of a candidate from the North.

The very idea of ethno-regional hegemony in Nigeria draws from the structural imbalance in the country's federalism, and specifically 'the overconcentration of power and resources in the federal government' (Suberu 1996: 66). As such, when mention is made of ethno-regional hegemony in Nigeria, it is usually in a context that the Hausa-Fulani ethnicity monopolize key federal political and military positions, which they in turn employ to further the group's socio-economic dominance over other ethno-regional groups. Such hegemonic potential of the North is historicized and considered reinforced by a military skewed in ethnic composition, oriented toward protecting the political advantage which the Hausa-Fulani ethnicity had in the post-independence years acquired.

Although acknowledging the colonial root of northern domination of power, Nwakama (2010) argues that the frequent use of the term, Northern hegemony, by Southerners might have given northern political leadership a false sense of importance or possibility in their perceptions of their place, power and role within the Nigerian polity. The failures of Nigeria's postcolonial political development, Nwakama argues, are shared, and as well implicate the southern elites. In other words, whatever the form of domination from the North is made possible by the complicity of the South.

However, popular idea of hegemony of the Hausa-Fulani is not restricted to the sphere of political leadership ascendance. A core aspect of the *Àmòtẹ̀kùn* story, which I investigate, touches on the way Fulani ethnic identity is implicated in the many accounts of insecurity in the southwest. While a direct link may not necessarily exist between insecurity and political domination of the Hausa-Fulani, the innuendoes of ethnic resistance and liberation contained in commentaries that emerged in the wake of the launch of *Àmòtẹ̀kùn* and popular belief about lack of will on the part of security agencies to bring suspected criminals to book due to their privileged ethnicity, portray the hegemonic dimension of insecurity. Moreover, the confidence that the governors of the southwest states exuded in the capacity of *Àmòtẹ̀kùn* to 'secure' their region much better than the Nigerian police ought to be understood in the context of the influential presence, which the Hausa-Fulani supposedly have in the nation's internal security apparatuses.

At the time when *Àmòtẹ̀kùn* was inaugurated, the Nigerian president, Muhammadu Buhari, a Fulani, superintend over a government widely taunted as overprotective of herdsmen of his Fulani stalk in the regular violent attacks the latter unleashed on farmers in the middle belt and southern parts of Nigeria. The launch of *Àmòtẹ̀kùn* and the enthusiastic responses it generated make sense in the contexts of the post-independence tumultuous ethnic relations and divisive identity politics. Furthermore, when interpreted in these contexts, the enthusiasm about *Àmòtẹ̀kùn* in the South and particularly

among the Yorùbá, and the oppositional stance of central government and sociocultural organisations in the north offer a window into the difficult intersection of ethnicity, religion and national security.

This article is not about the realness or otherwise of security threats in the southwest and the effectiveness of Àmòtẹ̀kùn in mitigating insecurity, particularly the threat posed by Fulani herdsmen. Rather, my main concern is with the way Àmòtẹ̀kùn is characterised as a countermeasure to hegemonized insecurity. The mobilizing power of Àmòtẹ̀kùn, I suggest, lies in the deployment of primordial and emancipation rhetoric to attract wide support, especially from the southern part of the country, and also in mythical propagations about folk policing. In Nigeria, local support for vigilantes has always been based on the belief that they have magical forms of detection and protection that can protect the innocent (Nolte 2004). Even when Àmòtẹ̀kùn, so far, might not have enhanced the security of the region in the way touted by the promoters, the special appeal to the Yorùbá connects to the way in which the people construct ethnic suaveness and cultural sophistication around decision about the outfit. The extensive interest and support that the security initiative received across the southwest states, as I will show, are related to an unexpressed but nonetheless powerful ideology of self-determination that has flourished in southern Nigeria during the last one decade of the post-1999 return to civilian rule.

Herdsmen Attacks: The Insecurity Context of Àmòtẹ̀kùn

Starting from the late 1990s a southward migration of Fulani pastoralists in Nigeria increased rapidly. Scholars have attributed this development to the debilitating effects of climate change in Northern parts of the country (Chukwuma 2020). One of the immediate outcomes of the migration was a conflictive relationship forged with farmers whose farm crops were destroyed by cattle on a regular basis (Olaniyi 2016). Moreover, kidnap cases linked to herdsmen became frequent. Therefore to curb the activities of suspected herdsmen, states of the Southwest enacted laws prohibiting open grazing and the use of firearms by pastoralists. However, these laws achieved little in terms of reducing the growing rate of insecurity in the region. The lack of or inadequate response from security agencies lend credence to an emerging Fulanization narrative, particularly that the leadership of core security agencies are widely believed to be of Fulani origin. The Fulanization narrative became stronger after the central government had proposed a human settlement policy, also known as RUGA project, which will enable Fulani herdsmen settle in areas that will be allocated to them in states across the federation,

for the purpose of ranching (Chukwuma 2020). Ethnic groups in the southern states voiced their opposition to the proposed scheme, with their rejection of RUGA underscoring the mutual suspicion that characterised inter-ethnic relations in Nigeria (Ademola 2020).

