



SELF-HELP!



by **Mike ODIEGWU** — May 11, 2019 in [News Update](#), [Saturday Magazine](#)

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The mob rounded up two middle-aged men at Edepie community, a suburb of Yenagoa, Bayelsa State. With their fists and kicks, the angry residents overpowered the suspects. They wrestled them down. In a jiffy, everybody was armed with bottles, stones and sticks, and threw their improvised weapons at the enervated suspects.

With ferocity and unimaginable velocity, the objects landed on sensitive parts of the suspects' body. The warring residents rolled out more stones and kept hauling them at the suspects. In a twinkle, the suspects were in the pool of their blood. They struggled for life, crawled on the ground and raised their hands to beg for mercy.

Their gestures attracted more hate from the mob, who landed more weapons on their heads. The residents were determined to see them bleed to death. Sensing their determination to survive the onslaught, the mob wore them disused tyres. Without prompting, some of them draped and drenched the suspects in combustible liquid and the fire raged.

The two middle-aged men were victims of jungle justice. In a jiffy, the mob found them guilty, pronounced their punishment and enforced it. It was on April 30. The sun was just rising to heat the earth when the victim 'met their ancestors' in a hellish manner. Their offence? Someone raised the alarm that they were kidnappers and that they came to steal a child at the community. Without verifying the claims, passers-by gathered and administered punishment. The only punishment they could offer was death.

On April 21, two youths met their deaths in similar circumstances at Biogbolo area of Yenagoa. They were accused of accosting and robbing a passerby. Those who lynched them claimed they were part of a five-man gang of notorious robbers in the habit of terrorising the area and robbing unsuspecting business people around the Otio/Erepa district, mainly populated by Hausa traders. This time, they tried to rob a passerby who, incidentally, had N1000 in his pocket. The victim reportedly raised the alarm to alert traders and residents, who immediately identified the suspects.

On April 24, 2019, a suspect, Samuel Abarimua, counted himself fortunate to have escaped from the angry mob who accused him of robbery. They reportedly caught Abarimua around Opolo area of Yenagoa, beat him and set him ablaze. The 16-year-old was gnashing and grinding his teeth in pains when the police arrived the scene, put out the fire and took him into custody.

But another suspect was not as fortunate as Abarimua on 21st of March 2019. He was accused of killing a woman identified as Blessing in Akenfa community in Yenagoa. He was immediately lynched.

Why jungle justice?

Some eyewitnesses of the lynching that took place at Bigbolo justified the action. They said the burnt suspects were notorious for terrorising the area, robbing, maiming and sometimes killing at the slightest provocation.

One of them, who refused to disclose his name, said: “We suffer a lot from them on a daily basis. They rob us and go free. The police are not doing anything about it. They move freely with firearms in the state and nobody catches them. Even if they are caught, they’ll be released in no time.

“At least, we will be free for some time. This is the first, and we will continue. Jungle justice will persist so that they will reduce this everyday crime. They rob people and cross to the other side of the community every day. We are on red alert now.”

Residents believe that armed cultists and other criminals have turned the capital city into a jungle. They operate at will with guns, machetes and other weapons. In fact, Yenagoa appears to be under siege following unchecked activities of criminals. On a daily basis, people are robbed of their smart phone, money and other valuables.

In fact, residents watch the rampage helplessly. They see proliferation of illegal guns in the city and observe how life is gradually becoming cheap in Yenagoa. Armed cultists have declared war in Yenagoa, robbing, killing and maiming residents at the slightest provocation. The residents lampooned the police and security agencies for failing in their responsibility to secure the lives and property of the people.

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They believe that the small town, which boasts the headquarters of the 16th Brigade of the Nigerian Army, Central Naval Command of the Nigerian Navy, Mobility Command of the Airforce, Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC), the Joint Task Force, Operation Delta Safe (ODS), the police, the DSS and other security outfits, should at least provide adequate security.

But armed cultists appear to have formed a parallel government terrorising people unchallenged. They even attack security operatives, kill them and dispossess them of their guns. Even in popular markets, like the Swali Market, cultists operate and kill people in broad daylight at will.

Undoubtedly, the activities of the marauders have affected the economy of the state. Shops are opened with caution, and in most places, business owners close their premises at 7 pm. Rising cases of crime also dealt a heavy blow on nightlife. People are afraid of the night, which hitherto was a period of endless relaxation.

Mixed reactions as residents blame police

Residents, therefore, argue that people resorted to jungle justice because their patience has been overstretched by the inability of the police to tame crime waves in the state. Most of them say they are not in support of the development.

Mr. Rogers Aderi argues that if allowed to fester, jungle justice will diminish the authority of the government. He, however, appeals to the police to step up their efforts, tackle crimes promptly to stop people from taking the law into their hands.