The Yorùbá are presumably the second largest ethnic group in Nigeria. The 2006 Census figure shows that the six Yorùbá speaking state of Ekiti, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Osun and Oyo comprised some 20 per cent of the country's 140 million people. This figure may not reflect the accurate population of an ethnicity which also constitutes significant parts of people in Kwara and Kogi states in the northcentral region of Nigeria. The Yorùbá live mainly in big town and cities and have an urbanization history which dates back to pre-colonial Nigeria (Mabogunje 1976). Their cities, particularly Lagos and Ibadan are arguably the largest in Nigeria. It is also on record that eight of the first ten secondary schools established in Nigeria between 1859 and 1913 were sited in Yorùbáland. At the point of independence in 1960 the people were without doubt the most educated ethnic group in Nigeria. Only the Igbo of the Eastern region ranked close to them in level of educational attainment. This feat was made possible by their history of early contact with missionaries and consequently, Western education. The wars that the Yorùbá fought with other groups, especially the Fulani, in the precolonial years, in a way strengthened their feeling of shared identity and sharpened boundaries (Eriksen 2010).

Prior to the mid-1980s violence between Fulani herders and Yorùbá farmers were infrequent although not totally non-existent (See Guyer 1997). The security situation in the Southwest, however, has assumed a worrisome dimension in the years following the 2015 general election. Killings, kidnapping for ransom, armed robbery and other criminal activities increased at a rate previously unknown, at least since the return to civilian rule in 1999. Many farmers abandoned their farms, and travellers no longer found the roads safe. No state in the region is spared the gruesome incidences of high-profile kidnapping, ritual killing and armed robbery. A former secretary of the federation during the Ibrahim Babangida military dictatorship years, Olu Falae, was abducted from his farm sometime in September 2015 by suspected Fulani herdsmen. In June 2019, masked assailants believed to be herdsmen killed the daughter of a prominent leader of the Yorùbá sociocultural group, Aféñifé. The killing provoked wild outrage across the southwest states and profound conversations on the functionality of Nigeria's internal security architecture.

The Yorùbá interpreted the numerous cases of killings in the southwest as an orchestrated attack on their ethnicity. An earlier attempt at provoking them to ethnic resistance had occurred in 1993 when the northern military establishment annulled the presidential election that was set to be won by Mo-shood Abiola, a Yorùbá businessman. However, it was not just the instances

of killings that stirred ethnic reaction in the form of Àmòtẹ̀kùn but the real threat to livelihood, socio-economy of the Yorùbá and their continued survival as a group which the attacks on farmers and destruction of farmlands represented. Within the context of the 19th Century Fulani history of land appropriation in Nigeria the attacks on Yorùbá farmers and farmlands came to transcend mere brigandage and bring about sentiment about an internal colonising agenda.

Associating an entire ethnicity with criminality is a very recent trend in Nigerian postcolonial history, indicative of the high-level distrust existing among ethnic groups in the country, as well as failure to achieve integration sixty years after independence. The profiling of Fulani pastoralists in relation to widespread criminal acts of killing, kidnapping, and banditry in the Southwest, goes beyond ethnic labelling and encompasses ideas of Islamic proselytization. Sentiments about certain political and economic privileges that the Fulani ethnicity is perceived to have gained, are believed to be at the expense of other ethnic nationalities in the country. The cord, which criminal profiling of the Fulani nomads strikes with Nigerians, particularly people of southern extraction, is therefore not just identity based. It touches on reactions relating to political dynamics and perceived unequal power relations between the northern and the southern parts of the country. The majority of the Southerners are Christians, thus they see the Fulani ethnicity as simultaneously embodying the Islamic religion and the northern political establishment. As a result, the idea of insecurity includes the perceived threat to the religious freedom of the Yorùbá Christians in the likely occurrence of a hegemony of the Fulani.

Like Campbell (2002) rightly observes, in politics of insecurity different understandings of the event and its implications do compete. The understanding that responsibility for internal security resides with a national political leadership, whose ethnicity is implicated in the security challenges confronting the Southwest states, is important for good appreciation of the faith that the Yorùbá have in a home grown security outfit. For many Southerners, there was just no way President Buhari and the entire security apparatus would clamp down on the activities of a group with whom they share ethnic affiliation. The importance of Àmòtẹ̀kùn, therefore, is basically in having trusted locals do the job of securing their homeland.

Àmòtẹ̀kùn and Ethnic Consciousness: The making of a regional security outfit

On 9 January 2020, governors of six southwest Nigerian states, at an elaborate public event in Ibadan inaugurated Operation Àmòtẹ̀kùn as a regional

security outfit. The governors cited the increasing rate of crimes across the Southwest region as the underlying factor for establishing the outfit. At the launch, speakers including traditional rulers and leaders of Yorùbá socio-cultural organisations, took turn to echo the complementariness of the initiative to institutionalised mode of policing. An aspect of the launch that the people found significant was the consensus reached by the governors across political parties divide. Just like the Oòduà Peoples Congress (OPC); a movement created in circumstances characterized by frustrated promises of democratic transition and fierce repression of political opposition (Guichaoua, 2006), Àmòtẹ̀kùn was closely associated with safeguarding the Yorùbá ethnic boundary. The initiative also reflects the Yorùbá sentiment about the restructuring of the country, which the people strongly believe will grant them power to craft a more progressive path of development for their own region.

In the days following the launch of Àmòtẹ̀kùn, the valour a security outfit crafted in the image and metaphor of a leopard simply reverberated across the South-western states and would not come off, even when the outfit was yet to mobilize in any of the states. Memes on leopard and its predatory exploits circulated widely in social media while prominent Yorùbá people, mostly political leaders and celebrity figures, appeared in the public dressed up in fabrics of leopard design. Several accounts of Àmòtẹ̀kùn featured in newspapers and social media simply implied that the Yorùbá have had enough of a dysfunctional policing system. Thus, for many Yorùbá people, Àmòtẹ̀kùn is everything about heritage, nationalism and identity. The outfit was concerned with demonstrating the Yorùbá resilience and capacity for self-defence, an area the Nigerian state was specifically believed to have been complicit. Many interpreted the symbolism of a prancing, angry leopard in full flight, adopted as the corps' logo as representing calmness, diplomacy, decisiveness and bravery. These qualities, the Yorùbá often invoke in their self-definition.

On January 14, 2020 the Federal Government of Nigeria declared Àmòtẹ̀kùn illegal. The public release issued by the government through the office of the attorney general contained element of threat especially when the minister averred that 'the law will take its natural course in relation to excesses associated with organization, administration and participation in "Àmòtẹ̀kùn" or continuous association with it as an association' (Channels TV). By declaring the outfit illegal and particularly with threat of force communicated to the Yorùbá states, the central government did not only stir controversy but indeed provided fuel for the oxygenation of identity politics in the southwest (Abati 2020). Rallies to garner support for the initiative were held in state capitals and major Yorùbá cities and more people reacted to the adversarial stance of the central government in the social media with the hashtags: "we are all Àmòtẹ̀kùn" and 'Àmòtẹ̀kùn has come to stay'. The

rhetoric resonated well with the teeming Yorùbá population. T-shirts and fez caps bearing the messages and the image of leopard sold widely, and people proudly wore them at their private homes and at public events to show their support for the initiative. The two slogans suggested that the Yorùbá collective identity was intricately linked with the decision to set up the outfit. Invariably, what constituted Àmòtẹ̀kùn was not just a few thousand yet to be commissioned local security operatives but rather an ethnic mass united by security affliction and a sense of threat to their ethnic identity.

Support for Àmòtẹ̀kùn also came from the 'Yorùbá in diaspora'. For instance, the Egbe Omo Yorùbá in North America argued that Àmòtẹ̀kùn had the right to protect the people of Yorùbáland from violent marauders same way the Hisbah security outfit in some parts of Northern Nigeria had been operating unhindered since 1999 (*The Nation* 2020). The reference the group made to the Hisbah was meant to raise important questions about ethnic inequality and double standard in enforcing constitutional provisions. In a way, to be identified with the initiative simply meant to be associated with Yorùbá nationalism and discontent with the structural incongruity of Nigeria.

On January 23, 2020 governors of the six Southwest states met with the Nigerian vice president to work out an amicable path to resolving the impasse over Àmòtẹ̀kùn. Both parties resolved that the security outfit would be structured to align with the community policing strategy of the federal government. They also came to an agreement that each state would enact laws giving legal backing to the initiative, and as well address all issues that concern the regulation of the security structure. Within a period of two weeks after the central government and the six Southwest state reached agreements on the legal frameworks for Àmòtẹ̀kùn, legislative houses in the six states adopted bills giving legal backings to the outfit, and between March 5 and March 13, 2020, these bills have been signed into laws in at least four of the six states. In the remaining states the bills setting up the security outfits were already passed by the legislative assemblies and awaited the assent of the governors.