Also, Emeka Ikpeama described the trend as dangerous, saying the state should not be turned into a jungle. “The right thing to do is to catch a thief and hand him over to the police. The police will then prosecute him so that he will have an opportunity to defend himself. It is better than taking the law into your hand. Some people can frame someone up and get him killed in jungle justice.

“I am not in support of jungle justice”, says Toseidei Tamarapreye, a youth. “It is not right for one person to take another man’s life.”

He recalls how four undergraduates were killed in Aluu, Rivers State, for a crime they knew nothing about. He says through jungle justice, someone can be killed for stealing cheap items.

But he said: “The police are responsible for what is going on in Bayelsa. If they are taking their work seriously, we will not have any issue about thieves and there will be nothing like jungle justice. So, the commissioner of police should step up his game. He should increase security in Yenagoa because the police are supposed to protect lives and property.

“I watched the incident at Opolo. The police were there when they were lynching a teenager. They watched the mob beat the suspect and set him ablaze. It was when the fire was raging that they came to rescue the person. It is wrong. They were there at the crime scene. They should have caught the thief instead of allowing the jungle justice.

“I will also blame the insecurity in Bayelsa on the police because they are not doing their work very well. If they were doing their work very well, there will be no insecurity. Even if you call them when

a crime is going on, they will not come till everything is done.”

Another youth, John Ezeorahm, has a different opinion. He says since the police are not doing their job, thieves caught should be lynched. “Our own society is corrupt”, he says, adding, “the security agencies are not doing their work well, that is why people are taking the law into their hands. Had it been they are doing their work, all this won’t be happening. Even the judiciary is corrupt.

“In a state like Bayelsa, you don’t need to call police or any security agencies to arrest the person. The best thing to do is to kill the person as a lesson to others. So, jungle justice is good because of the society we live in.”

Preye Asamaowei laments the crime rate in Yenagoa and the inability of the police to tame it.

“The recent crime rate in Bayelsa, especially Yenagoa, is so bad that when you invite your friends these days, they will not come. I was in support of it when it started, but I later withdrew my support because I realise that the punishment for a crime like stealing is not death. I also realised that an innocent person can be killed in the process.”

Rising concerns and solutions

A youth leader, Bodmass Kemepadei, highlights the danger of jungle justice. Recalling the incident at Edepie where two middle-aged men were killed, Bodmass, a popular blogger in Bayelsa, said they were victims of false alarm. He insists that cultists are using jungle Justice to kill their perceived rivals unknown to members of the public, who are invited to partake in the murder.

He said: “Cult war in Yenagoa has taken a new dimension. Our security agencies must act fast. It is no longer shooting of guns but false allegations and mob attack. Once a certain group sees a perceived enemy, they shout “thief! thief!” and the unsuspecting public joins the echo.

“The incident at Ede-Epie was a domestic issue that led to cult attack. As a youth leader in this state, I can’t say such things for the fun of it. This is serious. If we do not stop this, it will lead to retaliatory burning, and Yenagoa will be a city of flames.

“I am already scared that the said group whose members were burnt may be forced to take the law into their hands by doing same to the other groups. The police, DSS, Army and all security forces must rise up now. Say no to Jungle justice. It is now being used by cult groups against one another.”

In fact, government officials are also worried about the recent trend in Yenagoa. The Special Adviser to the Governor on Public Affairs implores residents to reject jungle Justice. He says though the patience of residents has been tested by activities of criminally-minded youths, jungle Justice cannot be the solution.

Alabrah said: “In recent weeks, instant justice has been meted out to some alleged criminally-minded youths caught while trying to rob their victims in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State. Robbery inside moving keke (tricycle) has also been rife. This is perhaps a daily occurrence with many having sordid tales to tell. These have tested the patience of residents of the state capital. And rightly so. But what solutions can you proffer? For me, Jungle justice is not an option.”

A human and environmental rights activist, Alagoa Morris, says the society, in normal climes, is designed to avoid jungle Justice, adding that it is the reason why the legislature, the executive and the judiciary arms of government exist, especially in democratic nations.

He, however, blamed jungle Justice in the state on defective judiciary. He added that the situation escalates because suspects arrested by the police find their ways back to the streets to continue their nefarious activities.

“We abhor jungle justice,” he said. “We hardly see jungle justice being perpetrated in advanced societies. I think this is also part of our indices of underdevelopment; part of the reminder that we are still underdeveloped, and the reason is the annoyance of the people that the judicial system is not effective.

“If we have an effective justice system, whereby the police, law enforcement agencies are also doing their job well and people have that confidence, I don’t think there will be jungle justice. It is that gap that people are now exploiting.

“People feel that if they don’t do that, this same criminals that have been tormenting them, hurting them daily, putting them in a state of fear, dispossessing them of their properties and even threatening their lives, they will find their way back to the street even when the police take them in.