It can be argued that the force of ethno-nationalism, which the initiative carried, waned considerably once the element of regional coordination was removed from Àmòtẹ̀kùn in the aftermath of the agreement the governors of the southwest states reached with the central government. The decentralization of the outfit might at one level signify a political victory for the central government and other dissenting voices. Nonetheless important meanings formulated about Àmòtẹ̀kùn show the outfit as having implications beyond the widespread security threat to an entire region.

The Opposition

Outside and within the southwest, considerations of Àmòtẹ̀kùn were related to the dissimilar ways in which the Nigerian state is encountered by ethnic nationalities and identity groups. For instance, leading sociocultural organisations in the southeast and the Middle Belt regions were receptive to the formation of Àmòtẹ̀kùn. The apex sociocultural organisation of the Igbo ethnic group of the southeast, the Ohaneze Ndigbo, lauded the outfit, and associated it with restructuring of the Nigerian federation, which the organisation has championed. The organisation also advised governors of the southeast states to set up similar outfit in their respective states.

The Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF) a northern sociocultural organisation and the Miyetti Allah an association of Fulani cattle breeders, were critical of Àmòtẹ̀kùn. They both interpreted it as an ethnic army and the launch as a prelude to the Yorùbá declaring a separatist Oduduwa Republic. The two groups aligned with the position of the national government, which declared the western Nigeria regional security initiative a threat to the country's internal security. The National Secretary of the Miyetti Allah described the outfit as a resurrection of the Oodua People's Congress with the soul aim of displacing Fulani herders from the southwest (Akinsuyi 2020). The close association of OPC with Àmòtẹ̀kùn no doubt creates unease for the Hausa/Fulani group, following the experience of violent clashes with the Yorùbá group in 1999.

Other interest groups from northern Nigeria disapproved of Àmòtẹ̀kùn and, like the ACF and Miyetti Allah, tagged it a Yorùbá tribal militia. The National Youth Council of Nigeria, for instance, equated Àmòtẹ̀kùn with the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), a secessionist movement in the southeast part of the country already proscribed by the Nigerian government (Yaba 2020). In its suggestion that the Àmòtẹ̀kùn initiative be banned, the northern youth group enjoined President Muhammadu Buhari not to allow unconstitutionality to prevail.

Essentially, while the earliest protests against Àmòtẹ̀kùn took the form of the North-South political struggle, other shades of opposition such as the one from the Muslims Rights Concern (MURIC) had emerged from the Southwest. The Islamic pressure group, MURIC, had since 1999 championed the cause of Yorùbá Muslims. The struggle of MURIC is formed on the assumption that Muslims in the southwest states are marginalised under a bureaucratic structure dominated by Christians. Under the leadership of Ishaq Akintola, MURIC, considered Àmòtẹ̀kùn anti-Islam on the ground that the name of the outfit emanated from the Bible. According to Akintola, adopting the name Àmòtẹ̀kùn, which is mentioned in a verse of the Bible with

particular reference to guarding a city demonstrates the Christianity undercurrent of the initiative (Owolabi 2020). Akintola further alleged favouritism towards Christians in the formation of Àmòtẹ̀kùn. According to the MURIC leader, prospective Àmòtẹ̀kùn corps were expected to provide birth certificates and attestation letters issued by churches as part of the conditions of recruitment. The Muslim organisation also alluded to Christian dominance of the command structure, which it claimed depicted Àmòtẹ̀kùn as a Christian agenda meant to further enforce the subjugation of Muslims in the Southwest. It may matter less that MURIC allegations were speculated and conspiratorial in outlook. These contentions, mostly reflect the religious fault line of Nigerian politics.

Two months after Àmòtẹ̀kùn's inauguration, the Yorùbá Appraisal Forum, organised protests in Lagos and Ekiti States demanding that the outfit be scrapped across the six southwest states. The group claimed it uncovered plots by politicians to use Àmòtẹ̀kùn to destabilise the region and ultimately the entire country ahead of the 2023 general elections (Ogunje 2020). It is unclear as to whether these protests were influenced by political considerations. Nonetheless, emphasis of the protesting groups on possibility of incumbent governors using Àmòtẹ̀kùn against opposition figures somehow suggests the protest as tainted with crass politicking. Rather than undermine full mobilisation of the outfit as planned, the protests seem to strengthen the resolve of the governor; for instance, as of December 2020, Àmòtẹ̀kùn had mobilised in four out of the six Southwest states.

Generally, the protests against Àmòtẹ̀kùn in their different forms attest to the extent in which policing and the entire national security architecture are embedded in politics of ethnic and religious domination. The protests by the Yoruba Appraisal Forum were significant in terms of the seal of ethnic approval it denied Amotekun. The protests further reflect the ruptures that work against consensus formation even among people of the same ethnic group. The scepticism from a section of the Yorùbá political class also stems from the partisan nature of the police in Nigeria's elections and the control in which ruling parties are known to have exercised over them. Àmòtẹ̀kùn is therefore thought to embody this manipulation of security instrumentality for illegitimate appropriation of power.

Yorùbá Trailblazing Tradition

What is significant is the structure itself, and not the mobilisation or the available ammunition. Of the six zones, Yorùbáland is the first to create a skeletal outfit with capacity and capabilities to be awakened and deployed in service of the southwestern region.

According to Rasheed (2020),

[...] It is gratifying to note that even amidst recriminations over the status quo, Yorùbá leaders are still able to hold out a flag of preparedness for all possibilities. It is therefore a really interesting and intriguing reading how leaders of other regions are grappling to respond to this innovative potent step. It must have dawned on everyone that after all the Yorùbá are after all not ‘cowards’.

The idea that Àmòtẹ̀kùn attests to the preparedness of the Yorùbá for any eventuality, which is contained in the above quote and comments of interviewees, is key to understanding the Yorùbá interpretation of their political and cultural sophistication. Àmòtẹ̀kùn, from the stance of Rasheed, goes beyond a mere security outfit. Although designed to strengthen a weak security architecture, yet Àmòtẹ̀kùn represents an intellectually thought response of the Yorùbá to perceived threat to their ethnic space, and an effort toward re-making the Yorùbá identity. While some states, especially in the South have been very vocal in their demand for decentralization of policing, in no part of Nigeria had a security outfit been previously set up at a regional level. Hence, Olawale Rasheed’s assertion about Yorùbáland being the first to create a skeletal outfit with capacity and capabilities to be awakened and deployed in service of the motherland. Even though it suggests weak integration of the Nigerian state and the possibility of the federation disintegrating in the future, this has basically drawn on discourse of ethnic courage and bravery i.e. The air of ethno-regional accomplishment and preparedness, exuded in Olawale Rasheed’s write up is not vacuous. It reflects a particular mode of viewing that the country as a temporary contraption is bound to dissolve in the nearest future.

From the perspective of interviewees, setting up Àmòtẹ̀kùn demonstrated the readiness of the Southwest governors to rise above rhetoric in the struggle against the Nigerian unitary federalism, and the unequal power relations associated with it. The outfit for many, is a coded challenge and a dart thrown at the Nigerian state. When asked about the impact of the establishment of the Àmòtẹ̀kùn in an interview, one interlocutor echoed that their objective was not to seceding or taking over the duty of the police, they simply wanted to assist the police to secure the land and the people, a decision which even the government cannot fault. According to this interviewee, the Yorùbá are strategic in their engagement with the Nigerian state, carefully weaving their actions around safeguarding internal security. Moreover, another interviewee mentioned that, this approach makes it difficult for the central state to accuse the governors of the Southwest states of subversive activities.

Another interviewee restated the claim bordering on Yorùbá cultural exceptions when he said, 'It seems the Federal government does not know who they are dealing with. We [Yorùbá] are different from other ethnic groups as we are used to long suffering. Many times, our neighbors misinterpret our silence for cowardice. But Yorùbá don't just do anything if they are not sure of it. We do our homework well before we take actions'. The seeming showboating comes in the context of the relative stability of the region in the post-independence years despite events capable of provoking large-scale violence. For him, the Yorùbá not engaging in unnecessary conflict simply mean a discretionary acumen that is hallmark of political and cultural sophistication.