“So I think this is the cause of jungle justice and it is a challenge on the security system, security apparatus, government in particular, to ensure that the right things are done. It is not just about building prison or getting political opponents arrested and detained.

“Society should ensure that all those who cross the red line are promptly followed up by investigation and arrested and followed with prosecution. If the court of competent jurisdiction frees

them, that is the person's luck. It is the wisdom of the court maybe due to lack of evidence, and that is where society should also be ready to bear witness to these issues.

"We have a scenario where you will go and bear witness and the next day you will see relations or the gang members you stood against coming after your life and you are on your own. The society is not even there to protect you. So, the society must also look at the witness angle.

"The government has its own role to play to ensure that innocent citizens are not made to suffer jungle justice, just like what happened in Port Harcourt, in Aluu. Those boys were lynched and it was later they found that they were innocent, and I believe that the case is still on.

"So, to avoid innocent persons becoming victims of jungle justice and to allow the prescribed institutions to look into all criminal matters and punish according to the law, we do not support jungle justice. That is the stand that I will take."

Also a non-governmental organisation, Patriotism Advancement and Community Orientation Network (PACON) says the trend in Bayelsa is worrisome. The Arc Convener of the group, Aluzu Ebikebina, said in within one month, four people have been killed by mob actions.

He said: "In recent times, people have constituted themselves into administrators of justice, giving to each man as they think fit. Empanelled by a common thirst for blood or scent of burnt skin, garbed in their ignorance, they have arrogated to themselves the power of a Judge. Within the twinkle of an eye, they can determine the fate of any man.

"This kind of justice has already been administered to more than four people in yengoa, the state capital, since last month. All the victims were never given an opportunity to be heard before their fate was summarily determined. As I recline on my bed this evening in my random musings, I wander in my thoughts about the propriety of this kind of justice. If it is right, why do we ascribe it to 'jungle'?

"That word alone connotes barbarism. I already found solace in the fact that the advocates of this kind of justice have a common admission. That is the dereliction of responsibility of constituted authorities. They agree that it is the failure of government to honour its primary responsibility that has made people resort to 'self-help'. That in itself, is an admission of wrong on their part.

"They have admitted, though unknowingly, that had government been alive to its responsibility, this kind of 'self-help' would not have taken place. But is jungle justice really self-help? While I am mindful of the state of insecurity in the state, I am careful to be counted among those who speak in favour of their conviction. Those who do not blow hot in one breath and cold in another breath."

Proffering solutions to jungle Justice, he added: “I dare say that there is no other way than letting justice be done to the society, the victim and the accused person. That was the learned silks reasoning Justice Oputa JSC, as he then was, in the case of Josiah v The State.

“As a neophyte in law, I was told that it is better for 99 guilty men to go free than for one innocent man to suffer injustice. I am guided by that principle even as an advocate for a better society. The damages done by not giving someone an opportunity to defend himself in a court of competent jurisdiction cannot be undone, even by retributive or corrective justice.

“Those in support of such barbarism should wait until their loved one is ‘mistaken’ to be a criminal and is killed on the spur of the moment. Those who kill suspected criminals without a sentence of a competent court of law are murderers.

“There is no justification to shortcut due process. No amount of rationing should make us elevate jungle behaviour to societal standard. What imminent danger are we preventing by sniffing life out of a man we have reduced to nothingness with clobber and sticks?

“Once a suspect is disarmed, we cannot argue to have administered self-help. Self-help is using a commensurate amount of force to prevent an imminent danger without waiting for the appropriate thing to be done. It is preventing a crime or wrong by every means necessary within an individual power.

“Even though it is necessary and lawful to an extent, the law frowns at it. Especially when other windows could have been explored in the circumstance.

“The moment a suspect is apprehended or disarmed, self-help abates. There is a reason Oputa said justice is done to the state. It is not done to the people. The suspect when overpowered should be handed over to the police. That is the right thing to do.

“That is why those responsible for the ALUU 4 killing have been sentenced to death. Those boys were of no imminent danger to their assailants at the point they were killed. Only cowards will give fatality to an unarmed man. I’d like to call them ‘spineless murderers’, missing in action when the threat was subsisting, always present to give fuel and spark when the victim is powerless.

“If we begin to kill all those who have stolen from us in the past or have attacked us one way or the other previously, those championing this sickening cause on their timeline will be running for safety too.”

Speaking on the ugly development, the state police command condemned it and appealed to residents to hand over arrested suspects to the police instead of subjecting them to mob action. The Police Public Relations Officer (PPRO), Butswat Asinim, said on no account should any suspect be subjected to mob action.

The PPRO, a Superintendent of Police, said: “We will continue to do our best to ensure that we protect members of the public against any form of attacks by criminals. We totally condemn mob action because it is unlawful.

“We urge members of the public to continue to assist the police. And in case they make arrest they should hand over the suspects to the police for diligent investigation and prosecution.”



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