On 11 January 1999, exactly two days after the launch of Àmòtẹ̀kùn, Onyedika Agbedo wrote a feature in *The Guardian*, a Nigerian tabloid. In the article, Agbedo listed instances of the Yorùbá pioneering efforts in modern Nigeria, which included the introduction of free primary education in 1955, the establishment of Western Nigeria Television (WNTV), which was the first television station in Africa, the building of the first stadium and the Cocoa House, which at a time ranked among the tallest building in Africa. With the establishment of Àmòtẹ̀kùn, Agbedo observes that "Southwest Nigeria is on the march again", and also goes further to describe the inauguration of the Western Nigeria Security Network (WNSN) as a feat that clearly projects the Southwest zone as a region that is never bereft of initiatives to tackle existing challenges and lay a solid foundation for a prosperous future (Agbedo 2020). This interpretation of Àmòtẹ̀kùn vis-à-vis the southwest historical trajectory not only illustrates the developmental orientation of a region, but equally points to a trailblazing tradition. The trailblazing phenomenon is a core aspect of the unending competition among Nigerian major ethnic groups for power and dominance. Whether it is the case of pioneering infrastructural projects or setting up a regional police outfit, trailblazing endeavours are objects of ethnic pride, perceived evidences of advanced cultural system and consequently a valid reason to reject domination from other ethnic groups. The references to "firsts" as we see in the quotes from Rasheed and Agbedo are also made to underscore an exceptional character of the Yorùbá, which unfortunately did not correspond to the marginal position, which the people believe they occupy in Nigerian leadership.

Another interesting dimension to the Yorùbá trailblazing tradition concerned the implication of Àmòtẹ̀kùn for the struggles of other groups in the country particularly the minority ethnic nationalities who usually perceived themselves as politically marginalized. In a feature published in Alltimepost.com and titled 'Àmòtẹ̀kùn: Yorùbá Has Taken Her Place in History,' Erasmus Ikhide avers that 'Àmòtẹ̀kùn, as the open sesame should serve as impetus and encouragement to the South-South, south-Eastern and Middle-Belt

Regions, who are the major victims of Fulani barbarity where their loved ones are raped and slaughtered right before them on a daily basis' (Ikhide 2020). Ikhide's comment is foregrounded in the southerners shared experience of insecurity and political marginalization. It meant that oppressed groups should take opportunity of the lead provided by the Yorùbá to enforce their own security. For the groups mentioned, real and imagined insecurity are related to concerns people have about inclusivity, internal domination, unequal access to resources, and a whole lot of other worries, which are collectively framed as the national questions. Beyond the provocative power of Àmòtẹ̀kùn, the thought on federal power is modified insofar as the central government demonstrates willingness to enter into negotiation with governors of the southwest states.

The fact that the Southwest region "successfully" dares the power of the central government makes the Àmòtẹ̀kùn story a fascinating one to Nigerians who considered themselves or their ethnicity marginalized. Many Nigerians, especially the Southerners, have lived with the belief that any challenge on the power of the North dominated central government is not only reckless but incapable of yielding any positive outcome.

Beyond Insecurity: Àmòtẹ̀kùn as Resistance Politics

For many Yorùbá, Àmòtẹ̀kùn embodies succour from the suffocating silence and inactivity of the Nigerian state. Public discourses following launch of the initiative centred on issues of freedom, confidence, assurances, peace and protection. But more importantly, the conversations about Àmòtẹ̀kùn associated insecurity in the southwest with growing Yorùbá powerlessness and subjectivity within the Nigerian nation. One of my interlocutors who participated in a rally held in Ibadan to support the initiative explained his endorsement of Àmòtẹ̀kùn in terms of age long tradition of Yorùbá independence. According to him, 'We, the Yorùbá were never slaves to any group in pre-colonial Nigeria: *iran Yorùbá kan ò s'ẹ̀rú rí*'. Other Àmòtẹ̀kùn enthusiasts who I interviewed described the initiative severally as 'a necessary measure to protect our people from modern-day Fulani slavery', 'the Yorùbá way of saying that we can never be second class citizen of this country [Nigeria]', and "a clear message that enough is enough". The emphasis on subjectivity reflects a widespread reading of herdsmen's attacks as a renewal of the 19th century Usman Dan Fodio's jihad, which hitherto failed to bring Yorùbá Land under the Fulani suzerainty.

Furthermore, in what can be termed the clearest statements of intent of Àmòtẹ̀kùn made by a public official, the commandant of the Ekiti State Àmòtẹ̀kùn alluded to the corps' liberation logic. An online news report

quoted the commandant to have said: 'People before us rose and fought invaders. We also want to rise and fight invaders. These invaders came with all forms of impunity, they kill, maim, rape and destroy farm produce' (Ibrahim 2020). The key points to note in this quote, is the appeal made to shared past [people before us], the expansionist and territorial undercurrent of violent crimes [invaders]. It is also noteworthy that part of the uniqueness of the Nigeria federalism lies in preservation of ethnic spaces and boundaries: violations (real and imagined) are therefore considered a threat to cultural distinctiveness and ethnic autonomy.

While Àmòtẹ̀kùn's proactivity is not in any way authenticated, it cannot also be easily dismissed. In particular, when the people I interviewed talked about Àmòtẹ̀kùn, they spoke with the conviction that the outfit would safeguard the territorial land of the Yorùbá, prevent Fulani herdsmen from overrunning the land and/or subjecting the people to internal colonisation. For them, Àmòtẹ̀kùn, being an ethnic force, cannot close its eyes to the atrocities perpetrated against the Yorùbá unlike the Nigerian police, which is seen more or less as an institution meant to protect the interest of the North. 'The Àmòtẹ̀kùn knows that it must be alive to its duties because the victim of the next attack can be a member of his family,' one of the interlocutors said. Thus, many that supported the initiative at inception believed it was an emancipatory force that owes its primary allegiance to the Yorùbá ethnicity.

At the launch of Àmòtẹ̀kùn, the governors of the six Southwest states spoke about the outfit being unmistakably complementary to the effort of the police. This assurance, however, did not prevent ideas of the initiative as a liberating force. Apart from the many Yorùbá that sees it in this light; public perception, especially in the Southern part of the country focused on an initiative, which constitutes a challenge on the status quo, and by implication, the perceived power of the North over the rest of the country. This sentiment was well communicated in an online feature article, which posits that: 'Àmòtẹ̀kùn is the beginning of the fight for Southern emancipation from the strangulation of Fulani oligarchy and propulsive move to disintegrate the country, which the Northerners have sworn will happen over their dead bodies because of Niger Delta oil wealth' (Ikhide 2020). The reference made to the 'Niger Delta oil wealth' is significant in the sense that it defines Nigeria's ethno-regional conflicts in terms of struggles for economic resources. In the quote, Ikhide interprets Àmòtẹ̀kùn simply as a liberation force to lead the dismantling of a political entity enmeshed in inequality and injustice. It seems the South needed one of the groups to bell the cat and Àmòtẹ̀kùn has been on hand to serve that purpose.

The faith that the Yorùbá have in Àmòtẹ̀kùn to combat insecurity in the southwest is centred on a consideration of the effectiveness of folk policing.

As in the case of vigilantes that were believed to have magical powers that could be deployed for crime fighting (Nolte 2004), Àmòtẹ̀kùn is fashioned as a security outfit driven by indigenous knowledge. This engagement with mystical protection reflects in the category of personnel proposed to populate its rank: Local hunters, vigilantes, members of the Oodua People's Congress and the *Àgbẹ̀kọ̀yà* Movement. Historically, peasant groups such as *Egbé Àgbẹ̀kọ̀yà*, *Mẹ̀kúnù Parapò* and *Egbé Mẹ̀kúnù Takú* had employed charms and traditional magic in prosecuting their fights for reduction in flat-rate taxation and demand for the sack of local district councils in western Nigeria (Beer 1976). Even when most of the participants in the 1968-1969 revolts were either dead or advanced in age myths about their gallantry and invincibility have remained in popular consciousness and accounts of the revolt. The Àmòtẹ̀kùn is meant not only to resuscitate the Yorùbá spirituality put into use during the *Àgbẹ̀kọ̀yà* revolt but also demonstrate indigenous capability for the defence of ethnic space and identity. To many Yorùbá, the initiative, which is an attempt to re-traditionalize or reawaken practices that were lost to Christianity and Islam is potent enough to restore the dignity of the people.

One notable aspect of the Àmòtẹ̀kùn resistance politics in the Southwest was the conversation it provoked about political restructuring. At different constitutional conferences held in the past, Nigerian Southern states, had supported the enthronement of "true federalism." It can be said that the launch of Àmòtẹ̀kùn represented a bolder statement of a regional and ethnic resolve. The Southwest public was so certain that the action of their governors in forming the security outfit, will force a level of concession from a central government disinclined to transferring more power to the component states. From the perspective of the people I spoke with, Àmòtẹ̀kùn assured a review of the national law on policing and mutual respect among ethnic nationalities in the country. In their opinions, clear statements have been made about the unsustainability of the existing political structure. The following account from an interlocutor mirrors the public mood and the dominant interpretation of Àmòtẹ̀kùn in the Southwest.

It is normal for those who are not yet at the receiving end of the insecurity in Yorùbá Land to ask, "What is Àmòtẹ̀kùn"? For me, what we [the Yorùbá] are saying with Àmòtẹ̀kùn is that we are no longer going to fold our arms and see our people killed like chickens by Fulani herdsmen. This is not about whether federal government like Àmòtẹ̀kùn or not. Things have passed that stage. I even know they [the central government] won't want the country to break up.

A threatening stance, this viewpoint on Àmòtẹ̀kùn illustrates the frustration of people with a security arrangement widely perceived as compromised, as well as their wholesome commitment to forcing a change in the local security architecture. It is worth noting the reference to the likelihood of the country breaking up if the security status quo is maintained. A coordinator of Àmòtẹ̀kùn in one of the local government areas in Oyo State explained that Àmòtẹ̀kùn was 'a vote of no confidence on the Nigerian police,' adding: 'we definitely cannot continue like this' (interview, 24 September 2020). Although the word "restructure" was rarely used by my interlocutors in the different conversations we had, the explanations they offered for the outfit depicted the logic of change.

Nearly all of the people I interviewed alluded to the slogan, 'Àmòtẹ̀kùn has come to stay' in their accounts. The saying, which became popular after the central government had declared Àmòtẹ̀kùn illegal, represents more than an expression of ethnic resolve. From what those I interviewed said, 'Àmòtẹ̀kùn has come to stay' is a way of saying the southwest security outfit has heralded an irreversible process of tinkering with the quasi-federal structure the country practices. As one interviewee put it, 'Àmòtẹ̀kùn means putting an end to all that is wrong with Nigeria.' By this he possibly implied the issue of ethno-regional imbalance and the perceived domination of other ethnicities by the Northern Hausa-Fulani group. For many others, Àmòtẹ̀kùn refers to the attempt at recovering the ethnic land from marauding herdsmen and safeguarding the lives and properties of Yorùbá people through a responsive security approach. Though an enterprise that can include armed confrontation to dislodge bandits and kidnappers, Àmòtẹ̀kùn is a step many considered necessary to redefine the terms of the continuity of Nigeria as a nation.

Conclusion

Gardner (2018) identifies open defiance and a range of tools that subnational units in the federal states from time to time adopt to shape, influence, or thwart national policies. In more instances, the tools of resistance 'are clearly unauthorised, and many others press so hard against the boundaries of what might be constitutionally contemplated as to raise significant doubts about their constitutionality' (Gardner 2018: 515). Similarly, John Dinan has shown how in the United States of America, states resist federal policies using tools such as lawsuits, declining participation in federal programs and passing policies inconsistent with federal policies (Dinan 2020). Àmòtẹ̀kùn offers a unique example for the Nigerian democracy. The significance of this mode of resistance is reckoned not only in terms of the national spotlight the outfit took but also the consciousness that many people in the southwest have that

'Àmòtẹ̀kùn has come to stay'. That the outfit successfully cleared the hurdle of constitutionality, which was the initial encumbrance, confirms Àmòtẹ̀kùn's resistance credentials, even as it brings to fore the moral burden of a central state. It is therefore not strange that the negotiated existence, which the outfit enjoys is rationalised on the premise of it being a measure to tackle insecurity.

It is not often the case that state are seen as subject of resistance. Unlike resistance engineered by individuals and non-state actors, the act of a regional state organising resistance, which I describe as state activism, is premised on the entanglement of state and ethnic borders in Nigeria. Àmòtẹ̀kùn is about regional states resisting the central state as much as an ethnicity resisting the repressive domination of another ethnicity. As a way of resisting and contesting ethno-regional hegemony, Àmòtẹ̀kùn boils down to the ethnic character of the Nigeria federal system. Although an organised resistance, it is neither a rebellion instigated by regional state against the national state nor a social movement committed to driving social change from below. Its character as a quasi-state intervention limits its capacity for disruptive engagements even when its *raison d'être* is in challenge of status quo. The ambiguity in its structure and nature suggests a resistance strategy superficial in outlook but strengthened by the ideological premise.

The assorted and discrete responses to a regional security outfit show that Nigerians maintain no common grounds on constitutional modalities for policing and internal security. The southern states, at various national conferences convoked in the past to amend the constitution, have been consistent in their argument for decentralised police, whereas the majority of northern states favoured retention of the status quo – centralised police. While advocates of a centralised police system constantly prevailed and only recently consented to the idea of community policing, the launch of Àmòtẹ̀kùn and the concession granted by the central state suggest the restructuring possibility amid regional state challenge on the authoritarian power of the central state.

Finally, that the Yorùbá latched on to the spate of insecurity in the Southwest to rekindle ethnic nationalism and advance the cause of political restructuring does not preclude the genuine intentions of the governors to effectively use Àmòtẹ̀kùn to curb the growing crime rate in the region. Considering the growing agitations for political restructuring by ethno-regional groups in the southern part of the country, it may not come as a surprise that inauguration of a regional security outfit united the Yorùbá even across political parties and religious divides, and received the blessings of other ethnic nationalities in the South. Àmòtẹ̀kùn is ultimately a response to structural incongruity and a more daring mode of contesting the Nigeria state.

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